

6. Activist Scholarship

Limits and Possibilities in Times of Black Genocide

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Between 1996 until 2006 I collaborated with two Los Angeles-based grassroots organizations, the Coalition Against Police Abuse (CAPA), and the Community in Support of the Gang Truce (CSGT). The beginning of that period was also when I started fieldwork as part of my academic training toward a degree in anthropology at the University of California, San Diego.

In this essay, I explore how my training in anthropology and my involvement with organizations working against anti-Black racism and for social justice have generated a blueprint for ethnography that does not shy away from projecting explicit political involvement. How do the knowledge and methods of social inquiry already present in grassroots organizations inflect our academic perspectives, enhancing their depth and uncovering previously silent assumptions about “subjects” and “objects” of “scientific inquiry”? On the basis of the description and analysis of my fieldwork in South Central Los Angeles, especially between 1996 and 1998, when I worked daily at CAPA and CSGT, I argue that the dialectic between academic training and on-the-ground everyday community work provides valuable insights into the possibilities of political activism, generating knowledge that interrogates the self-proclaimed neutral strands of academic research. This interrogation projects the visions of liberatory social organization so necessary in times of continuing Black genocide. I make the case for an often unrecognized aspect of fieldwork with advocacy groups, in particular when that work is conducted by someone who, like me, had relatively few applicable skills to the everyday grind of assisting victims of police brutality, unfair evictions, and gang warfare: that scholars, especially those in the beginning of their career,

benefit from their involvement with grassroots organizations in ways glaringly disproportionate to what we can offer them.

The essay is organized in three parts. In the first part, I present a brief overview of the history and activities of CAPA and CSGT. I then describe my insertion in these organizations: how I became involved, the activities that I helped develop, and the knowledge of community organizing that I was fortunate to learn from Los Angeles activists. The final section is about some of the lessons—practical and theoretical—that can be drawn from what I call observant participation in such organizations vis-à-vis both academic training and necessary political interventions.

HISTORY AND ACTIVITIES OF CAPA AND CSGT

The Coalition Against Police Abuse

Founded by Black Panther Party members who survived the FBI's Counter Intelligence Programs (COINTELPROs), CAPA has been in South Central Los Angeles since 1976. It was formed primarily in response to the historically persistent waves of police shooting, beatings, and harassment that define predominantly Black neighborhoods. Michael Zinzun, a nationally known community activist and former Black Panther Party member, who coordinated CAPA until his untimely death in 2006.¹ The institution embraces a variety of causes that are the result of both CAPA's historical antecedents of community-related political activity and its analysis of and intervention in emerging events such as the 1980s great wave of immigration from Latin and Central America, the Reaganomics-generated unemployment crisis, gang activity, and large-scale, high-tech, militarized, publicly sanctioned police repression.

While CAPA's original and main purpose is to legally assist victims of police brutality, CAPA considers police abuse part of a wider context of oppression. Its members see their struggle against police brutality as necessarily connected to broader structural and historical inequalities. The struggle against police brutality, in this way, is nothing but the struggle toward social justice.

CAPA sees not only the necessity of organizing against police abuse, but also the need to link increases in police abuse to the rising economic crisis presently taking place in the United States. In other words, if workers strike for higher wages, who is called? The police. If you can't pay your rent and refuse to move into the streets, who is called? The police. And if you organize demonstrations against a corrupt and unjust system, who is called? The police, whether with force or as un-

dercover spies. CAPA believes the police are a necessary element in the maintenance of a system controlled by a few millionaires and politicians who put profit before people.²

CAPA defines itself as a direct product of the Panthers. It is a place where several ex-Black Panthers gather, reminisce, and discuss present issues. CAPA's logo is a black panther encircled by "All Power to the People," the emblematic Black Panther phrase that condensed much of the party's goals.

The theoretical and practical guidelines adopted by the coalition are based on the writings of Carmichael and Hamilton, Frantz Fanon, and Malcolm X, among others. CAPA activists usually explain such guidelines as derivations of Black Power. Among those guidelines is the recognition that Black Americans ought to consider themselves part of a wider, international community. As colonized people in the United States, Black Americans should link their struggles with those of people in similar conditions. "Black Power means that Black people see themselves as part of a new force, sometimes called the 'Third World'; that we see our struggle as closely related to liberation struggles around the world. There is only one place for Black Americans in these struggles, and that is on the side of the Third World" (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, xi). Blacks in this country, the argument goes, endure hardships common to several colonies throughout the globe. By transcending the physical and ideological horizons of the mainstream United States—by questioning values of consumption and individualism, recognizing the intrinsic racist nature of American institutions, and embracing the radical traditions of the African diaspora—Blacks gain an alternative perspective for their collective struggles. Inspired by Frantz Fanon's rejection of European epistemological and political models, Black Power suggests an expanded notion of community as an antidote to the illusions of full integration and racial equality in U.S. society.

