

Introduction

ENGAGED ANTHROPOLOGY. ANTHROPOLOGY as advocacy. Activist anthropology. Collaborative anthropology. Militant anthropology. Public anthropology. Despite their differences, all of these projects share a commitment to mobilizing anthropology for constructive interventions into politics. They can be understood as a series of experiments in making anthropology relevant and useful. Examples include participation in social movements, collaborating with activists and nongovernmental organizations, advising lawyers, writing affidavits, and producing expert reports. These are the primary modes of engagement discussed in this book, which draws on my personal experiences, although they do not exhaust the contributions anthropologists can make to politics (see Low and Merry 2010). These practices offer a valuable supplement to more conventional forms of ethnographic research, as they introduce anthropologists to unfamiliar research sites and interlocutors, suggest alternative topics for inquiry, and yield novel insights. Engagement opens up new avenues for pursuing anthropological research.

These experiments in engaged anthropology can be seen to pick up where the influential literature on writing culture and cultural critique of the 1980s left off (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; see also Hale 2006; Ortner 2016; Starn 2015). The writing culture movement responded to the “crisis in representation” provoked by Edward Said’s (1978) *Orientalism* and related developments in literary and postcolonial theory, especially the need to pay greater attention to power and history. Anthropologists in North America came to question the processes through which ethnographic knowledge is produced (Rabinow 1977), including the construction of ethnographic authority (Clifford 1988). On the other side of the Atlantic, Marilyn Strathern’s (1988) pathbreaking *Gender of the Gift* similarly treated ethnographic

narratives as “fictions” in the sense of being deliberately conceived for particular analytic purposes, emphasizing the constructed nature of representation rather than its opposition to truth or facts. Articulated at a historical moment dominated by the intersection of decolonization and globalization (Clifford 2015), and motivated by “challenges from feminists, political activists, native anthropologists, and others” (Besteman and Haugerud 2013, 2; see Said 1989, 210), these discussions encouraged anthropologists to “develop a critique of Western imperialism as well as anthropology’s complicity with colonialism and other forms of domination” (Besteman and Haugerud 2013, 2).

While engaged anthropology follows the general trajectory established by the writing culture movement in addressing questions about political accountability and responsibility, there are a number of significant differences. Whereas the debates on writing culture focused on the *politics of representation*, engaged anthropology is primarily concerned with the *politics of participation*, addressing the roles anthropologists are increasingly called to play as expert witnesses, authors of social impact studies, contributors to social movements, and so forth.

The writing culture debates addressed the question of reflexivity *within the text*, including the influence of the author’s political commitments and positionality on ethnography. In contrast, engaged anthropology is concerned with reflexivity *beyond the text*, examining how ethnographic knowledge and anthropological ideas like the culture concept are increasingly deployed by a range of actors, including activists, lawyers and judges, social movements, states, and diverse publics. Such practices encourage anthropologists to ask “how we understand our work, strategically, as a mode of social action and intervention in relation to and collaboration with the projects of those we study,” as Faye Ginsburg (1997, 14) points out. Writing about her work with cultural activists, Ginsburg (1997) argues that “reflexivity [should] be more than textual, and that it [should] begin by considering how our research is part of a social world shared with our subjects.”¹

The critique of ethnographic representation by the contributors to the writing culture debates gave rise to a generation of experimental ethnographies that transformed the genre (Marcus and Fischer 1986). In contrast, the practice of engaged anthropology involves taking risks in how we conduct research and make use of ethnographic knowledge. Moving beyond conventional relationships with our informants and their political projects also means that the success of these interventions is far from guaranteed.

The writing culture movement also contributed to a major schism in the discipline, anthropology's version of the "science wars." While the resulting disputes over empiricism and interpretation have largely been resolved, or at least pushed to the back burner, they occasionally boil over.² Debates about engaged anthropology are equally contentious. Critics of engaged anthropology object to the politicization of research. They complain that engaged anthropologists chase ambulances rather than pursue intellectual questions. Some even argue that short-term engaged-research projects are a poor substitute for good ethnography, rejecting their value as a complementary practice. This is similar to the way critics of the writing culture movement objected to reflexivity, arguing that it was antithetical to empiricism rather than recognizing it as a serious effort to rethink ethnography's assumptions and reveal its blind spots.

