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Public Anthropology in a Pandemic: Advocacy, Ethnography, and Theory

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“We have to fight to recover the dimensions in which people actually live, because it is only there that any good outcome is possible.” Raymond Williams (1961)

1. Unmoored

COVID-19 nearly snuffed out public life in America. Venues of assembly were brushed aside by the virtue of social distancing. Travel prohibitions fenced off open-ended paths of curiosity while mandates to work from home hollowed out newsrooms, advocacy groups, and government agencies. Classrooms and libraries closed their doors as online learning became the mantra repeated in the hopes of it working. While digital surrogates soon flooded our lives, something of the indeterminate and interwoven collective present slipped away. And while the diminished place of the public in contemporary life has long been bemoaned, the pandemic quickened its drift, deepened its divorce, and papered over the deficit. For teachers, journalists, elected officials, and many anthropologists, this evacuation was often experienced as a frustrating labor removed from the bustling venues that grant our work wider purchase. Yet for others, such withdrawal of public concern was not a lack so much as an opportunity.

Shady companies in the toxic waste and oil refining industry found COVID-19 an advantageous moment to operate in open defiance of environmental law and public health concerns. Although the economic slowdown during COVID-19 led to global reductions in air pollution, at certain sites some reckless operators moved flagrantly in the opposite direction. With many regulators under mandates to work from home and many investigative journalists unable to travel, the pandemic allowed some companies to disregard regulations and endanger lives without facing immediate scrutiny. COVID obscured the view from outside and gave facilities the feeling they could operate with impunity. Frontline communities bore a heavy price at these sites not only in the exposures they faced but also in the explanations they were denied. For those living downwind of reckless facilities, the pandemic separated their rising laments from empirical validation and their disorienting impressions from official investigation. The ethnographic and the empirical were torn asunder. And while there has never been a perfect correspondence between the two, the pandemic provoked new questions about the consequences of their rupture and how they might be held together differently and for what end. These questions go straight to the fractured foundation of anthropology in this age of proliferating upheavals.

During COVID-19, two of my longstanding research projects were enlisted in grassroots efforts to hold negligent industrial facilities accountable. Although both facilities had abysmal records prior to the pandemic, both facilities also hid a rising

cascade of violations to environmental protections under the emergency of the pandemic. Collaborating with frontline neighborhoods near a hazardous waste incinerator in upstate New York and a massive oil refinery in St. Croix, US Virgin Islands, I worked with outraged residents to amplify the lived reality of environmental injustice in a moment that seemed intent on looking the other way. After months of complaints to plant operators and nearby authorities that were uniformly met with blithe assurances and no real investigation, many residents began to suspect their private encounters with toxic exposures – skin rashes, headaches, lethargy, bloody noses, diarrhea, trouble breathing – were an indication of personal illness more than environmental injustice. “I thought I was going crazy,” residents at both sites told me. Yet when held together, the stories residents told about their encounters were remarkably consistent: an outbreak of debilitating headaches or severe vomiting across an entire public housing complex on the same day, the visible throat-burning fumes that entered homes through cracks in windows and doors, the February weekend when residents had to shake soot off their sheets after leaving the window open at night, a night when gardens shriveled up and pets died, followed by a morning when everything smelled like an auto mechanic shop. Weaving fractured individual experiences into the coherency of a real event, my work helped amplify ethnographic realities into public accountability. Such amplification came through hosting community information sessions, writing opinion pieces for local papers, providing background interviews for national reporters, launching public websites that conveyed the lived suffering of ongoing lapses, testifying at hearings hosted by state agencies and community groups, working with congressional staffers on new legislation, and joining with community groups to advocate for their seat at the table. This public anthropology brought the spotlight of national attention to both sites and led to substantial victories for both impacted communities even as their struggle is ongoing. Anthropology – as a method of inquiry and as a matter of emphasis – played an instrumental role in broadcasting both sites into community recognition, national news, and congressional deliberation.