An international community, if only virtual, is thus established. This is a significant theoretical and practical step toward liberation. It permits visualizing realities beyond the confines of Black inner cities and relativizing taken-for-granted modes of thought. It enables a new language and praxis. The utopia of an international community of struggles becomes palpable for Black Americans as it rescues a tradition of Black U.S. and diasporic radical tradition, links this tradition to present predicaments—at home and elsewhere—and in the process attempts to revitalize and expand local communitarian bonds.

The coalition has been successful in expanding its geographical horizons with frequent interchange visits to organizations of various cities in the United States and abroad. In recent years, CAPA members have visited England, France, Ghana, Namibia, Jamaica, Haiti, and Brazil. Persons from these countries and various American cities are constantly coming to Los Angeles and spending time at the coalition, exchanging information and techniques of community organization. Although most of these persons are Blacks of the African diaspora, since the early 1990s there has been a substantial increase in the number of non-Black persons of color participating in the coalition's programs, especially Latina/os.

This international praxis, together with the many years of effective community organizing, has made the coalition's politicization of the unlawfulness of law enforcement rather successful.³ CAPA activists are frequently contacted by local and national media to speak about their activities—especially in the wake of the common cases of police misconduct. CAPA has established itself as an important, widely recognized voice of the inner city. Accumulating knowledge and public exposure of its causes, the coalition serves as a fundamental base upon which emerging social movements in the inner city build their momentum. When the gang truce between Bloods and Crips was signed in 1992, for example, CAPA served as one of the main intermediaries for the elaboration and maintenance of the peace terms. The coalition's historical genealogy and its contemporary practices have prepared the terrain for the incorporation of ex- and current gang members willing to establish and expand the Watts Gang Truce.⁴

I now turn to CSGT, which shares the same building CAPA occupies.

The Community in Support of the Gang Truce

Photographs of the Million Man March in Washington, D.C., on October 16, 1995, show former enemy gang members from Los Angeles shaking hands and pledging to continue and expand the Watts truce formalized in 1992. The pictures are part of CAPA's permanent exposition, arranged in panels distributed in the main room of its building, and are obvious counterpoints to the pictures of police brutality and racism that occupy nearby space. At the office, one not familiar with the meanings of the photographs may hear from an old-timer or member of CSGT the explanation that one of the key events that made possible the Million Man March was the establishment of the gang truce. There would not have been so many people listening to Louis Farrakhan and other Black public figures were it

not for the cessation of hostilities between gangs of all parts of the United States that started in Los Angeles.

On March 27, 1992, representatives of the four housing projects of Watts (Nickerson Gardens, Jordan Downs, Imperial Courts, and Hacienda Village) signed the truce. The negotiations had been going on since at least the late 1980s (Jah and Shah'Keyah 1995). The results were almost immediate. On June 17, 1992, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "gang-related homicides in South Los Angeles have dropped markedly—to 2 last month, compared with 16 in May 1991—leading police to give new credit to the truce declared between Black gangs." Meanwhile, various community organizations willing to support and expand the Watts cease-fire were being formed.

Founded in March of 1991—a year before the Watts cease-fire was formalized—CSGT's main goal is to support the gang peace treaty by "addressing the totality of issues affecting that truce."⁵ To understand this claim, it is necessary to consider that CSGT is closely linked to CAPA. Both organizations share a building on Western Avenue, on the northern fringe of South Central. Many of CSGT's members work closely with CAPA activists. This means that, in practice, the lines that separate and define CAPA and CSGT are tenuous—even though each organization has its own independent nonprofit legal status.

Not surprisingly, the 1960s Black Power theses, as CAPA's old-timers perceive them, play a considerable role in CSGT's outlook. CSGT defends a concept of economic development, for example, that is "different than the market-driven or corporate dominated approaches that are often promoted by big business and government."⁶ Furthermore, CSGT believes that economic development, rather than pitting one person against the other, or one group against the other, should advance the individual *and* the community. So instead of enterprise zones, CSGT calls for cooperative zones, which, they claim, "promote social and economic justice, and are free of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression."⁷

In this spirit, CSGT offers video classes, silk-screen training, the "off the roach" program, and computer classes and lately has been developing plastic domes for the homeless. There is also training and encouragement to participate in a speakers' bureau, a media bureau, and a rumor resolution hotline.