The writing culture movement was deeply influenced by postcolonial politics and poststructuralist critique of the relationship between power and knowledge. Engaged anthropology takes the responsibilities associated with these concerns seriously (Low and Merry 2010, 203). These projects respond in part to the relationships that emerge in the process of conducting ethnographic research, especially the obligations of reciprocity that are central to these interactions (Kirsch 2002a). But engaged anthropology also seeks to address larger concerns about social justice, structural violence, and environmental degradation that are often rooted in colonial history and exacerbated by globalization and contemporary forms of capitalism. Most importantly, the participants in these projects recognize that anthropologists have more to contribute to the solution of these problems than their texts.

Given the centrality of reflexivity to the debates about writing culture, it is surprising that relatively little attention has been paid to the challenges, complications, and contradictions of engaged research. This omission is closely related to the way that most of the existing literature on engaged anthropology falls into two categories. On the one hand are problem-centered ethnographic accounts organized by concerns about social justice (e.g., Checker 2005; Johnston and Barker 2008). On the other are programmatic statements that call for rethinking the discipline's relationship to politics through activism (e.g., Hale 2006, 2007; Schepher-Hughes 1995). But given their pragmatic focus, case studies addressing social problems tend to be less reflexive than other anthropological writing, perhaps out of concern that acknowledging the author's political commitments might undermine

the authority of the text. The more didactic literature on engaged anthropology exhibits similar omissions, given its emphasis on promoting engagement at the expense of revealing its vulnerabilities and shortcomings. Neither genre pays sufficient attention to the actual practices of engaged research and their implications for both scholarship and politics.

Consequently, I ask not only whether engaged anthropology produces “good enough” ethnography (Scheper-Hughes 1989, 28) but also whether engagement is good for anthropology and contributes to desirable political outcomes. In her analysis of liberal projects of reform, Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) questions whether progress is possible without critically examining the underlying institutions and practices. Anthropology’s response to the “crisis in representation” and the need to address questions about power and history can be seen as the internal critique of the discipline that helped make contemporary experiments in engaged anthropology possible. In writing this book, my goal is to bring attention to the practices of engaged anthropology parallel to the examination of fieldwork and ethnography by the contributors to the writing culture movement. My purpose is not to critique engagement, however, but to better understand its contribution to anthropology, ethnography, and politics. I do so by examining my experiences as an engaged anthropologist.

MOTIVATION

This book is intended to enhance recognition and understanding of engaged research in anthropology and related social sciences. Despite the attention garnered by such arguments, I do not subscribe to the point of view that all ethnographic research should be activist or engaged. Political engagement is not always appropriate or welcome, and many anthropologists would be reluctant participants. More importantly, the diversity of approaches in anthropology is one of its greatest assets (Strathern 2006). Attempts to impose narrow agendas on the discipline ignore this fundamental insight. In contrast, acknowledging the value of engaged research has the salutary effect of expanding the possibilities and potential contributions of anthropology.

There are several reasons why engaged research has become so prevalent in recent years. The nearly universal recognition that culture is a valuable resource (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Strathern 1995; Turner 1991), and potentially a form of property (Brown 2003; Hirsch and Strathern 2004),

increases the demand for anthropological skills and ethnographic knowledge. Given the face-to-face relationships that develop over the course of ethnographic research, the people who provide access to the intimate details of their lives feel entitled to make reciprocal demands on anthropologists (Kirsch 2002a), and in many contexts such requests take the form of preconditions for gaining access to research sites.

Anthropologists are also aware of the critical response of previous generations of informants to ethnographic representation of their practices (e.g., Scheper-Hughes 2000). This includes our penchant for publically sharing information ordinarily regarded as private (Herzfeld 1997; Shryock 2004). In contrast, engaged anthropologists seek to cultivate alternative relationships through collaboration on shared political projects. The rise of nongovernmental organizations since the 1980s has also multiplied the possibilities for engagement.³ This includes participation in social movements that extend across international borders, incorporating differently positioned actors who deploy complementary modes of access to power, discourses of persuasion, and political leverage (Escobar 2008; Juris 2008; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Kirsch 2014).

It has also been suggested that greater academic precarity leads scholars to search for new ways to market their skills (Goldman and Baum 2000, 2). But it is more than economic opportunity that motivates these undertakings. In an era of diminished expectations for academic careers, many anthropologists seek alternative sources of fulfillment or rationales for conducting research, including the desire to contribute to positive social change. Such ambitions coincide with the revised expectations of funding agencies and society at large regarding the responsibilities of scientists and scholars (Nowotny, Scott, and Gibbons 2001), including the obligation to specify how their work will benefit the subjects of their research and have a positive impact on society (Page and Strathern 2016).