2. The Reckless Rush to Burn AFFF

In 2017, the US military launched a crackpot operation to burn toxic firefighting foam at the Norlite Lightweight Aggregate Kiln. Anticipating a federal designation of Aqueous Firefighting Foam (AFFF) as a hazardous substance (and subject to costly disposal restrictions), the military rushed to incinerate massive stockpiles of AFFF before they became a liability. The only problem? There is no evidence that incineration destroys toxic firefighting foam (Lerner 2018; Bond 2021a). Ignoring the facts, the US military attempted to torch over 20 million pounds of AFFF, the majority at Norlite.

Tucked into a working-class neighborhood in Cohoes, NY, Norlite is hidden from view but for the two squat smokestacks rising just above the Saratoga Sites Public Housing Complex. According to Norlite’s almost folksy website, the company mines a nearby shale deposit and transforms the quarry into a key ingredient of high-performance cement by running crushed shale through a kiln. In reality, the dinky shale operation provides the perfect homespun cover for a multinational profit machine: incinerating hazardous waste. It is hard to see Norlite for what it is. But once you see it, you can’t stop seeing it. Local activists reached out in November 2019 asking about rumors AFFF was being burned at Norlite. With left-over grant money, I offered to analyze soil samples downwind of Norlite for the PFAS chemicals in AFFF. Collaboration often means helping out with what’s most needed, and initially that meant public anthropology was

less important than soil samples. But as I got more involved, it also became clear that the community was hungry to understand how AFFF was smuggled into their lives.

With the ground finally thawing in early March 2020, a few students and I collected 7 soil and water samples around Norlite. Talking with residents, we heard stories of snow in every shade but white and a recent uptick of headaches and nosebleeds. The past year had been particularly awful, one resident said, describing how she collapsed for lack of breath alongside the paint that she found inexplicitly dissolving off her car. A few residents pointed their fingers at Norlite, others threw their hands up in the air. Two weeks later, coronavirus sent Bennington College online, and I was quarantining at home when we got the lab results. A final verdict eludes so few samples, but what we saw was alarming (Bond, Schroeder, and Foley 2020). And as COVID shutdown the world, it turned out that those 7 samples were the only real-world data on a crucial question suddenly coming to light: was incineration destroying the toxic chemistry of AFFF or simply redistributing it?

On April 30, I hosted my first COVID press conference on Zoom, walking reporters and residents through our preliminary findings: “Far from destroying AFFF, the Norlite plant appears to be raining down a witches’ brew of PFAS compounds on the poor and working-class neighborhoods of Cohoes.” I spent the afternoon holding (socially-distanced) press availability at Saratoga Sites with television interviews, followed by calls with locked down newsrooms to convey a sense of the scene for their coverage. Afterwards, residents gathered to share stories in the courtyard. “I knew it was shady, everyone knew it wasn’t good. But I didn’t know it was a hazardous waste incinerator.” “I went out once when the smell was bad, there was a thick, almost white, cloud all around here. The second I stepped out of my apartment I was sick immediately.” “I started getting nosebleeds once I moved here 6 years ago. I never had nosebleeds before.” “My daughter has a cold that won’t go away. For months, it won’t go away. She didn’t have it before we came here.”

The next day, the Norlite and AFFF debacle was featured in *The Intercept*, *Chemical and Engineering News*, *Bloomberg News*, *Politico*, *The Hill*, *Wall Street Journal* and others, with extensive coverage in the regional press as well. Senator Chuck Schumer wrote a letter to EPA that opened “In light of Bennington College’s recent announcement” before calling the agency to investigate Norlite. (A few days later an EPA official called me, “You got a lot of mileage out of 7 samples.” But no, he couldn’t help right now because it was “too political.” But officially: COVID travel restrictions.) The state response was more frustrating. Before Norlite had a chance to respond, New York State DEC rejected our data out of hand and slammed the door on further research: “There is no basis to conduct additional sampling.” DEC senior staff took to the phones to convince residents their manifold health issues had no relation to the hazardous waste incinerator next door. One of my critical tasks became linking up the slandered experiences of residents with the scientific grasp of the toxicity of AFFF. Local complaints had a solid scientific foundation, but those connections had to be made (Bond 2021a). We also organized public forums for residents to share their stories together, like the rally “We Breathe What They Burn.” Norlite executives were quick to mock such “stunts of victimization theater” (WAMC 2021). But something of the injustice came into wider view.