While CSGT's programs and their scale may not be the most suitable for the full economic recovery of the inner city, they nevertheless provide an alternative project of community by politicizing aspects of inner-city life that top-down sweeping plans are incapable of addressing. In politiciz-

ing the conditions and lives of poor youth, CSGT also establishes a public voice that, in itself, breaks the silence to which inner-city grassroots movements are usually condemned. Inspired by CAPA's long history of activism, CSGT calls for community control of the police and a Civilian Police Review Board.⁸ CAPA's influence is also evident in the legal advice that CSGT provides for juveniles involved with the criminal justice system. CAPA members, following a tradition that can be traced back to the Panthers, are meticulous students of the law. Much of the legal knowledge gathered over thirty years of community activism was transferred to the efforts in maintaining and expanding the gang truce.⁹

MY RESEARCH APPROACH

I contacted CAPA as soon as I moved to South Central, in January 1996. I wanted to work for the organization, and I also wanted to learn about the lives of those who participated in it. So I called Michael Zinzun, a well-known organizer whom I had heard about from activists working against anti-Black racism and police abuse in San Diego. During our phone conversation, I was asked a series of questions aimed at revealing my political convictions. The fact that I supported and had campaigned for the Workers' Party in Brazil (Partido dos Trabalhadores)—a grassroots, democratic socialist organization that eventually reached the presidency with Lula in 2003—certainly helped Zinzun's decision to invite me to the office so that we could extend our conversation and see in which ways, if any, I could work at CAPA. Zinzun had been in Brazil for the first time in 1993, less than two months before our first conversation, with a group of thirteen students, professors, ex-gang members, persons who had been incarcerated, and community organizers. The purpose of this trip had been to "both learn and offer help with the growing consciousness-building that is taking place there among the poor, the disenfranchised and people of color."¹⁰

An important part of our telephone conversation was devoted to a discussion of Brazil's racial composition. According to Zinzun, Brazil was the second-largest Black nation on earth, with almost seventy million Black people. Only Nigeria, with a population of one hundred million, had more inhabitants of African descent than Brazil. As we extended our discussion, I realized he was as much interested in *my* racial identity. I told him I considered myself Black, even though, coming out of a mixed-race family, my phenotype is ambiguous. He then proceeded to talk about Malcolm X—how conscious he was of the contradictions of his light skin and how

this aspect of his identity was an important component of his critique of white supremacy and the need to embrace Blackness. Zinzun himself, he confided, was the product of several distinct ancestries, including his Apache father. Still, what mattered for Zinzun was that people of color understand their history, recognize their differences (and the privileges and disadvantages that derive from them), and above all not become entangled in self-deceptions and competition with other people of color. The political aspect of Blackness was crucial to how he understood identity.

At the office, I was given a series of questionnaires, leaflets, brochures, and papers on CAPA and CSGT. While I completed a questionnaire (about my willingness to participate in the organization's events, receive its newsletter, and contribute to its finances), Zinzun explained some of the organizations' programs, which, of course, I only came to understand through everyday participation in its activities. What I present in this essay, therefore, is the product of an initial two-year study in which I supplemented what I learned from this participation with various documents and ethnographic material that I collected about the coalition, as well as with historical and sociological research on L.A.'s residential segregation patterns, labor market, everyday violence, and institutionalized forms of discrimination such as that operated by the police. My account, furthermore, is informed by my ongoing collaborations with CAPA and CSGT activists. All of this is to say that, even though there is a tendency, in academia, to separate lived experiences—and the knowledge that is an integral part of them—from theoretical and descriptive efforts informed by disciplines, I was able to articulate these seemingly disparate fields into a political and research agenda that was both a valuable tool in the struggle against police brutality and a contribution to the academic debate on race, segregation, social movements, and justice.