Scholars also come to identify with the subjects of their research and consequently seek to protect their interests. This occurs across the disciplines. For example, many of the biologists with whom I have worked became conservationists when the species they spent decades observing became endangered.⁴ Other scholars, including scientists studying global climate change, are driven by their research findings to intervene in public policy. Anthropologists concerned about the welfare of their informants regularly invoke their political obligations in their writing, emphasizing their responsibility to bear witness to both physical and structural violence. If the

discipline took a “dark turn” (Ortner 2016) in its focus on the “suffering subject” (Robbins 2013) during the decades that followed the writing culture movement, it was because anthropologists no longer assumed that the problems of the world were someone else’s concern. It is the desire to both understand and actively respond to these issues that motivates anthropologists who pursue contemporary forms of engaged anthropology, giving rise to the need to examine how these experiments are changing the field.

STATUS

Anthropologists have a long tradition of addressing political concerns in their work, from the pioneering contributions of Franz Boas on racism and immigration quotas (Pierpont 2004), to Sol Tax’s (1975) “Action Anthropology” founded in the 1950s, Kathleen Gough’s (1968) critique of anthropology and imperialism in the 1960s, and teach-ins against the Vietnam War organized by Marshall Sahlins and Eric Wolf at the University of Michigan during the 1970s (Sahlins 2000, 205–70; Heyman 2010), to name but a few exemplars from the past. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that engaged anthropology has never been the most prominent or prestigious trend within the discipline, despite efforts to identify and promote alternative genealogies for these practices (Lassiter 2005; Cook 2015).⁵

The primary reason for the second-class status of engaged research is its reputation for applying existing ideas rather than contributing to knowledge production and the development of social theory. The former is regarded as conventional or conservative, while the latter is associated with creativity and innovation and, thus, is more highly valued. The preference for pure or basic science over applied or engaged research continues to dominate many, if not most, academic fields, even though comparable distinctions have been discredited in other domains, resulting in more pluralist views of knowledge. However, the split between knowledge and practice is more pronounced in academic settings in the global north than in the global south, where establishing relationships between the two is often seen as more urgent.⁶

There are two common flaws in the persistence of this division. First is the assumption that the results from engaged research projects apply only to the problem at hand and, consequently, fail to yield generalizable findings or insights. In contrast, the examples presented in this book show how engaged

anthropology results in ideas whose value transcends the initial research agenda. Second is the failure to acknowledge that most scientific research proceeds inductively from in-depth study of specific phenomena and concerns. Engaged anthropology is no exception. It can also be seen as where the rubber meets the road, providing opportunities to develop, test, and refine anthropological understandings in the real world, which is difficult, if not impossible for other forms of ethnographic research. Consequently, one of my goals in writing this book is to destabilize the prevailing dichotomy between purely academic and engaged forms of research in anthropology.

The historical status of engaged anthropology has affected its position in the disciplinary division of labor. Until recently, the dominant pattern has been for anthropologists to become involved in engaged research projects only after establishing their academic careers. Before Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) wrote her manifesto on the “primacy of the ethical” in response to violence in post-Apartheid South Africa, or reported on the inequities of the global organ trade (Scheper-Hughes 2005), she used the language of medical pathology to describe kinship, rural sociality, and schizophrenia (Scheper-Hughes 1979), provoking the “ire” of her informants in Ireland (Scheper-Hughes 2000). Similarly, in his classic essay on long-term fieldwork among the Kayapo in Brazil, Terence Turner (1991) divided their history into two distinct epochs, before and after political self-recognition, which turned on their appreciation of the value of culture. The change also demarcated a shift in his ethnographic praxis: only after becoming an established professor at the University of Chicago did Turner help set up the Kayapo Video Project and become involved in their struggle against the Altamira Dam on the Xingu River. These are not criticisms but prominent examples of how the status of engaged anthropology has shaped ethnographic research practices.

Only in the post-writing-culture era have anthropologists begun to frame their initial research projects in response to their political commitments. In *A Finger in the Wound*, Diane Nelson (1999, 46) describes her earlier work as a “solidarity activist” with people from Guatemala, although in hindsight she questions some of her original assumptions: “I have found ‘the people’ to be rather more heterogeneous, ‘the state’ less clearly bounded, *gringas* less magically welcome, and my accounts to be far more ‘partial’—in the sense of incomplete—than I had acknowledged.” Kim Fortun’s (2001) *Advocacy after Bhopal* was one of the first ethnographic monographs in this period to be explicitly framed as a work of political engagement; she not only collaborated with local activists pursuing compensation for the chemical disaster in India

but also “studied up” at home to examine whether similar disasters were possible in the United States.

