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"Academic Anthropology" and the People without Theory:
Public Anthropologies at the CUNY Graduate Center

Let's be honest: This paper runs the risk of being of dubious academic and intellectual value. On a panel celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Graduate Center's anthropology program, the temptation, of course, is to celebrate and to veer into celebratory hagiography of Graduate Center Anthropology.

The risk is doubly present because, as a graduate of the program, I have a professional—and thus financial—interest in making my alma mater look good. Pumping up the reputation of the program can, at least in some small way, pump up the value of my degree and career. The risk of this paper descending into celebratory drivel is actually even greater given my task to write about engaged and public anthropologies at the Graduate Center. As someone who has identified to some extent with such terms, I have a professional and financial interest in celebrating various public anthropologies.

Now, of course, there is much to celebrate about anthropology and public anthropology at the Graduate Center. I feel immensely grateful to have been educated in the program. I owe my professional career to the program and to its faculty, staff, and fellow students. Let me use this as an opportunity to thank everyone associated with the program for the intellectually and life-

enriching experience I enjoyed. Thank you, too, to the City and State of New York and New York taxpayers for the tens of thousands of dollars you invested in my education.

(If I can make a small public anthropological plug for investing in public education, for those of us lucky enough to have received doctoral funding and who now have tenure track jobs and some degree of financial security, I would encourage us to donate some portion of our salaries every year to public educational institutions like the Graduate Center and the wider CUNY system—at least until we're successful in pressuring our political leaders to transfer some of the nearly $1 trillion a year the United States is spending on its military-nuclear-intelligence state to the country's public schools at every level.)

Caveats and public service announcements aside, I think it's safe to say that anthropologists identified with a rapidly proliferating number of names like *public* and *engaged* have moved the discipline significantly in recent years. Anthropologists identified as *public, engaged, public interest, practicing, activist, advocacy,* and *applied* (among other names) have moved the discipline from a tendency toward insular, exclusionary conversations within academia to a discipline working more closely with broad publics outside the academy, addressing their needs and interests, and communicating with them in a wide variety of ways.

Despite this shift, anthropology marked as *public* or *engaged* is frequently distinguished from anthropology marked as *theoretical* or *academic*. This is, of course, the source of the ironic reference in the title of this paper. I'm sure most of you can conjure up examples of this phenomenon. Sometimes it's a subtle aside, a whisper, or a small slip, such as when a colleague, perhaps unintentionally and with no ill will, contrasts public anthropology with "real academic" work. On other occasions, some explicitly denigrate and dismiss public anthropology as "not academic" or "not theoretical." In either case, the boundary drawing reveals underlying

assumptions about hierarchies of value between the supposedly superior theoretical and academic and the supposedly inferior public and engaged.

In 1969, Dell Hymes wrote, "One should react to the utterance of 'That's not anthropology,' as one would to the omen of an intellectual death. For that is what it is."[1] Similarly, I think we should react to utterances like, "That's not academic anthropology," or "That's not theoretical," or "That's *only* public anthropology," or "That's not real anthropology," as not just omens of intellectual death, but as intellectual deaths, full stop.

Declaring something "not theoretical" or "undertheorized" has been, for too long, an anthropological slur, an all-too-easy way to put down work one doesn't like. The practice is particularly troubling given that Euro-American males' work is more likely to be considered capital-"T" "Theory" than work produced by women, people of color, and scholars from the global South.[2]

One can and should critique work as insufficiently supported by theory (or any other body of existing literature, theoretical or otherwise) if, indeed, it is insufficiently supported. But to do so requires explaining *how* and *why* something is "not theoretical enough." It requires explaining *how* and *why* the absence of particular theories (or other scholarship) invalidates or weakens someone's work. Calling work written in clear, accessible language, work that avoids the theoretical jargon of the moment, or work that fails to name check prominent theorists "a-

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[1] Dell, Hymes, "The Use of Anthropology: Critical, Personal, Political." In *Reinventing Anthropology*, edited by Dell Hymes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 45.
[2] Catherine Lutz points out that across the social sciences, academics have made a "sharp distinction between theoretical and empirical (and in anthropologists' work, ethnographic) writing. This distinction has a very strong hierarchical and gendered quality," she says. "That is, all other things being equal, theoretical writing is seen to have more value than ethnographic writing, and men's writing, more often than women's, has been regarded as theoretical rather than ethnographic." ("Empire Is in the Details," *American Ethnologist* 33, no. 4 (2006): 594n. 1.)

theoretical" is, if not an intellectual death, at best, an unsupported intellectual shortcut. While there is clearly work identified as "public" that lacks theoretical or other scholarly grounding, drawing superficial lines between the theoretical and academic and the public and engaged is, again, an intellectual death to be rejected, full stop.