The projects I became involved with at CAPA and CSGT were not part of academic agendas. While I later learned about graduate programs that encourage involvement with and work about community organizations seeking social justice, such orientation is far from common in anthropology, much less in the social sciences, in the United States. Anthropology, its theories and methods, did not make much sense in South Central L.A.'s context of massive marginalization, brutality, and premature death. There was an urgent need to intervene, and my training in the discipline was not of great help. It should not have been a surprise. Cedric Robinson (1983/2000), Patricia Hill Collins (1998), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995), and Gayatri Spivak (1999), among many others, have written on the close connection between Western academic disciplines and their White-

centric, excluding, and dehumanizing assumptions. Robin Kelley (1997), more specifically, reflecting on the relationship between anthropology and U.S. Black neighborhoods, analyzed the ways in which authors such as Ulf Hannerz (1969) have perpetuated stereotypes about African Americans by drawing broad generalizations based on limited contact. An essentialist notion of Black culture (Kelley 1997, 35) is one among many blind spots preventing not only a complex appreciation of Black social life in segregated communities but also an understanding of and need to engage with transformative local collective efforts. The fact remains that the social sciences in the Western world, and their practitioners, willingly or not, further hegemonic common sense about Blacks, albeit—or should I say, especially—by ignoring their plights and the works they produce. We do not even have to dwell on the specific texts to reach such conclusions—and by this I am certainly not diminishing the importance of *principled* deconstructions of hegemonic narratives. Just consider how many graduate and undergraduate students in the United States and other countries of the African diaspora read and seriously engage with the works of Black scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois, C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and Angela Davis? Not many, and when these works are read they are often not taken as seriously as the so-called white classics. This fact alone is a good indication of the white bias of disciplines such as sociology, political science, and anthropology, just to remain within the “social sciences.” In such disciplines, while Blacks figure prominently in what are considered classic studies of Africa (and inner-city neighborhoods in the United States), they are not as commonly rendered the subject of social-scientific inquiry in the United States. When they are, stereotypical and therefore dehumanizing renditions abound (Wilson 1996; Anderson 1990; Waters 1999).¹¹

Despite what is still taught in anthropological methods classes, no detached, fly-on-the wall is approach possible. Such an approach in anthropology, considered an antidote to the influences of one’s subjectivity on the research process, only obscures the fact that even those who try to be invisible are, at the very least, already influencing the social environment in which they choose to do their fieldwork and, more importantly, are already committing themselves to a very clear moral and political position—that of letting things remain as they are, of leaving the status quo untouched.

Given CAPA’s explicit political orientation, I would not have been accepted as a collaborator if my political and racial allegiances were not clear. It is very telling that, while I was job hunting and going to academic

conferences, I was often asked about the objectivity of my research. The implication, of course, was that my work was not as valuable as that conducted by a dispassionate observer, since my political inclinations tinted, so to speak, my “data.” I was frequently asked by academics: “How would your research change if it were conducted by someone else?” The question, of course, suggested a “someone else” without explicit political commitment. Guided *somewhat* by the scientific premise of experimental repeatability that requires controlled environments and methods that should consistently produce the same results, such inquiries also interrogate the disciplinary integrity of engaged research and researchers. It should go without saying that when both the site of research and the researchers are not white, the alleged scientific discourse becomes aligned with a well-known history of delegitimization that casts a deep suspicion on nonwhite practitioners of academic disciplines (Collins 1991).

That a feeble connection exists between the social sciences and the natural sciences (hence my emphasis on the *somewhat*) underscores the circular dynamics connecting hypotheses, methods, and results that accompany the overwhelming majority of scientific research (e.g., Feyereabend 1988). The answer to my respected (sometimes even idolized) white interrogators was straightforward: there would be no research if there was no involvement. I would not have become a CAPA collaborator if their members had not found my political commitment compatible with their program of social emancipation. Objectivity, if understood as detachment, was simply impossible, for a mere observer would not have been welcome into the building on Western Avenue more than a few times.

Adding to the impossibility of taking a “detached” stance vis-à-vis the organization I chose to work with was that CAPA had a long history of infiltration by agents provocateurs and undercover police officers. Thus a “fly-on-the-wall approach” to obtaining information about CAPA, while certainly adopted by the police and FBI, would have never worked for me—not as a research strategy (for that would clearly align me with those trying to undermine the work that the coalition was producing) and even less from an ethical standpoint, since choosing the “neutral” route would mean nothing short of choosing the side of those in power for whom the oppression of Black people is a source of privilege (Lipsitz 1998).

Spying has always been a concern for those working at the coalition. During the Black Panther years, agents provocateurs played crucial roles in the wars carried on by the FBI and its Counter-Intelligence Pro-

grams—COINTELPROs (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990; Cleaver and Katsiaficas 2001). Such strategies continued when the survivors of those wars formed new organizations in the late 1970s and early 1980s, precisely when the New Right, with Reagan as its prominent symbol, gave (at the very least tacit) *carte blanche* to repressive tactics against progressive movements in the United States and abroad (Chomsky 2003; Gordon 1998; Sinavandan 2003).