In *Crude Chronicles*, Suzana Sawyer (2004, 22) describes how she worked with the leaders of an indigenous organization in Ecuador who challenged the expansion of petroleum extraction in their territories: “As such, my research dispensed with any pretensions of ‘objectivity’; it was unabashedly invested and engaged. Yet such highly enmeshed research afforded a methodological richness that could not be gotten any other way. Establishing where my political allegiances lay was critical to my being able to collaborate with [the organization, which] would never have had me otherwise. . . . Thus,” she concludes, “I consciously chose to build a research project based on political engagement rather than sociological detachment” (Sawyer 2004, 22). Shannon Speed (2007, 2) notes that she “came to the discipline as an activist” and describes how her political commitments shaped her research on human rights in Chiapas, Mexico. In most of the engaged ethnographies from this period, including my own (Kirsch 2014), relatively circumscribed discussions of engagement are used to position these projects politically and methodologically rather than being the primary focus of the work. Even in more recent ethnographies by Daniel Goldstein (2012) on violence and insecurity in urban Bolivia, and by Angela Stuesse (2016) on race and labor rights in the American South, questions about engaged or activist research methods are addressed in separate chapters rather than integrated into the text, perpetuating the division between ethnographic knowledge and political engagement.

The historically low status of engaged research within anthropology is also evident in the lack of institutional recognition and rewards. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2009, 4) refers to the work of engaged scholars as “double time,” or moonlighting, labor undertaken in addition to their day jobs. This was literally true for my participation in Australian legal proceedings against the owners of the Ok Tedi mine, given the time difference between Melbourne and Ann Arbor, which meant that conference calls with lawyers took place in the middle of the night for me. Another aspect of working a second shift is that engaged anthropology is undervalued labor, counted as either community service (Scheper-Hughes 2009, 3) or, in my case, service to the field. Thus composing an affidavit for a court case was implicitly compared to the duties of a committee member for the American Anthropological Association rather than recognized as an extension of my research.

The widespread failure to acknowledge the value of these kinds of activities has led some scholars to argue that engaged or activist research practices

should be formally recognized by the academy (Hale 2007). However, inviting administrative oversight runs the risk of standardizing, homogenizing, and potentially compromising these projects, much as the institutionalization of social movements diminishes their capacity for contributing to radical change (Piven and Cloward 1978). To some extent, this has already started to occur as universities promote engagement in the form of local outreach, attracting corporate sponsorship of research, being quoted by traditional media or actively participating in social media, or providing service learning opportunities for students, activities that are potentially valuable and interesting but which differ substantially from the political projects discussed in this book.

Despite my concerns about bureaucratization, there is a need for greater appreciation of the alternative temporalities of engaged research projects in relation to fixed tenure clocks and research assessments. Similarly, it is important to recognize that engaged research lacks the certainty of more conventional forms of research in terms of guaranteeing academic outputs, as the status of the project may remain unresolved, publication may compromise the interests of one's informants, or the project may fail for reasons beyond the investigator's control. Greater institutional flexibility may be required to accommodate the elements of risk-taking in these projects, which contribute to the dynamic and innovative potential of engaged research.

CRITICISM

Being reflexive about engaged research requires acknowledging the concerns raised by its critics. As Charles Hale (2006, 101) notes, complaints that engaged anthropology "lacks objectivity or has become politicized" have been tempered by insights from feminist theory (Haraway 1988), which suggest that anthropologists are always already politically positioned as a result of power relations between researchers and subjects, the questions that orient their studies, and interpersonal relationships between anthropologists and their interlocutors (Behar 1993; Macdonald 2002). For example, James Ferguson (1999, 24–37) describes how the liberal politics of social anthropologists at the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute led them to assume that Euro-American narratives about modernity and progress were applicable to Africa. The primary response to these revelations about the nature of scholarly inquiry has not been futile efforts to purify anthropology from politics by

retreating to prior understandings of objectivity in the social sciences (Latour 1993), which is no longer seen as possible or even desirable. Instead, these discussions have underscored the need to make explicit how politics and positionality influence scholarly research.

Critics of engaged anthropology also object to the heroic representation of its practitioners. The expression “anthropologist as hero” is usually attributed to the literary critic Susan Sontag (1966), although she was writing about the identification of the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss with the indigenous peoples of the Amazon and his estrangement from the modern world, not engaged anthropology. “A Hero of Our Time” was the original title of Sontag’s (1963) review, which was subsequently reprinted as “Anthropologist as Hero” in her collection *Against Interpretation* (Sontag 1966). The latter phrase invokes romantic accounts of anthropologists who intervene in distant conflicts, saving their informants from harm. But such clichés and declensionist narratives are more prominent in fiction and popular film than in scholarly publications, in which anthropologists are more likely to be depicted as bureaucrats of adventure rather than as heroic figures (Peacock 2002, 68).

