

## SfAA Comments: Accompaniment and Anthropology with Im/migrant Communities

**Abstract:** This roundtable brings together engaged anthropologists working with im/migrant communities to explore the transformational potential of *accompaniment* as anthropological practice. Informed by decolonial and feminist critiques of anthropology, accompaniment troubles the boundaries of scholar-activist and academic-community member to address the broader social purpose of our anthropological work. We understand accompaniment as an ethical commitment to solidarity, to using our positions of relative privilege to help ameliorate suffering. The roundtable will serve as a collective conversation about the multivalent meanings of accompaniment with im/migrant communities and as a forum to imagine possibilities for caring, relational, and decolonial forms of ethnographic engagement.

### Guiding Questions:

- What forms does accompaniment take in our work?
- How is accompaniment similar to - or different from - other forms of applied anthropology?
- How does accompaniment feel, as ethnographic practice or embodied experience?
- What tensions emerge in our accompaniment work and how do we move through those?
- What adaptations and shifts have we made due to the pandemic and related crises of care/giving and/or institutional burnout and betrayal?
- How do these shifts shape our ethnographic / accompaniment choices and moves?

### Intro Comments:

- *Accessible intro: Hello and welcome to our panel, Accompaniment and Anthropology with Im/migrant Communities. My name is Whitney Duncan, she/her/hers, and, by way of accessible introduction, I am a white, cisgender woman with long brown hair and glasses, with a background of mountains where I live in Golden, Colorado, which is the unceded territory of Ute, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe nations.*
- As our session abstract states, we are here to talk about our engaged anthropological work with immigrant communities, in particular work that we have come to conceptualize as ‘accompaniment.’
- We are all active steering members of AANIR, the Anthropological Action Network for Immigrants and Refugees, an informal collective of engaged anthropologists born at a late-breaking AAA session on supporting our immigrant students and organizing as sanctuary campuses in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election.
- Since then, we’ve met regularly, strategized, shared resources, commiserated, organized webinars and stance statements around various immigration-related policies and injustices.
- We are all engaged in various and wide-ranging forms of research, advocacy, activism, teaching, and policy-work centered around immigrant rights and justice.
- And in conversations—especially over the last two years during the pandemic, in which lives and ways of working and relating have been transformed and turned upside down—we’ve been talking about how our work alongside immigrant community members, research participants, students, colleagues, friends, shifts and evolves so profoundly –
  - from scholar to social worker, observer to friend, witness to advocate as we fight deportations, engage in social protest, write reports and editorials, meet with

policymakers, contest family separations, navigate scarce social resources, highlight disparities in health and mental health, advocate for immigrant-protective policies, and more generally listen, support, and engage in acts of solidarity.

- This is what we're referring to as accompaniment.
  - o Though I want to emphasize that our intention in this session and in the volume we're working on (which we hope will be under review next fall and out in 2023) is not to circumscribe what accompaniment is or what it means—
    - But rather to collaboratively explore what it *can* mean and what it looks like to center caring, relational, and decolonial forms of ethnographic engagement with the immigrant communities we work alongside.

My comments:

- Again, I am Whitney Duncan, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Northern Colorado.
- So, as I reflected on what I wanted to share today, I found myself looking back on my work over the years to try to trace how and when I started thinking about accompaniment, and how my practices of accompaniment have shifted.
  - o Attempting to articulate my own definition of accompaniment and explain in a way more satisfying to myself why it is a way of doing anthropology and advocacy—and doing life—that resonates so strongly.
- In my book on mental health in Mexico, I wrote that I view anthropological research and writing as a long process of being-with, or *convivencia*, and reflected that a central part of that experience is being *conmovida*, a word that frequently came up in an emotional support group I attended in Oaxaca as part of my fieldwork.
  - o When they used that term, *conmovida*, the women in the support group were expressing the ways they were moved *with* others, and really pointing to the ways that emotion and experience more generally are co-created and co-experienced
    - how of course feeling-with is a form of being-with.
- Incidentally, the subject of my MA thesis in linguistic anthropology was the ways in which immigrant members of an emotional support group on the US/Mexico border co-created empathy.
  - o So I have always been drawn to the emotional heart of ethnographic work, the centrality of presence with others, and of feeling with others.
  - o I have also always been drawn to methodologies that prioritize dialogue and the co-creation of knowledge, that question ethnographic and authorly authority
    - but for a long time it felt difficult to implement those, having been trained relatively traditionally in ethnographic and qualitative research design and having felt the usual pressures around grantwriting and publishing.
- It wasn't until many years later, a few months into my volunteer work with a Denver-based advocacy organization that I joined in early 2017, that I first started hearing and using the term accompaniment, or *acompañamiento*
  - o That group provides a space for its immigrant members to strategize, give and receive support, create social networks, and advocate for themselves and others.

- All members wrapped up in the deportation regime or have family members who are.
  - The group is, as I wrote in this screenshotted Cultural Anthropology blog post in 2018, a site of resistance, solidarity, and grief—but also of movement-building and being *conmovida*.
- As you would expect, my roles and relationships in the group have grown and shifted over the years and this work had considerable overlap with my academic research on immigrant health and healthcare access in Colorado over the same period of time, which has also always been committed to forms of immigrant advocacy and policy change.
- I have struggled with really understanding at any given point what hat I am wearing: researcher, activist, friend, fellow mother, community member...
  - Members of the group and I have accompanied each other through births and deaths, their husbands' and children's deportations, and everything in between, including a global pandemic which for me has put into relief the importance of honoring a way of working that does not shy away from the blurring of boundaries, roles, and relationships in ethnographic and advocacy work, but honors it and centers it as well as forms of care, co-presence, and healing.
- In the past two years these activities have intensified in the past year as I have found myself with group members in number of interactions and efforts, from Zoom calls with legislators to advocate for various immigrant protective policies—especially immigrant inclusion in stimulus payments and universal legal representation—to rallies calling for a path to citizenship for all as part of reconciliation packages, to co-organizing an emotional support group for mothers in the advocacy group, because so many of them have expressed a fervent need for a space to *desahogarse*, or unburden themselves, in the supportive presence of others who get it.
- It is in that spirit that several of the women in the group and I are beginning a co-produced project that blends traditions of oral *testimonio*, testimonial therapy, digital storytelling, and ethnography
  - I have witnessed over the years how women in the group have so courageously shared their stories – in asylum hearings, in their I-589s and their applications for U-Visas, in rallies on the steps of the Colorado and U.S. Capitols, in Zoom and in-person meetings with state and national representatives and senators, on the news and in news articles, and in trainings around how 'stories of self' can be used as effective advocacy tools.
- Recently, though, group has been sharing a lot about the urgent need for mutual emotional support and healing – and spaces in which to be *conmovida* that do not necessarily have a political end (though they might)
  - Spaces in which to share stories that may or may not 'win' their cases or center trauma, violence, and loss.
  - Spaces that are not governed by necessarily political or therapeutic logics but may morph into and draw upon both.