For example, in 1979, after discovering that CAPA had been infiltrated by police agents, its members, together with those of other progressive organizations that had also detected and documented the presence of spies in their headquarters, sued the Los Angeles Police Commission for violation of their constitutional rights to assembly, privacy, and association. Juridically assisted by American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) attorneys and staff persons, in 1983 the 131 plaintiffs agreed to a \$1.8 million settlement. The plaintiffs also imposed a list of nine resolutions upon the city bureaucracy and the Los Angeles Police Department. It was agreed that the California Supreme Court would have jurisdiction over the settlement agreement and would thus regulate and be a guarantee against future spying.¹²

The facts that started the case happened unexpectedly. CAPA and other progressive civil society organizations were pressuring the Los Angeles Police Department to, among other matters, incorporate more persons of color into its staff. In response to these demands, the LAPD issued a press release with a list of persons who were already part of its staff and who had nonwhite backgrounds. To the surprise of many CAPA members, the list contained thirteen names of persons who either had worked or were still working at the coalition. Zinzun's then personal secretary was one of the LAPD staff. The thirteen infiltrators had worked with several progressive organizations, and, as Zinzun showed me, they appear in several photographs of manifestations and rallies against police brutality. It would almost be humorous if it weren't tragic.

I was confronted with the persisting *effects* of this history of spying, infiltration, and intimidation during the whole period I worked at the office, first as a person suspected of being an infiltrator, then as the object of routine threats originating (so attest coalition members) from the police. In the first few months working at CAPA, I was never left alone in the office; I had no access to documents or to certain rooms and drawers, and I was never permitted to be the last one to leave. Old-timers informed me that such precautions were necessary routine. That was when I first heard about the spy cases—they were the rationale offered for the

suspicion shown toward new members. I was to be given keys to the office only when the staff agreed that my allegiance was beyond doubt. Because I was at the office every day and developed close rapport to a number of activists there, the process of acquiring keys took over three months. Before that happened, however, as I engaged in daily work at the office—mainly writing flyers, answering the phone, participating in meetings on strategies of community organization, acquiring and rearranging the furniture in the office—I was given several CAPA videos to watch during weekends. The videos were about the LAPD's racism and violence and about the Black Panther's community programs; some were videos of Zinzun's monthly television program *Message to the Grassroots*. I was asked about them later, and it was evident that I was being carefully observed and that my political allegiances were being evaluated.

So much for anthropology's agenda of participant observation—I, the anthropologist, was the object of close scrutiny. Since anthropology is a white-dominated discipline, and therefore one that has historically been associated with spheres of institutionalized power—anthropologists, after all, arrived in unexplored lands as part of the colonization apparatus, together with the army and clergy (see, e.g., Césaire 2000)—it is obvious that its practitioners neither learn how to nor are comfortable with being the ones subjected to observation. The uneasiness with which my work was received in many traditional and conservative academic milieus derives in great part from this reversal of roles. Such reversal becomes even more problematic when Black persons are the subjects of the scrutiny, thus directly questioning not only anthropology but Western thought in general and its deep-seated reliance on the transparency and ultimate imposed (if only imagined) transparency and therefore objectification of the “native informant” (Spivak 1999).

It quickly became clear, however, that activists at the office were not the only ones observing my activities. My “fieldwork” was given yet another twist when, as soon as I was given the keys to the office, I started receiving threatening phone calls. The distorted, metallic low voice told me to “get out of the ‘hood’” and made several other threats, the less radical of which promised to kick my ass “real bad.” I asked Zinzun about the intimidating phone calls; he responded, matter-of-factly, that they were common. He was certain they were from the police. They were recorded messages sent to everyone working at the coalition and other community organizations.

Threatening phone calls were not the only signs of activity clearly aimed at destabilizing the coalition. The office had been broken into sev-

eral times since its foundation. One break-in occurred in mid-March of 1996, less than three months after I started working there. Another occurred in August of that same year. As usual, the actions were carried out to resemble robberies: a VCR and some inexpensive objects were taken away and all the drawers and files were searched.¹³ But office members knew better. According to Zinzun, the object of the “robberies” was documents that CAPA has been gathering about police brutality over the last twenty years. Psychological intimidation was also an obvious purpose of such break-ins. Yet even though these “burglaries” always caused worry and anger, old-timers downplayed their effectiveness: after all, they had been happening for such a long time that, if they generated some frustration, they caused no more surprise.