Michael Brown (2014, 273) takes these objections one step further, arguing that the rhetoric of engaged research “needs victims and heroes, or better yet, heroic victims[,] . . . leading to frustratingly thin accounts . . . [that] oversimplify morally complex situations.” In part, he is referring to the phenomenon of “ethnographic refusal,” in which anthropologists withhold evidence that might complicate representations of their research subjects or jeopardize their political projects (Ortner 1995). For example, engaged anthropologists may fail to describe dissenting points of view or the opinions of those who decline to participate in social movements. Avoiding discussion of internal conflict results in a romanticized view of resistance (Ortner 1995, 177; see also Abu-Lughod 1990) and homogenized representations of communities (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Creed 2006). This tendency may be exacerbated in the case of the short-term research projects that are incapable of producing the nuanced “thick description” associated with long-term ethnographic research (Geertz 1973), as I discuss in several of the chapters.

Taking sides in political conflicts also poses the risk that engaged anthropologists will lose access to informants who possess alternative perspectives or political views. Conversely, my experience suggests that advocacy can actually provide access to a wider range of interlocutors and facilitate participation in events from which anthropologists who remain neutral may be

excluded (Kirsch 2002a). Taking a stance on controversial topics can also create opportunities to discuss these issues with participants on both sides of the debate (Loperena 2016). However, access to confidential information obtained through participation in political struggles can increase demands on engaged anthropologists to protect the interests of their informants, especially when “writing in the eye of a storm,” as Diane Bell (2002) argues. Nonetheless, engaged anthropologists can revisit their work and offer more detailed accounts once the political stakes have changed. I discuss questions about ethnographic refusal and the political commitments of engaged anthropologists more thoroughly in the ensuing chapters.

Other critics express concern that political advocacy will compromise the ability of anthropologists to present evidence or provide expert testimony in court (see Cove 1996; Paine 1996). Although this is an important issue, lawyers and legal systems do recognize the professional “duty of care” anthropologists have to their informants (Edmond 2004). Consequently, the two models of the anthropological expert, as either a “reasonable and objective professional” or an “advocate” (Edmond 2004, 210), should not necessarily be treated as binary opposites (Fergie 2004, 50). There are also distinctive national traditions with respect to the treatment of anthropological testimony, variations across judicial forums, differences among judges, and contrasting views among opposing lawyers with respect to anthropological contributions to legal proceedings. In addition, it is important to recognize that such testimony is usually presented within an adversarial contest of competing experts. When I have asked lawyers whether my track record of supporting indigenous land rights and criticizing the mining industry disqualifies me from contributing to legal proceedings on these subjects, the response has always been that my testimony is more valuable as a result of my experience and commitments.

A final question is whether anthropologists who consult for corporations or are embedded in the military should also be seen as doing engaged anthropology. It is inappropriate to use political agreement or disagreement with these activities as the criterion for defining engagement. Rather, the critical issue is accountability (Goldstein 2012, 40), whether the information gained through ethnographic research is used to benefit the subjects of anthropological research or applied in ways that might increase their exposure to harm.

Marilyn Strathern (1987) describes the awkward relationship between feminism and anthropology, although elsewhere she demonstrates the value of putting the two in conversation with each other (Strathern 1988). Similarly,

I think it is important to acknowledge the potential awkwardness between academic research and political engagement without forgoing the benefits from their interaction.

ANTHROPOLOGY BEYOND THE TEXT

I became an engaged anthropologist by accident rather than design, as my initial steps along this path were unplanned. I was conducting ethnographic research on ritual, magic, and sorcery in a Yonggom village on the Ok Tedi River in Papua New Guinea in the late 1980s when I became concerned about pollution from a large copper and gold mine in the mountains to the north. In the ensuing years, I became involved in the struggle by the affected communities to protect their environment and livelihoods, although I did not anticipate that these interactions would eventually become the focus of my research.

In chapter 1, which describes my participation in the lawsuit against the Australian owners of the Ok Tedi mine, I discuss several issues that engaged anthropologists rarely address in their published work. I begin with the influence of politics on how social scientists frame their analyses. Next, I describe two interactions I was previously reluctant to write about, both examples of ethnographic refusal; it is only with the passage of time that I am able to write about these events without jeopardizing my informants or compromising their political objectives. In the second half of the chapter, I consider how participation in engaged research projects results in relationships that influence our work in unexpected ways. In particular I examine debates with colleagues, corporate efforts to discipline expertise, the legal colonization of anthropological knowledge, negotiating difference with nongovernmental organizations, and collaboration with communities. Although I have previously examined the Ok Tedi case in considerable detail (Kirsch 2006, 2014), many of these “backstage” encounters are presented here for the first time. This discussion also establishes the terms of reference for analyzing the other projects presented in the book.