Residents and I testified at the town council meetings, now being held online, and a few weeks later the mayor signed a one-year moratorium on burning AFFF in Cohoes. We testified at the NY State Assembly, again on Zoom, and were delighted to

see a state bill pass that banned the burning of AFFF in November. I was soon invited to testify via Zoom at statehouses in Illinois and Vermont, and before the year was out 12 states had prohibited burning AFFF. Such testimony was a chance to meet citizens, churches, and unions fighting hazardous waste incinerators. Many, protesting from poor communities of color, noted how incinerators operated more brazenly during COVID. “No one is monitoring the incinerator right now,” one resident of East St. Louis told me, “And they had a criminal track record before COVID.” Testifying was also an opportunity to see how persuasive narrating the local experience of toxic exposures can be. “Lead with the human stories,” wizened activists told me; state legislators may not be convinced by environmental science, but they will often vote to protect people they can relate to. By April 2021, I was on a call with congressional staffers in DC: they were working to tuck an AFFF burn moratorium into the defense budget and wanted to make sure the current draft was strong enough to protect the residents of Saratoga Sites Public Housing Complex. It passed in the Defense Authorization Act of 2022.

3. The Enduring Indifference of an Imperial Oil Refinery

As President Biden was being sworn in, cascading mishaps at the Limetree Refinery inflicted havoc and harm on St. Croix in the US Virgin Islands. For the 20,000 people living downwind, the fallout bordered on nightmarish: the refinery coughed up thick clouds of oil that showered homes and farms in petrochemicals while asphyxiating emissions closed schools, filled emergency rooms with residents gasping for breath, and forced families to sleep in cars to get upwind of the refinery. Daily assaults on the health of Black and Brown neighborhoods on this US territory continued unabated for months while the refinery issued calm statements that absolutely nothing was amiss. The Governor wondered aloud if the problem was really just an open sewer or a few overly sensitive individuals.

Subsequent investigations found catastrophic operational failures inside Limetree Refinery. A faulty flare was effectively aerosolizing crude oil into thick clouds of petroleum that drifted over the island. As the EPA (2021:11) later reported, these oily mists could have erupted into “flaming rain” in the crowded neighborhoods near the refinery. While a firestorm was averted, other exposures proved just as deadly. As was later revealed, between January and May refinery officials watched unchecked sulphurous emissions exceed levels considered lethal by orders of magnitude, while issuing a steady stream of assurances to the public that ubiquitous sulfurous smells were “far below the level normally considered dangerous to health” (Limetree 2021:1). Residents knew something was amiss, yet they later recounted feeling like they were living in a dystopia where grotesque injuries inflicted on them in their own homes were somehow illegible outside. To force this injustice into the light of day, three community groups on St. Croix and I partnered in the spring of 2021. We set-up a phone line for residents to call-in complaints so we could record incidents, a system that was soon overwhelmed by calls. We also hosted community meetings on Zoom, in which residents began to apprehend the immense scale of what was happening to them. Passing worrisome information on to EPA, we begged that agency to set-up independent monitoring at the refinery. EPA deferred to the Governor (who said nothing was wrong) while agency leadership noted the difficulty of travelling during COVID. Desperate for help, we turned to the national press, and while the pandemic prevented newsrooms from sending reporters to St. Croix we helped connect them to residents over the phone. “The Island Where It Rained Oil,” ran

the *Washington Post* headline in March.

A month later, EPA finally sent a team to St. Croix. On May 6, an EPA investigator parked near the refinery and rolled down his car window. “The odor I briefly encountered was overwhelming and nauseating,” he later recalled, bringing instant debilitating sickness (EPA 2021b: 19). Four months after residents first felt their lives were in danger, EPA issued an emergency shutdown of the refinery for posing “an imminent and substantial endangerment to public health” (EPA 2021a:1). While EPA investigators overcovered faulty equipment, poorly trained administrators, and habitual negligence at the refinery, the agency declined community demands for a full investigation into the impact on residents – a standard EPA response to failures at domestic refineries – and focused all their resources on moving forward.

