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Revisiting Feminist Ethnography: Methods and Activism at the Intersection of Neoliberal Policy

Dána-Ain Davis and Christa Craven

In the wake of neoliberalism, where human rights and social justice have increasingly been subordinated to proliferating “consumer choices” and ideals of market justice, this article suggests that feminist ethnographers are in an important position to reassert the central feminist connections among theory, method, and practice. It draws on experiences of feminist anthropologists studying battered women and midwifery advocates to consider the role of feminist ethnography within the context of neoliberalism. It suggests avenues for incorporating methodological innovations, collaborative analysis, and feminist writing objectives and activism in scholarly projects. What does feminist ethnography look like in a historical moment characterized by increasingly diverse delineations of neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism? What are the possibilities (and challenges) that exist for feminist ethnography twenty years after initial debates emerged in this field about reflexivity, objectivity, reductive individualism, and the social relevance of activist scholarship? This article generates a contextualized dialogue about the possibilities for feminist ethnography in the twenty-first century—at the intersection of engaged feminist research and activism in the service of the organizations, people, communities, and feminist issues studied.

Keywords: activism / battered women / black feminist anthropology / feminist ethnography / midwifery advocacy / neoliberalism

This article seeks to reengage discussions about the possibilities of feminist ethnography and the role feminist methodology can play as a counterpoint to the often chameleon-like project of neoliberalism. Neoliberal ideologies, with their shift away from government responsibility for assuring social, political,

and economic rights toward an over-reliance on consumption and the market to resolve social inequities, came to dominate corporate and governmental spheres in the late-twentieth century. Yet, the various machinations of neoliberalism within public and private sectors also affect the way that it has been delineated differently across (and oftentimes within) academic disciplines. These articulations begin when Charles Peters (1983) argued that neoliberalism was a counterpoint to eighteenth-century liberalism, in which unions and big government were favored. His was not just a critique of liberalism, but rather a critique of both late-twentieth-century conservatism and earlier liberal ideals with particular changes in mind. He sought a rebirth of entrepreneurship, which would have a more concrete role both in the economy and political ideology. Then there is classic neoliberalism, which focuses on anti-regulation, privatization, and devolution of the state in addressing social issues. This version is based on Friedrich Hayek's (1944) and Milton Friedman's (1962) hypothesis that the more political freedom a society has, the higher degree of economic freedom is necessary. Finally, a third stream of neoliberalism discussed by Doug Porter and David Craig (2004) views neoliberalism as an "inclusive" liberalism, in which market liberalism coexists with policies that promote opportunity, empowerment, and security; while still market-led, the emphasis is on partnerships and good governance.

In this article, we aim to complicate discussions of feminist research methods and activism as they have shifted under neoliberal politics and ideologies. We begin by revisiting the vibrant tensions that emerged in feminist ethnography during the 1980s and 1990s (Abu-Lughod 1990; Behar and Gordon 1995; Gordon 1993; Harrison 1991; Stacey 1988; Visweswaran 1994, 1997; Zavella 1996) to argue that feminist ethnography can offer a pragmatic corrective to neoliberalism, even as shifts are taking place within different constitutive approaches that vary from considering neoliberalism as the ascendant political and economic strategy to a possible post-neoliberal environment. With its historical commitment to engaging in research that is socially and politically relevant to those we study, feminist ethnography counters neoliberalism's apolitical stance and its tendency toward reductive individualism and faulty dependence on objectivity. Although critical debates within the social scientific community over reflexivity and objectivity in research predate neoliberalism, feminist ethnography and the burgeoning (and we would argue closely related) field of activist scholarship offer new frameworks to respond to the intensification of these concerns.