The second chapter is based on long-term research and collaboration with West Papuan refugees and political exiles. Not far from the village on the Ok Tedi River where I conducted my original research was a refugee camp inhabited by several hundred people from the Indonesian side of the international border with Papua New Guinea. They were part of the 1984 exodus of more

than ten thousand people in protest against Indonesia's military occupation of West Papua. Although I initially kept my distance from the refugees because of their suspicion of outsiders, they eventually invited me to work with them as well. Many of the refugees speak the same language as the Yonggom, although they refer to themselves as Muyu. Several of my early publications addressed the situation along the border, although later I began writing about the politics of representation in West Papua and its consequences. This work was constrained by government restrictions that prevented me from conducting research on the Indonesian side of the border. When I finally had an opportunity to visit West Papua in 2014, I learned about the different strategies of mobilization pursued by political actors living in Indonesia and by refugees and political exiles residing in other countries. My contribution to the West Papuan independence movement has thus far been limited to academic writing and participation in various forms of "solidarity politics" (see Nelson 1999). These experiences show that effective political engagement with the objectives of our interlocutors may prove to be elusive.

The other case studies in the book are the result of short-term interventions. In chapter 3, I ask whether conservation and development projects introduced in Papua New Guinea during the 1990s offer a viable alternative to destructive forms of resource extraction like the Ok Tedi mine. Ethnographic research in the Lakekamu River basin showed that competing land claims and alternative visions of development posed significant obstacles to the implementation of the project. But the desire to reduce future environmental threats led me to overstate its potential in my previous work. This suggests the need to consider how aspirations for better outcomes can influence the work of engaged anthropologists.

My participation in the lawsuit against the Ok Tedi mine provided me with the skills, experience, and opportunity to work on related projects. Chapter 4 addresses my contribution to a lawsuit against the Gold Ridge mine near Honiara, the capital of Solomon Islands. One of my responsibilities as a consultant in that case was to examine local property rights. When the litigation failed and Guadalcanal was engulfed by civil conflict, I was unable to return. Drawing on archival research conducted in the Solomons in 2014, I describe how my earlier work on land rights helps explain the subsequent outbreak of violence. In contrast to the assumption that the findings of engaged research are of little value beyond the initial context, I show how ethnographic data from these projects may be put to new uses in changed circumstances.

I discuss my work as a consultant for the Nuclear Claims Tribunal in the Marshall Islands in chapter 5. The focus of the project was the experience of people relocated from Rongelap Atoll after their exposure to radiation from nuclear weapons testing by the American military in 1954. My contribution to this project focused on their discourse about culture loss, especially how the concept of cultural property rights helped make their losses visible. These findings were subsequently incorporated into international discussion about noneconomic loss and damage associated with climate change, which considers those aspects of environmental impacts that cannot be reduced to purely financial terms, including attachments to place, the value of preexisting livelihoods, and various forms of local knowledge. This shows how the analysis of local contexts can have global significance. These discussions are of considerable importance to the people living in the low-lying atolls of the Marshall Islands, which are vulnerable to rising sea levels.

In chapter 6, I describe how research on controversial topics may have negative political repercussions even when the researcher is trying to identify common ground among the protagonists. The subject is recent debates about the repatriation of Native American human remains at the university where I teach. In a talk presented at a roundtable discussion of these issues, I explained how the participants in these debates draw on different domains in staking out their respective positions: archaeologists make reference to science, university administrators emphasize property law, and Native Americans invoke kinship when referring to the human remains in the collections of the archaeology museum. Yet all three groups recognize the value of these domains in other contexts. The response to my participation in these events suggests that when debates are polarized, attempts to show how different points of view are constructed may result in political backlash. The chapter illustrates some of the risks entailed in writing about contested issues.

In the final chapter, I examine the anthropologist's role as expert witness. Chapter 7 presents two affidavits on indigenous land rights I submitted to the Inter-American Commission on and Court of Human Rights. The first affidavit addresses the detrimental consequences of Suriname's refusal to recognize the land rights of the Kaliña and Lokono indigenous peoples, including the destructive impacts of bauxite mining on land taken from them for a nature reserve. The second case is concerned with the title to indigenous land granted by Guyana to the Akawaio people of Isseneru, which excludes land subject to mining permits previously issued to outsiders.