In response to this neo-colonial lapse, I penned, in the island newspaper, a public history documenting the refinery’s long history of noncompliance with labor law, environmental protections, and local accountability (Bond 2021b). The St. Croix refinery, I wrote, has always been close enough to the United States to reap the benefits but just far enough away to avoid any responsibility for the mess. This colonial arrangement sacrifices the lives of Black and Brown Caribbean Americans to produce cheap gasoline for the mainland US.

To counter the imperial invisibility of current injuries, I also partnered with community groups to organize our own door-to-door investigation of the recent fallout. We designed a survey that captured aggregate data on the lived impact of the pollution released by the refinery, and residents’ own descriptions of those experiences. After announcing the survey on local radio, we were taken aback by the lines that formed at our tables outside grocery stores. People wanted to tell their stories. Emissions so thick they appeared as a fog invading daycare centers and homes. Children falling out of bed in the dead of night, gasping for breath. Individuals, in voices still raspy from the pain, describing the night the air burned their throats and lungs. Entire neighborhoods recounting the day when everyone started vomiting uncontrollably. Workers at the pier recalled a cloud that looked like gasoline vapors shimmering in the tropical air, a thing of curious beauty until the asphyxiation took hold. We also uncovered three untimely deaths that family members attributed to refinery emissions. Dates recalled by residents lined up perfectly with specific flare troubles or emission events that EPA uncovered. Yet nobody wanted to take residents seriously.

In formal testimony and opinion pieces, we insisted that the ethnographic realities of this disaster be recognized, and that emergency response prioritize assistance to the neighborhoods hardest hit (Bond, Gerard, Sibilly-Brown, and Valiulis 2022). We also published a website that aimed to convey both the personal voices of residents and the immense scale of the injustice (www.bennington.edu/Limetree). The information and stories we made public sparked a surge of local and national news coverage with articles in the *Associated Press*, *Inside Climate News*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*. Two days after we released our results, Limetree Refinery filed for bankruptcy in Texas. Executives were explicit: bankruptcy was the best way to avoid impending environmental liability. And sure enough, the Houston court placed damaged lives at the very bottom of debts worth repaying. To this day, many of the injuries to health and home caused by the Limetree Refinery are still awaiting help as the Governor now talks of rebooting the refinery as the only way to pay for environmental justice (Bond 2022).

4. Ethnography in the Fight

These projects offer yet another compelling demonstration of the civic relevance of ethnographic insights to science, policy, and justice (Eriksen 2005; Scheper-Hughes 2009; Low and Merry 2010; Fassin 2017). Yet this work also pulled ethnography in a slightly heterodox, if not entirely unpopulated direction, one in which the research agenda is more attuned to the shifting terrain of an unfolding fight than the refereed metrics of the discipline (Gough 1968; Scheper-Hughes 1995; Bourgois 2002; Kirsch 2002). It is work that calls upon a set of skills largely ignored in the graduate training at top anthropology programs: blasting out press releases rather than submitting proposals, hammering out feisty talking points (and staying on message) rather than narrating a cleverly hedged conference paper, vividly describing the lived trauma of industry negligence and regulatory failures rather than revising and resubmitting snippets of experience into disciplinary legibility, success measured in how your novel framing becomes journalistic common sense rather than in the accumulation of citations, and using every opportunity to make uncomfortable demands of staid institutions rather than making our professional lives palatable for institutional digestion.

There are times when the contradictory and coherent qualities of the world must be clarified by pulling them into disciplinary debate and rigor, but there are also times when the most pressing task is one of departing the seminar room and enlisting our scholarly dispositions in the fight at hand. Telling the difference between the two is no easy matter, but such is the crucial demand of the contemporary.

As my apostate anthropology dove into the swirling waters of advocacy head first, the reach and reception of the ethnography itself deepened in unexpected ways. I was neither neutral nor an observer. I was an active participant, with all the tactical considerations and ethical convictions that flow from such a stance (Kirsch 2015; Dave 2011). Yet far from diminishing the ethnographic view of the problem, such commitments enriched it. My activism opened the door to a much wider set of actors, authorities, and accruals at work around these negligent facilities than would have been available in the professional detachment of more traditional anthropological research (Hale 2008; Scheper-Hughes 2009). The world seen, felt, grasped, confronted through involvement does not align perfectly with the world under the gaze of interpretation, but exactly how they vary remains a shifting, slightly off-putting, and deadly serious question in anthropology today.