These facts only underscore the constant presence of surreptitious surveillance and intimidation focused on those working at the coalition. In 1996, however, this presence was only a pale reminder of the full-scale spying operation that had taken place at CAPA until it was discovered and made the object of a lawsuit in the early 1980s. If the most obvious COINTELPRO operations had ceased with the dismemberment of the Black Panther Party, it was nevertheless evident that their form, content, and inspiration had continued, not only during the years of systematic spying at CAPA, but also in recent events. Zinzun often says the office has been infiltrated from its very first days of existence. In the late 1970s, before the coalition moved to its present Western Avenue office, members of the coalition daily ate and held conversations in the small storefront restaurant next door. The amiable woman who owned and managed the place, and who seemed particularly fond of the young activists, would years later be identified as a police undercover agent.

All of this is to say that—and going back to the frequent question fellow anthropologists and academics asked me—unless your allegiance was beyond doubt, you would neither gain the trust of CAPA activists nor be able to circulate unencumbered in the building. So forget being a graduate student in anthropology trying to do participant observation. You were an activist first and, circumstances permitting, an observer second. Hence the expression I use to characterize my experience at the coalition as it pertains to ethnographic methods: *observant participation*, rather than the traditional *participant observation*. While *participant observation* traditionally puts the emphasis on the observation, *observant participation* refers to active participation in the organized group, such that observation becomes an appendage of the main activity. Indeed, that is how my days were spent: after hours of numerous activities in the office,

at night I would write down notes about the day's events and reflect on how they affected and were inflected by the strategies that we were utilizing to combat Black people's oppression. The field notes had at least a double function. Whereas they obviously served to record details about office routine (e.g., interactions between different persons; cases of police brutality we were working on; personal stories offered in the midst of conversations), they were also a means to reflect on the effectiveness, transformation, reformulation, and application of everyday interventions to reverse Black oppression. In other words, what on the surface may appear self-reflexive note taking—the stuff from, about, and in which the self-reflexive moment in anthropology was launched in the mid-1980s (e.g., Marcus and Fischer 1986; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Crapanzano 1980)—in reality constituted the process of self-critique and eventual reformulation that we all underwent as members of the coalition.

DEVELOPING A DIALOGICAL ARGUMENT AND EXPLORING WIDER HORIZONS

As much as activists value self-critique and reformulation of theories and practices associated with the mechanics of community organization, self-critique and reformulation are not enough for the deep and broad comprehension of the phenomena affecting Black people in South Central. As the activists frequently recognized, the critical edge of the discourse and praxis of community organizing necessitated linking the present to the past, the innumerable everyday occurrences to systematic policies affecting the criminal justice system, human geography, employment, and health, among others. An intersectional analysis informed much of the critical consciousness valued at the coalition. Thus, emulating the various seminars that CAPA held on capitalism, Pan-Africanism, racism, and the criminal justice system, I searched for structures of meaning in narratives provided by academic disciplines, archives, and of course the coalition's own documents and hidden transcripts of social intervention. By contextualizing the events of everyday life within a greater framework of historical-genealogical information about the production and maintenance of racialized inequalities, and by juxtaposing this larger framework with the microphysics of everyday life, I attempted to formulate a critical discourse whose form and content, rather than being those of a Cartesian *demonstration*, suggest an *argument*.

An argument is more easily permeable to debate than a demonstration (Perelman 1970). The open-ended character of arguments reflects their

necessarily partial, localized, historically determined, and dialogical nature. All the phases involved in critical ethnographies—especially the never-ending feedback that is established between those who are part of the study and what the study presents—are necessarily dialogical. Complicating the process are the inevitable critique and reformulation of the provisional results that one reaches after undertaking research and engaging in dialogue with both oneself and those persons involved in the realities being studied. At CAPA, there was no shortage of incentive to carry out such vital critiques.

In the midst of such radical deconstructions, however, there were palpable and, I would like to think, useful results. I did systematize CAPA's history, from the Panthers to its inauguration in 1976, leading to its present-day perspectives, activities, and dilemmas. The layers and layers of scattered documents that reported on decades of struggles against racist police brutality I was able to put in a narrative that placed local efforts in the context of greater struggles in the United States and the African diaspora. This historical narrative made it possible not only to better understand the theory and praxis of contemporary struggles but also to place those struggles in a transnational perspective. Although present in many of the activists' consciousness, such a historical narrative was not easily transmitted to newcomers, much less to other community activists who could draw from this knowledge important insights into strategies of locating and averting processes of anti-Black marginalization.