The chapter considers how these affidavits have to be simultaneously legible to audiences with overlapping but sometimes incommensurable frames of reference, including lawyers and the legal system, the communities participating in these proceedings, and the discipline of anthropology. I also needed to reconcile my support for the Akawaio land claim with concerns about their use of mercury in artisanal gold mining, which can have significant environmental and health impacts, ensuring that my affidavit did not exacerbate the problem.

I take up the larger questions raised by these examples in the conclusion, including the problematic dichotomy between purely academic and engaged forms of research, by showing how the findings of these projects are of value beyond their initial objectives and context. Engaged anthropology also offers new sites for research, such as the adjudication of culture in legal proceedings. It identifies novel topics for research, such as culture loss. It also suggests the need for caution when writing from a distance, when seeking solutions to problems, and when debates are polarized. It can generate valuable suggestions for future research, such as hypotheses concerning the role of contested land rights in civil conflict and how competing political claims may be fashioned from shared domains. Thus a key dimension of engaged research is its capacity to contribute to larger debates rather than being purely instrumental in scope. Finally, I consider whether engaged anthropology produces “good enough” ethnography, as well as whether it is good for the discipline and helps to achieve positive political outcomes.

PROPERTY DISPUTES AND LEGAL CLAIMS

All of the cases discussed in this book address questions about property, a topic with a long and distinguished history in anthropology, as well as recent developments that make it a “dangerously interesting term to use” (Strathern and Hirsch 2004, 7).⁷ Although engaged anthropology takes many forms and addresses multiple questions, it is not unusual for anthropologists to become involved in conflicts relating to property, whether land rights, compensation claims, or cultural property rights. This is especially the case when working with indigenous peoples, given their long histories of dispossession and contemporary struggles for recognition.

The legal proceedings discussed in chapter 1, for example, include efforts by the mining company to preempt the rights of local landowners as well as

their access to subsistence resources. The independence movement described in chapter 2 seeks sovereignty over the Indonesian territory of West Papua. Chapter 3 describes how overlapping and contested land claims among the four sociolinguistic groups living in the Lakekamu River basin in southeastern Papua New Guinea have delayed the establishment of a conservation and development project. The extension of secondary land rights to plantation workers in Solomon Islands, described in chapter 4, exacerbated anxieties about indigenous control over land that date back to the colonial period, and were the flash point for civil conflict. In chapter 5, I describe how forced relocation owing to exposure to radiation in the Marshall Islands resulted in the loss of specialized forms of knowledge dependent on access to specific resources. My university's treatment of human remains as property was vigorously contested by Native Americans in the Midwest, who view them through the lens of kinship rather than ownership, as discussed in chapter 6. In both of the cases from the Amazon discussed in chapter 7, indigenous peoples seek to compel the state to recognize their land rights. In Suriname, this was seen as essential to preserving their freedom. In Guyana, collective land rights are central to Akawaio identity, in contrast to the importance of private property elsewhere in the country. Consequently, this book can also be read as a discussion of indigenous property disputes and the contributions anthropologists might make to their resolution.

Many of the contests over land, territory, and cultural property discussed in this book ended up in court: the Ok Tedi case in the Supreme Court of Victoria in Australia, the dispute over the Gold Ridge mine in the High Court of Solomon Islands, claims for damage to property and persons as a result of U.S. nuclear weapons testing in the Nuclear Claims Tribunal in the Marshall Islands, and the disputes with Guyana and Suriname in the Inter-American Commission on and Court of Human Rights in Costa Rica and Washington, DC. Comparison of these cases provides insight into how different legal institutions influence the form and content of the claims being advanced.

Although indigenous rights are increasingly recognized and protected by the law (Anaya 2004; Gilbert 2016), indigenous peoples must present their claims in legal systems historically used to facilitate their dispossession. Such proceedings might be seen to further colonial hegemony by compelling indigenous peoples to express themselves in alien language (Das 1989, 316; Dirlik 2001). Given that the law generally favors the interests of elites (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006), the juridification of these conflicts might be seen to domesticate indigenous politics (see Eckert et al. 2012a, 4).