Our primary goal is to re-situate feminist ethnography as an intervention, given that our respective research took place in a neoliberal context. By that, we mean that we both studied anthropology and women's, gender, and sexuality studies, entered the field, and wrote ethnographic descriptions of women at a particular time "when neoliberalism was a key concept for cultural and political-economic change on a global scale" (Kingfisher and Maskovsky

2008, 115). Broadly, we attended to public-policy issues and grassroots activism. Cumulatively, our research examines state discourses, the restructuring of citizens in market terms and as projects, and the impact of privatizing various aspects of service delivery, among other consequences of the neoliberal agenda. We sought to explore how patterns of neoliberal inequality were produced in two domains: Welfare, and reproductive rights in the United States. Specifically, Dána-Ain Davis (2006) conducted research with battered black women living the consequences of welfare-reform policy, and Christa Craven (2010) conducted research on reproductive healthcare reform among organizers in the midwifery movement. And, while we assume that the current economic downturn and shifts in the political terrain will lead to some adjustments to the sins of neoliberalism, it will take some time to undo the policies and ideologies that uphold its tenets.

Our discussion is choreographed against the dramatic ways that neoliberalism erases the particularity of women's experience that feminist ethnography has historically privileged, and undermines the role of social justice that many feminist ethnographers have sought to center by making the market the ultimate arbiter of social and economic justice. Social justice scholarship used in the service of activist efforts can challenge this trend in a broad range of field-sites that feminist ethnographers from a variety of disciplines explore. Although both our research projects have been centered within the United States, we believe that it is important to consider both sites within North America *and* internationally, as neoliberal policies stratify global access to formerly public resources, such as education, healthcare, and food and water. Instead, feminist ethnography—and particularly our methodological choices (as they inevitably relate back to our pedagogical and activist work)—can contribute to a larger feminist politics that seeks to stem the uneven impacts of neoliberalism.

Essentially, we question: How can feminist ethnography intensify efforts toward social justice in the wake of neoliberalism and into post-neoliberalism? The many manifestations of neoliberalism—and here we must point out that our rendering is hardly exhaustive—includes practices that, as David Harvey (2005) posits, engender accumulation by dispossession. Harvey's point is that people become dispossessed of many things—such as their rights in China, their land in Mexico, their pensions in the United States. Through this process, we have seen people's rights denied as government responsibilities for assuring social, political, and economic rights have shifted. Neoliberal principles are overly reliant on market-based patterns of consumption to resolve social inequities and principles that perpetuate fictions of equitable citizenry. In what follows, we will briefly historicize feminist ethnography and some of its intersections within a neoliberal terrain. This will then be followed by some case examples from both of our fieldwork, which examines particular feminist ethnographic tenets in relation to some specific characteristics of neoliberalism that emerged in our research. We conclude with reflections on the possibilities for feminist

ethnography as an activist project that substantively addresses women's lived experience of neoliberalism in its many manifestations.

What Can Feminist Ethnography Do in This Neoliberal Moment?

During the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars in a variety of disciplines began to craft diverse answers to the question, "Can there be a feminist ethnography?" Judith Stacey's (1988) influential article published under this title warned against reifying feminist approaches to ethnographic research as capable of mitigating the potentially exploitive aspects of observation and objectification. She explained that "the appearance of greater respect for and equality with research subjects afforded by feminist ethnography can mask the potential for deeper forms of exploitation" (22). Her acerbic observation was based, in part, on her study of family and gender relations; in particular, she was vexed by the death of one of her key informants as both a friend and a researcher, and faced the dilemma of whether or not and to whom to make a gift of the precious, but potentially hurtful, tapes of an oral history she had once constructed with the deceased. She was confronted with the fact that as a researcher, she also stood to benefit from the tragedy.