The pressing need to explore wider horizons of understanding and action is a fundamental message offered by these organizations. The exploration of wider horizons is manifest in several ways: in the establishment of dialogue according to basic principles of communicative rationality; in the attempts to understand, draw on, and at the same time expand given racial classifications; and in the formation of effective, locally and globally based social movements. Widening horizons means searching for deep historical roots and broad social structures and connecting these to personal and collective action aimed at building alternative modes of sociability at home and abroad. CSGT is not only increasingly Latina/o but fast becoming more international. As well, CAPA and CSGT recognize their problematic reliance on patriarchal modes of organizing. Men and women often talk about the specific forms of male-centered behavior that impede the full blossoming of the movement's emancipatory potential. Widening horizons implies not only questioning the common subordination of politics to essentialized identities—interrogating and learning and building from so-called identity politics—but also, and most importantly,

defining identities in accordance with an inclusive and radical political praxis, a praxis that searches, persistently, for greater equality and justice beyond the physical and ideological limitations defined by rigid hierarchies based on race, gender, and sexuality. Widening horizons, finally, means questioning and moving beyond local and national borders.¹⁴

It can be argued that translating scattered information into a linear narrative, besides unnecessarily changing the nature of the anarchic and improvisational methods of community organizing, also makes such methods more easily domesticated and appropriated by individuals and institutions who may not have the same political liberatory goals. Such an argument presents another critical problem for activist research: In which ways, if any, does it advance the agenda of those who are featured in academic media (papers, books, talks) but are not a part of these media? Although activists at the coalition and CSGT often reminded me that I was contributing, I am more skeptical.

That the liberation-oriented knowledge is more clearly articulated and practiced in activist settings such as CAPA and CSGT underscores the many ways in which activist research is often based on a disproportionate exchange of skills and information. What did I bring to the coalition? What benefits accrued from my presence? Other than my time and willingness to perform banal office work and sometimes engage in projects that could have been conceptualized and carried out by almost anyone—such as the computer classes Zinzun and I started in 1996—there was not much in my set of skills that was of vital importance. The personal, intellectual, and political lessons that I learned were far greater and more vital than anything that I could have ever offered to the activists in Los Angeles. When he heard my opinion on these matters, Zinzun did not disagree. Yet he always insisted that I keep doing what I did: that is, occupy the space in academia, teach, conduct research, and as importantly continue to bring people like him and other freedom fighters to the closely policed spaces of the university. In this wisdom was the recognition that we academics can play a role, but one that is always marginal and necessarily informed by long his/herstories of freedom dreams.

NOTES

1. For further description and analysis of CAPA, CSGT, and the Los Angeles context within which these organizations operate, see Vargas (1999).

2. CAPA, "CAPA Report: 1989 through 1993," n.d., unpaginated.

3. In 1979, after discovering that CAPA had been infiltrated by police agents, its members, together with those of other progressive organizations that had also detected and documented the presence of spies in their headquarters, sued the Los Angeles Police Commission for violation of their constitutional rights to assembly, privacy, and association. Juridically assisted by American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) attorneys and staff persons, in 1983 the 131 plaintiffs agreed with a \$1.8 million settlement. The plaintiffs also imposed a list of nine resolutions upon the city bureaucracy and the Los Angeles Police Department. It was agreed that the California Supreme Court would have jurisdiction over the settlement agreement and thus regulate and be a guarantee against future spying. In 1986, after being beaten by Pasadena police officers and losing his sight in one eye, Zinzun won a \$1.2 million suit against the city. In July 1994, Zinzun was awarded \$512,500 after a dispute with the LAPD's second-in-command, Assistant Chief Robert L. Vernon. While Zinzun was campaigning for the Pasadena Board of City Directors in 1989, Vernon accused Zinzun of terrorist acts. For an analysis of various lawsuits waged by CAPA members against the Los Angeles Police Department, see Vargas (1999, ch. 6).

4. It is important to note that the connection between gang members and progressive political organizations was a common occurrence in Los Angeles during the years of the Black Panther Party. Two of the BPP's most well-known members, Bunchy Carter and Jon Huggins, had been members of local street gangs. U.S. members killed Carter and Huggins (Churchill and Vander Wall 1990; Churchill 2001).