Anthropologists at the Graduate Center—among others—have long demonstrated the fallacy of such binaries between the theoretical/academic and the public/engaged, beginning long before terms like public and engaged anthropology emerged. For decades, many Graduate Center anthropologists, along with allies elsewhere, have practiced an anthropology that has been informed by and made contributions to methodologically rigorous, empirically grounded social science theory, while simultaneously—and on the basis of such theory—making politically engaged contributions to activist movements and broad publics outside the university.

In what follows, I will identify at least nine major characteristics linking the theoretically *and* publicly engaged work of anthropologists connected to the Graduate Center (GC) since the Department of Anthropology's founding in 1966. I will also ask whether GC Anthropology has in some ways perpetuated such false binaries and elitist, exclusionary visions of what anthropology is and should be. I ask this intentionally provocative question, and I offer this paper with the hope of helping to erase such unhelpful binaries and encourage more work of a theoretically grounded, public, engaged nature. I will conclude with some thoughts about how GC faculty, students, staff, and alums, and other anthropologist allies can create structural changes at the Graduate Center and across the discipline.

Methods—or the Lack Thereof

In researching this paper, I wish I could say that I carried out a systematic history and analysis of work of a public anthropological nature conducted by Graduate Center faculty, students, and alums since the program's inception. I did not.

Instead, what follows are conclusions I have drawn after reflecting on and analyzing, 1) GC public anthropology with which I am familiar from my time at the Graduate Center between 2000 and 2006, and in the years since my graduation; 2) the profiles of current GC-affiliated faculty;[3] and 3) information I received after I sent emails to department listservs for current and former students requesting examples of public anthropological work by anyone connected to the Graduate Center.

My conclusions are far from exhaustive and are obviously partial, subjective, and reflective of my experiences with and beyond the GC. I encourage feedback to hear what kinds of work, methods, and approaches I may have unintentionally excluded. Above all, I offer my analysis and conclusions to encourage more rigorous, theoretically grounded public anthropology at the Graduate Center and across the discipline.

I am defining public anthropology broadly. I have no interest in drawing yet more fictional boundaries trying to define *what is* and *what is not* public anthropology, let alone all the other incarnations of engaged, practicing, activist, and related anthropologies. Again, as I think Hymes would agree, there's little to be gained intellectually from anyone saying, "That *is* public anthropology," and "That's *not* public anthropology."

In soliciting examples of public anthropology from people connected to the program, I have allowed others to define the term[4] and what work falls within its confines. In what follows,

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[3] Many of the links to faculty websites and additional information are, unfortunately, broken.
[4] I find the following general definition of *public anthropology* useful. It was developed by the department in which I now find myself, at American University. "Although the term can mean

I will not refer to or cite anyone's work by name. Referencing the work of some in the GC community and not others would be inappropriate given the unsystematic nature of my analysis. Name checking or citing some but not others would also effectively be a form of boundary drawing, and, inevitably, I would exclude some unintentionally—pissing people off in the process.

Linking Theory and Public Engagement: Nine Characteristics

Anthropologists at the Graduate Center have made major contributions both beyond academia and within it. They have made major contributions in diverse areas including, but clearly not limited to, race and racism, gender and sexuality, class and inequality, gentrification and the rights of the poor, health and illness, violence and war, social movements and resistance of many kinds—among many other areas.[5]

I have identified at least nine major characteristics or commitments that I see as generally linking the theoretically *and* publicly engaged work of anthropologists connected to the Graduate Center. These characteristics include commitments to:

1) Assisting progressive social change;

2) Decolonizing anthropology and anthropological knowledge production and the expansion of anthropological expertise beyond its primarily Euro-American roots;

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many things to many people, broadly defined, it refers to a movement among anthropologists to take anthropology beyond the confines of academia to address and work on the problems, concerns, and interests of the broadest possible publics while reducing the boundaries that exist between anthropologists and the communities with whom they work in every phase of research and dissemination."

[5] Some others include public archaeology, medical anthropology and drug use, waste reduction and environmental justice, indigenous youth and public health, public space and privatization, Black Lives Matter and Occupy Wall Street, economic development and the interests of the poor, multiculturalism and religion, immigrant rights and minimum wage struggles, immigration and ethnicity, Islamophobia and human rights, HIV/AIDS and capitalism, welfare reform and racial disparities.