Countering the arguments of “hegemony theorists” are scholars who view the mobilization of the law from below as a means to democratize power (Santos and Rodríguez-Garavito 2005; Eckert et al. 2012b) and a valuable “weapon of the weak” (see Scott 1987). Access to international courts and tribunals may also permit indigenous peoples to transcend political conflicts that have stalemated at the level of the state (Kirsch 2007). This is an important debate, and the examples presented in this book contribute to our understanding of the risks and benefits of legal activism. Rather than limit myself to considering these questions in the abstract, I have long since thrown in my lot with the indigenous peoples described here—from the Yonggom in Papua New Guinea to the Akawaio in Guyana—who brought their claims to international courts in response to their frustration with local politics, in the hope of gaining support for their cause, and to further their pursuit of justice. In other words, I am trying to influence the debate between hegemony and counterhegemony theorists through my participation in these legal proceedings.

Consequently, in the chapters that follow, I describe both how I became involved in these projects, and their outcomes. In all of the legal cases described here, I was invited to participate by community members, the non-governmental organizations with which they collaborate, or their lawyers, and sometimes all of them at once. At times, people were frustrated that they needed to enlist an outsider to help make their claims legible in court. But they also recognized the value of anthropological expertise in these legal proceedings and in relation to their political struggles more broadly.

CATEGORIES OF PRACTICE

New scholarly projects are often accompanied by the proliferation of specialized terminology, and recent attention to engaged anthropology is no exception. Although there is an understandable desire for precise delineation of these terms, there is considerable overlap in practice (Low and Merry 2010, S207; Goldstein 2012, 39). In my early work on the Ok Tedi case, I stressed the role of advocacy, comparing anthropologists to lawyers who act on behalf of their clients, and underscored my willingness to take sides because remaining neutral—given the unbalanced power relations—was equivalent to endorsing the status quo (Kirsch 2002a). Although I sometimes use *activism* as a synonym for *engagement* when explaining my work to others, I generally

avoid using the term when writing about my own experiences. My primary reservation about the category of “activist anthropology” (Hale 2006) is that it can shift attention away from the people or community seeking to bring about change.⁸ This may be why Charles Hale (2007, 105) defines *activist research* as the practice of “align[ing] oneself with an organized group in a struggle for rights,” although his definition is unnecessarily restrictive (Goldstein 2012, 41). Of these terms, *engagement* is defined the most broadly (Low and Merry 2010), although in this book I am explicitly concerned with *political engagement*.⁹

Applied anthropology refers to the long-standing practice of using anthropological perspectives to design and sometimes implement solutions to specific problems. As Roy A. Rappaport (1993, 296) notes, applied anthropologists typically work for institutional clients rather than the people directly affected by the problem. Consequently, “whatever values motivate or guide the study are not necessarily the anthropologist’s, usually remain inexplicit, and are sometimes even covert” (Rappaport 1993, 296–97). Even so, I would not want to exaggerate the differences between applied and engaged anthropology, as many of these projects could be defined either way. For example, both of the social scientists I collaborated with on the Rongelap case refer to their work as applied anthropology (Barker 2004; Johnston and Barker 2008).

A related category is public anthropology. This refers to writing for new audiences and the possibility of contributing “to a transformation of the way the world is represented and experienced” (Fassin 2013, 628). It also includes contributions to both traditional and new social media, from newspaper editorials to blogs. Although some scholars use the categories of “public” and “engaged” anthropology interchangeably (see Eriksen 2006), *public anthropology* almost always refers to writing texts rather than to other forms of participation. It also tends to refer to documents produced for consumption by educated readers in the anthropologist’s country of residence, in contrast to sharing information with the participants in our research projects and the communities in which they live, although in some cases the two may overlap.

The final category of practice is collaborative anthropology. In one sense, anthropology is always collaborative given its reliance on interlocutors for information. When anthropologists mobilize their research to help their informants achieve their goals, both parties may benefit (Hale 2006; see Oldfield 2015). Other collaborative projects involve training community members to conduct research on their own behalf, without necessarily contributing to discussions within the discipline (see Lassiter 2005). Similar

reservations apply to forms of applied anthropology that emphasize the production of “deliverables” to clients at the expense of participating in debates in the field (Mosse 2013). Although these initiatives have their own value and goals, they differ from the projects discussed in this book, which are explicitly intended to contribute to debates in anthropology and social theory.

As I have suggested, there has been a discernable shift in attitudes toward engaged anthropology in recent years, moving from entrenched skepticism toward popular acceptance. Thus, defining these categories of practice too narrowly may exclude some scholars who identify as engaged or activist anthropologists. This includes the primary distinction I make between the production of texts for academic or public consumption and other activities that constitute engaged research as a category of practice. Even though I fully acknowledge the power of the written word to change the world, and recognize the complementarity of political engagement and ethnographic writing, for the purposes of this project I focus on the contributions of anthropology beyond the text.