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From Activism to Invested Scholarship: When Outsiders Are Insiders (abstract)

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The Social Practice of Human Rights: Charting the Frontiers of Research and Advocacy

2015 Conference of the University of Dayton Human Rights Center

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Research Panel: Engaging in Human Rights Work

Presenters: Kristi Heather Kenyon, Dalhousie University; University of Pretoria; Tal Nitsán, University of British Columbia

Title: From Activism to Invested Scholarship: When Outsiders Are Insiders

Abstract: Social science methodologies frequently assume that the researcher is ahistorical, bringing no background or investment to the topic they study. Yet, as activists and scholars of human rights activism we are drawn to the movements we study precisely because of our engagement with these groups, places and topics. How does our research and teaching change if we are viewed as participants rather than outside observers in the movements we study? How do we navigate interviews with people who know us as activists rather than scholars? How do we interpret materials in which our own words and images appear?

Coming to academia as activists, we have personal histories intimately connected to the topics we study, including colleagues on the ground. Although we are activist ‘insiders’ we also negotiate a simultaneous position of ‘outsiderness’ as we study countries where we are culturally foreign. Employing a reflexive analysis of our own research methodologies we interrogate the dynamics of what we term ‘invested scholarship.’ We explore two human rights struggles: women’s rights in Guatemala and HIV rights in Botswana. Both studies are based on fieldwork including observation, participation, formal and informal conversations, and semi-structured and in-depth interviews. To analyse the complex role of the activist/scholar we focus on the ways in which we, the invested scholars, appear in our data, through images, statements and relationships. We find that assumptions of allegiance and ‘insiderness’ appear relatively frequently in our research interactions. Being known as activists by those we study is a status that allows us a position of trust and unique access. However, such a privileged position also comes with unique challenges and responsibilities raising questions of objectivity, ethics and methodology. We argue that this role is a negotiated nexus of activism and scholarship that presents important critiques to the paradigm of outsider objectivity.

Keywords: activist scholars, reflexive methodology, human rights

Biographies:

Kristi Heather Kenyon, Postdoctoral Fellow, Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria, South Africa; Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Political Science, Dalhousie University: Kristi Heather Kenyon has been involved in human rights advocacy for more than 15 years as an activist and invested scholar. She has worked with non-governmental organisations in the human rights and development sectors in Southern Africa, South East Asia and Canada. Her Doctoral thesis, *Choosing Rights: The Puzzle of the Rights Frame in HIV Activism* examines 9 African HIV advocacy groups and analyses their decision to frame their claims as rights. She is currently exploring Southern African understandings of human rights and continues to be involved in advocacy on health, human rights, gender and development.

Tal Nitsán, PhD, Department of Anthropology, University of British Columbia: Tal Nitsán teaches gender-related courses in the departments of Anthropology and Sociology at UBC. She has been involved

in different anti gender-based-violence projects, such as the Jerusalem Rape Crisis Center and the UBC Sexual Assault Awareness Committee. Her Doctoral thesis, *From Left to Rights: Guatemalan Women's Struggle for Social Justice*, focuses on the Guatemalan campaign to end violence against women. Inspired by the Guatemalan women's movement, Nitsán's current research and activism focus on producing and promoting rape-free campus cultures in North America.