Penning opinion pieces led to a flurry of media invitations to talk about negligent facilities on local radio and television, which themselves brought a steady stream of impacted residents wanting to share their stories. Community meetings to disclose worrisome findings became tense forums for neighborhoods to navigate generational divides of language, race, and class as they tried to stand together for the first time. Unable to visit, journalists told me of their boredom with hearing the same suffering story in phone calls with residents as they pressed for new angles if we wanted to keep the story in the headlines. Environmental scientists enlisted into the project spoke of their shock at seeing the lived dimensions of toxic exposures they typically only addressed from the safe distance of the lab. Sympathetic DC staffers talked openly about the blunt electoral considerations that shaped exactly how far congressional committees would go to address the problem. National advocacy groups offered support, but only to the extent it could be aligned their current fundraising campaign. Government agencies denied any problem existed until the evidence was overwhelming, and then begged us to

pause the release of more information until they could catch up. Corporate lawyers wobbled between lucrative offers if only I might give more attention to “industry perspectives” and making mildly threatening statements about my research. Personal injury lawyers booked tables at exclusive restaurants to explain how gross negligence was being airbrushed away by savvy lobbying before asking if I might want to sign on as an expert witness or neighborhood recruiter. Community leaders joined me at a radio station to talk about the project, only to find a sitting governor in the studio waiting to debate us.

The ethnographic view of a hazardous waste incinerator in New York and the oil refinery in St. Croix was invaluablely enhanced by my collaborative activism. In the thick of the action, I could describe firsthand the power players, compromised negotiations, partisan stalemates, institutional blind-spots, pandemic prohibitions, and ruthless agendas that joined together in quiet endorsement of industrial disregard. And the tremendous work required by community leaders to revoke that endorsement. This splendid wealth of ethnographic insight, however, was first mobilized not into disciplinary merit but for the fight at hand. At the height of the pandemic, it took a concerted effort to keep abysmal local experiences in public view. My notes from weekly conference calls between residents and activists at both sites pivot on shared concerns: How do we pressure elected officials when no public meetings are being held? How can we convey the horrors of what’s been going on downwind to law-makers and journalists stuck working from home? How can we share the experience of lived environmental injustice on Zoom? As momentum amassed in the opposite direction, this became more than just figuring out how to tell the story. Offending corporations, complicit state agencies, and COVID restrictions all gathered together to brush away the entire disaster as unreal. Some residents started to doubt what they knew best: their own experience.

Ethnography, as I came to understand it, is as much about describing how a particular people experience the world as it is about accounting for wider forces at play in any particular experience of the world (Roseberry 1988). If some anthropologists have argued for making the historically deep and geographically broad constitution of dangerous exposures visible, as Paul Farmer (2004) often put it, there is a new current in anthropology that puts its emphasis on tracing the intimate dimensions of exposure. Nicolas Shapiro (2015:369) encourages an ethnographic sensitivity to how “minor enfeebling encounters” can become “events that stir ethical consideration and political intervention.” Max Liboiron, Manuel Tironi, and Nerea Calvillo (2018) draw attention to the “intimate activism” that quietly disrupts toxicity with ethics rather than ends. The question for an engaged anthropology of toxicity today, then, is two-fold: first, how do we relate these two scales of accounting for toxicity – corporate profit and corporeal pain, industrial disregard and intimate discernment, political economy and private enfeeblement – in our efforts to advance a more exacting analysis of toxicity today? And more to the point of this essay, how do we move from descriptions of the labor required to draw toxicity into political consideration and toward a more active participation in that labor?

5. Theory in the Present Tense

If the practice of ethnography was enriched by its direct confrontation with a hazardous waste incinerator and an entrepot oil refinery, so was its readership. The most receptive audience – an audience that met every published piece with spirited discussion and follow-up questions, that probed my argument to find the

exact spot where the marshaled evidence no longer supports the claim, that offered new data and told stories to fill in the gaps, and that measured every conclusion against the lens of their own firsthand expertise – was the very people I was writing about. Everything I wrote also attracted a far more adversarial readership of industry lawyers and complicit state officials looking for any poorly worded phrase or overly zealous conclusion that might undermine my credibility. Peer-review pales in comparison. Each statement to the press and published description had to be crafted with some sense of how different, and often oppositional, audiences would make sense of it.

