
Marie-Claire Voyer-Messier
Laval University

The edited volume Engaged Observer: Anthropology, advocacy and activism, explores war and oppression as central topics of analysis. The volume is a collection of anthropological case studies that focus on survivors’ experiences and the everyday lives of those who witness violence. It is also an invitation, even a pressing one at times, to bring anthropologists who study in war zones or other violent and repressive environments to consider their engagement towards the people they choose to collaborate with. A call to scholars who represent victimized individuals and nations to also become advocates for them, as well as witnesses to the moments and experiences that shape the world of those struck by violence and war.

The book is structured into four broad topics, entitled: ‘The politics of witnessing in war and pain’; ‘Lessons from agents of change’; ‘Trauma, violence, and women’s resistance in everyday life’; and, ‘The engaged observer, inside and outside the academy’. By exploring these topics through case studies, the book propels the reader into the experiences of the ethnographers themselves and their deep engagement within local contexts. The collective work includes chapters exploring war, violence, and oppression in Burma, Palestine, Colombia, Guatemala, Italy, and elsewhere, tackling issues such as AIDS, prison life, paramilitary groups, war and refugee camps.

The editor, Victoria Sanford frames the volume in terms of the distinction between ‘Truth’ and ‘truths’, and the need to accept the fact that: "everyone has a truth [...] that represents] an honest interpretation based on different memory and experience of the same events...” (p. 28). She also introduces the terms “trajectories of meaning” and “structures of understanding” to suggest that different people can foster different truths and live the same event(s) in very distinct ways. Sanford explores how the paths people follow in life can be different according to what the journey means to them, or how they understand and live what has happened to them. Based in the specific contexts of the Vietnam War and of La Violencia in Guatemala, she offers examples of the same events being lived and told in diverging ways by two people who were there. For instance, in the case of the Vietnam War, the testimonies given about the Thanh Phong village massacre by members of the squadron responsible for the attack, as well as by a Vietnamese survivor of her village’s massacre, differed greatly in terms of what was done and seen by the same people, at the same place. Thus memory, guilt, fear, and trauma, namely, can account for the diverging versions of a single event, and the existence of various truths.

In the context of war, violence, and oppression, the difficulties linked to the act of representation and to the validity of interpretations present specific challenges that social scientists should consider when they speak on behalf of others. This volume explores such challenges and shows readers, for example, how survivors, witnesses, and anthropologists can become speechless when presented with the horrors of war, making it difficult to later render these moments in a way that does them justice. Further, many volume contributors explore the difficulties of interpretation and sometimes consider this task impossible because the evidence collected in these circumstances is often difficult to accept or verify. Angel-Asani gives a good example of this in her case study of imprisoned black women in Italy. In her work with incarcerated women, she has often encountered difficulties among her scholarly peers who deemed her results untrustworthy, since her interlocutors were criminals and therefore unreliable people, thus revealing the biases of academia.
The volume as a whole encourages the reader to reflect more critically on the epistemology of anthropological research and the production of knowledge about others. It is in the specifics of each case study, of every contributor’s experience, that we find fresh insight on how to conduct field research and render results. Instead of offering major guidelines and general rules for any methodological and analytical work in the field of anthropology, Engaged Observer suggests 12 different ways, each rooted in the specific context of a case study, to enrich our ethnographic work and the way we approach our study material. In order to enrich this exploration, the authors raise questions, including: Is it possible to remain politically, ethnically and/or legally neutral while witnessing terror, pain and suffering? Can we as anthropologists, on one hand, choose to work in areas touched by these atrocities, and on the other, willingly stay out of people’s fights for justice and a normal life? Can moral duty and academic interest coexist? These questions demand consideration, according to these authors, for researchers working with marginalized communities.

With these interrogations, Engaged Observer encourages readers to consider the contemporary anthropological enterprise and engaged work. This is clearly addressed in Skidmore’s case study on advocacy and the politics of engagement in Burma (Myanmar). She makes a plea for anthropologists to be advocates for their interlocutors. In her case, she presents evidence that this advocacy should assist to break hegemonic readings of people’s stories as created by military regimes and institutions. According to her, it is preferable for researchers to write about events witnessed in violent and oppressive environments from the locals’ perspective. It is particularly important in contexts where regimes seek to control and manipulate narratives of terror and suffering and at times to influence over-zealous scholars to take a pro-military stance.

This volume also points to a need for scholars who work in war-touched and violent contexts to be able to find a balance between the analytical explanations requested by the academic community who fund and read the research, and the perspectives and needs of those studied from an experiential level. One way of doing this is by shifting the anthropological focus away from systems of representation and academic knowledge towards embodied experience. Bosia’s chapter demonstrates this approach by bringing the body to the center of the study in order to infuse a degree of empathy into the work. While working with AIDS patients in a gay community, paying attention to physical experience and agency helped Bosia study and talk more openly about the phenomenon of "barebacking". Exploring barebacking helped not only to highlight this practice as a major cause of infection among gay men, but also served as a way to engage the body in a social statement.

Above all, this book is essential for those developing research projects as it helps anthropologists considering research in violent and conflict-laden environments to design research aims and methods that are suited for this type of context. One contributor, Warren, argues succinctly that it is time for “developing a new self-consciousness about how we do it [field research], and identifying new issues, powerful questions, and innovative framings through which to assert the salience of our well-honed approaches to real-world issues” (p. 223). Finally, the most compelling aspect about this volume is its ability to propel the reader into the experiences of specific local contexts while offering important analytical, theoretical, and methodological tools for the study of the everyday lives of those with whom anthropologists work, whether it be in an intense setting or not.

Author Biography: Marie-Claire Voyer-Messier is a master’s student in religious anthropology at Laval University in Québec city, Canada. Her area of interest is the Indonesian island of Java, where she studies a modern ritual feast through the concepts of agency and performance. She intends to go on teaching Anthropology in college after she completes her degree this year.