5. CSGT, "Fund for a New L.A." proposal, December 1994, 1.

6. CSGT, "Statement of Economic Development," n.d., 3.

7. *Ibid.* This proposal is an obvious alternative to Rebuild Los Angeles (RLA), a nonprofit corporation headed by Peter Ueberroth that embodied the revitalization program launched in May of 1992 by Mayor Tom Bradley following that year's rebellion in South Central. Even though RLA spoke the language of a public-private partnership, the initiative was clearly corporate minded, dominated by representatives of major companies and closed to public participation. In the end, the market-driven model that structured RLA failed to provide enough or adequate jobs. For an insightful analysis of the limits of RLA, see Labor/Community Strategy Center (1996).

8. As stated in "Our Demands: What Our Community Needs" (n.d.):

Stop the criminalization of our youth!

1. Eliminate the national gang database which currently gives youth a permanent record for simply being detained for "*suspicion of being a gang member*," even if the youth is later released for lack of evidence. What must happen is changing state legislation to erase the records of any individual unjustly detained or arrested and permanently recorded. This record often prevents them from being employed.

2. Eliminate federal programs such as "Weed and Seed" that target whole communities as being non-rehabilitable, subject them to repressive law enforcement programs and place social service monies under the jurisdiction of law enforcement agencies.

3. Eliminate illegal searches and gang sweeps.

4. Stop police abuse and their "Us Against Them" attitude. (8)

These demands stand against an array of law enforcement measures that are specific to the 1980s and whose main results were to further criminalize, arrest,

and stigmatize brown and Black youth. For an analysis of 1980s law enforcement policies and practices in Los Angeles, see Davis (1992, ch. 5).

The urgency of such demands became even clearer when the Rampart scandal erupted. The scandal began when LAPD officer Rafael A. Perez was arrested on August 25, 1998, on suspicion of stealing cocaine from the LAPD headquarters. In September 1999, Perez pleaded guilty of stealing eight pounds of cocaine. He accepted a confidential plea agreement according to which he is expected to receive a reduced sentence on the drug charges in exchange for identifying other police officers involved in crimes and misconduct. Subsequently twenty officers were relieved of duty, were suspended without pay, were fired, or resigned. See Cannon (2000).

9. Of great concern among inner-city Black and brown youth is the “three-strikes law,” which gives persons with three felony convictions a mandatory sentence of twenty-five years to life in prison. Juveniles sixteen years and older can face adjudications that can be counted as “strikes.” These strikes become a permanent part of one’s police record. “Do not plead guilty to any felony without first understanding that the plea will result in an automatic strike on your record,” advises CSGT. “It is unethical for your attorney to not clearly explain the danger of life imprisonment with a guilty plea to felony charges in the ‘3 Strikes’ environment . . . Juveniles 16 years or older who face adjudications that can be counted as ‘strikes’ should demand an adult trial with legal representation and all constitutional protection, including a jury trial” (“Statement of Economic Development,” 11). For a pertinent analysis of the official justifications and effects of the “three-strikes law,” see, for example, Donziger (1996, chs. 1 and 4). For an account of the impact of the criminal justice system on young Black men, see Miller (1996).

10. As was reported in the *Pelican Bay Prison Express*, April 1996, 25. CAPA has been successful in expanding its geographical horizons, maintaining contacts and frequent interchange visits with organizations of various cities in the United States and abroad. In recent years, coalition members have visited England, France, several African countries, and Brazil. Persons from these countries and American cities are constantly coming to Los Angeles and spending time at the coalition, exchanging information and techniques of community organization. Zinzun’s national and international visibility—and that of other coalition and CSGT members—has projected their cause well beyond the City of Angels’ core neighborhoods.

11. Exceptions: MacLeod (1995); Gregory (1998); etc.

12. These facts are also narrated in Escobar (1993).

13. In 1992, for example, following the uprisings, a more radical “robbery” was conducted. VCRs, televisions, tapes, and other valuables were taken. Yet even though several offices were housed in the same building, only CAPA drawers were searched—a clear sign that the “robbers” knew exactly where and what to look for.

14. These political stances, it should be noted, do not constitute outright negations of identity politics. Contrary to critics of race-based identity politics on the right and left of the political spectrum, organizations such as CAPA and CSGT clearly operate under the concept that identity politics is necessary. These organizations, however, are constantly engaged in reinventing their identities and, for that matter, revisiting their notions of race as these are inflected by the international experience. Thus they recognize that identity politics, while necessary, are not fixed and not sufficient. Various authors, according to my interpretation of

their texts, have localized similar tensions in progressive grassroots organizations; see Kelley (1997); Collins (1998); Sudbury (1998).

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