3) Rigorous, often innovative research methodologies (which can deepen empirical and theoretical contributions) such as collaborative, participatory, and feminist-inspired methods, mapping and oral history methodologies, among others;

4) Examining the effects of large-scale political-economic, historical, and ideological forces and processes on people's lives explicitly linked to examinations of people's micro-level experiences, meaning-making, and agency;

5) Investigations of power and a willingness to challenge power and the powerful (e.g., national and local government officials, the Pentagon, corporations, elites);

6) Investigations aimed at exposing and reducing local and global inequalities, such as those along lines of race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and religion;

7) Writing for (and other communication with) broad public audiences, including policymakers and others, to share anthropological knowledge about major issues of the day, often using new and innovative media and media outlets (e.g., U.S. wars in Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq);

8) Direct connections to social movements (e.g., environmental justice struggles, Occupy Wall Street, #BlackLivesMatter) and the shaping of rigorous scholarship to support movements with useful empirical findings and theory; and

9) Supporting free or low-cost public education, public education initiatives, and innovative teaching methodologies and pedagogies (e.g., teach-ins, open classes, degree programs, even textbooks) as important forms of public anthropology.

These commitments and characteristics constitute a necessarily partial list. They are, of course, neither exhaustive nor universally shared among anthropologists connected to the Graduate Center. They are also in no way intended as any kind of criteria or measuring stick. However, by examining the record of Graduate Center anthropology, I hope we can explore how anthropologists can learn from and advance a body of work that has long ignored false dichotomies and instead practiced a politically committed, empirically grounded, theoretically and publicly engaged anthropology dedicated to helping effect progressive social change.

Despite the impressive public work of anthropologists at the Graduate Center and beyond, some anthropologists still contrast theoretical or academic anthropology with public or

engaged anthropologies. As others have noted, this seems to be a particular problem in the United States: At least since the days of Boas, Mead, and Hurston, there has been less of an expectation and assumption that anthropology (and other academic disciplines) should provide broad public benefits and that anthropologists (and other academics) should be public intellectuals engaged in debates of significance to broad publics outside academia.

That some still contrast the supposedly theoretical/academic and the public/engaged has its roots, I suspect, in the political economy of post-World War II academia in the United States; in the rapid expansion of university departments in that era (of which the Graduate Center's founding was part); in the desire by some university-employed anthropologists to maintain hierarchical boundaries with the growing number of anthropologists employed outside universities; as well in simple elitism and snobbery.[6]

Conclusions

Personally, I would like to see anthropologists move toward the elimination of monikers like public and engaged anthropology. These names have helped fuel an important and growing movement of anthropologists (and other scholars) pursuing scholarship dedicated to benefitting people outside academia. Troublingly, however, such names also run the risk of becoming competing anthropological brands, primarily fueling the production of insular academic journal articles and benefitting academic careers. Ultimately, like others at the Graduate Center and beyond, I would hope that, as one fellow alum put it to me, public anthropology will be "understood to be an inherent part of what we should do as anthropologists."[7]

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[6] This subject clearly needs more research and analysis than I can provide here.
[7] Email to author.

Unfortunately, as the alum pointed out, "in too many places, this public anthro work is not acknowledged or deemed as relevant to our careers." Often, the alum said, "those of us who are committed to making our work and expertise matter outside the academy" do so "on top of or at the expense of other forms of knowledge production." Which is to say that too often, academic incentive structures reinforce the false theoretical and academic vs. public and engaged binary, discouraging work of a public nature while privileging insular work primarily of interest to other anthropologists.

While many connected to the GC program have demonstrated the fallacy of such binaries, I would like us to consider whether the Department has, in some ways, also perpetuated these binaries and elitist visions of what anthropology is and should be? (It wouldn't be hugely surprising given that the Graduate Center was designed to be an elite part of the CUNY system.) One alum who wrote me described observing a "fundamentally conservative approach to research" in the department.[8]

Noting that "there were some exceptions," the alum said, faculty "by and large maintained an elitist intellectual position on theory/practice, knowledge generation, methodologies, and the relationship between researchers and subjects."[9]

As much as I want to celebrate the department and as much as the department deserves celebration, I want to ask whether and to what extent the program—and academic anthropology in the United States more broadly—is also perpetuating unhelpful and intellectually dubious distinctions between supposedly theoretical academic anthropology and a supposedly a-theoretical publicly engaged anthropology? If this is the case, the question is what can we do

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[8] Email to author.
[9] Email to author.

about it? I hope we can productively take up this question in the discussion period as a challenge

to improve and build on the successes of the department's first 50 years.