In other words, the very real stakes at play in these contested worlds shaped the ethnographic narration of those worlds. Description was not primarily a matter of pulling wounded lives into disciplinary significance but of realizing and amplifying the significance that people themselves were demanding in their struggle for justice. To be clear: this was not a matter of reifying unmediated experience as the gospel truth of critical analysis – to “make a god out of unexamined subjectivity,” as Raymond Williams (1979:168) once put it – but about situating the critical reflexivity of everyday life at the convergence of a wider field of agents, agendas, and authorities that would otherwise remain just out of view. And by insisting that such reflexivity is never fully subsumed by the wider forces nor innocent of them. The critical project, then, becomes one of making these forces both visible and contestable where they are most acutely felt. Alpa Shah (2022) shows how one of the most political acts within ethnographic writing today is to “make generalizations and links to larger processes” visible to the experienced world at hand. Explanation can be an ethical labor of care and repair, as Carole McGranahan (2022) reminds us, “Ethnography is not just method; it is also theory.”

So many frontline communities feel their worlds lurching beyond the analytical capacity of endorsed science, the social responsibility of offending industries, and the archaic vigilance of the regulatory state. Variations of this theme have become a hallmark of contemporary anthropology. Reworking materialism, the sheer physicality of disruptions underway overwhelms the given coordinates of thought and action. Living amid self-devouring growth, runaway changes, smothered horizons, proliferating loss, and military occupations without end, communities struggle to simply carry-on in places where the powerful seem intent on eradicating everything. For many anthropologists, it is no longer tenable to describe such worlds from the sidelines: unbound violence and ecological vertigo demand a new immediacy and intimacy in ethnographic writing (Petryna 2015; Moran-Thomas 2017; Livingston 2019; Bessire 2021; Mathur 2021; Khayyat 2022). Such writing cuts deep, and poses questions that go beyond analytics. What happens when lives drift beyond the pale of the possible? Will these unmoored lives become the ferment of a more transformative politics or the foundation of neo-fascism? As Hannah Arendt (1951) once pointed out, when masses of people lose a referential basis and agentive assemblies for navigating turmoil – when they stop “believing in the reality of their own experience”(351) – the ground is primed for the abstract consistency of totalitarian lies to replace the rambunctious stage of social change. Cascading calamities are a worrisome revival of these concerns, but also one where the holistic sensibility of anthropology can issue a powerful corrective. Many besieged neighborhoods and discarded landscapes are desperate for bold, cogent accounts that show the scale of what is happening to them now. To put it another way, they want a version of anthropological theory.

The frontline communities I know best want theory in the present tense. As I learned during the pandemic, such theory does not make an easy peace with complicit institutions nor does

it stand back in contemplation of the destruction underway. Rather, it works to historically excavate the convergence of forces at play in upended lives (Trouillot 1995; Kleinberg, Scott, and Wilder 2020), helps rising discontent learn how to land a blow (Checker 2007; Garriga-Lopez 2020), and never loses sight of what real justice would mean (Davis 2010; Bonilla and LeBrón 2019). Following Rosa Luxemburg, we must demand practical justice now not because we think reform will bring it but because the demand itself is a revolutionary education. There is significant variation how such an ethnographically rooted theory might unfold in the Global North versus the Global South, in the slums of the metropole versus the neo-colonial edges of empire, in calls for stately recognition of suffering versus mutual aid networks that refuse the state altogether, in efforts to hold profiteers accountable versus movements to redistribute outside the law, and such theories always take shape within and against the felt vicissitudes of class, race, gender, and citizenship of a particular place. But for so many battered communities, the way disasters, pandemics, wars, and toxic exposures overwhelm the existing institutional orders is not so much a prompt for scholarly reflection on better worlds to come as it is an invitation to join with the political struggle to build a better world now. How we might start writing to the theoretical need within our blasted contemporary should be the aim of critical anthropology today.

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