Other tensions that emerged in debates about feminist ethnography during this time both clarified and confounded (Behar and Gordon 1995; Gordon 1993; Harrison 1991; Visweswaran, 1994, 1997; Zavella 1996). For example, while the circle of methodological approaches widened to include the contextual and experiential—making life and oral history valid modes of investigation, among others—the process also revealed ellipses of power differentials between researcher and subjects. In an article published (inadvertently) under the same title as Stacey's, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" Lila Abu-Lughod (1990) demonstrated how feminist ethnographers could contribute to the reassessment of inequality by critically examining ways in which women from privileged backgrounds often contributed to the oppression of more marginalized women by universalizing and romanticizing a shared women's experience. While subsequent feminist ethnographic and theoretical work did facilitate a generative production of theory regarding multiple forms of oppression and intersectionality and held promise for the radical change of structural inequalities, these frontiers of knowledge have not undone systems of power (Anzaldúa 1987; Mohanty 2003; Mullings 1997; Zavella 1996). It is within this context that feminist ethnographers have continued to encourage the production of feminist knowledge as a project inseparable from praxis, placing feminist ethnography firmly within a liberatory context, as we seek to continue in this article (see, for example, Harrison 1991).

We look to feminist ethnography and the principles therein to offer pragmatic exposure of some flaws in neoliberal governance and the varied ways that it is operationalized, with an eye toward how it (unstable as it is) can be

dislodged. So, while there may be any number of critiques against the feminist ethnographic enterprise—indeed in relation to feminist theory more broadly—the domains refined within feminist sensibility are clear, if different. It is clear that gendered experiences are crucial to understanding all things social, and it is clear that regardless of the theoretical road one chooses to understand standpoint theory, positionality, and praxis,¹ they are refracted in our interpretive universes of data in some way. It is also clear that among the many strands of feminism, there is support for linking feminist ethnography to a commitment to engaging in research that is socially and politically relevant to those we study.

We see much evidence of the success of feminist ethnography in the transnational feminist literature engaged with exploring the domains of neoliberalism. One example is Aihwa Ong's (1987) groundbreaking ethnography on the capitalist controls over young women's sexuality in Malaysia; Ong's later work (2006) also provides a sophisticated analysis of the malleability of neoliberalism. Other ethnographies have highlighted the divisive effects of market capitalism and neoliberalism. Lesley Gill (1994), for example, examines the precarious interactions between women transnationally, problematizing mistress–servant relationships in Bolivia. Feminist ethnographers have also taken aim at the effects of neoliberalism on women's organizing; notably, Florence Babb (2001) offered a valuable critique of social-transformation efforts for the working class, women, lesbians and gays, and other non-elite groups after Nicaragua's Sandinista revolution, and Jennifer Bickham-Mendez's (2005) work documents the challenges of transnational feminist and labor organizing in response to emerging free-trade zones and *maquiladora* factories in Nicaragua. Lastly, Anna Tsing's (2005) recent work on what she terms “friction”—the awkward, unstable engagements and encounters on the global stage—demonstrates how “activists borrow traveling feminisms for their own uses” (238). While we acknowledge that feminist ethnography is not inherently activist itself (and recognize that some of the authors above would likely stop short of identifying their work as such), we take the position that it can be situated as a potent challenge to neoliberalism's denial of the structural inequalities that exist within capitalist societies.

Using the similar feminist ethnographic ideological and methodological approaches of the aforementioned transnational feminist ethnographic projects, we want to suggest that U.S.-based feminist ethnographic projects also be undertaken more pointedly. Feminist ethnography has the important potential to contest the neoliberal intensification of efforts to neutralize differences and inequality, where everyday life is reconstructed in ways to support upward distribution of resources and widening inequities are tolerated, if not encouraged. Our interest is in the possibilities for feminist ethnography to discern countervisions to neoliberal practices, uncover solidarities and tensions across borders, and reference a wider range of sites where politics, economics, and culture bear the weight of neoliberal ideology, practice, and policy.

In part, this speaks to Catherine Kingfisher and Jeff Maskovsky's (2008) insights that neoliberalism has a multitude of articulations and intersections with other political-cultural formations and governing projects. Importantly, there is already feminist ethnographic work in the United States that has begun this task—for example, Aimee Cox's (2009) work exploring the strategies that young women in low-income urban communities use to become economically and socially mobile, and Gina Perez's (2004) work on Puerto Ricans and militarization and Cheryl Rodriguez's (2003) work on a "New Urbanism" project HOPE VI in Florida, which is a U.S. Housing and Urban Development (HUD) plan meant to revitalize public-housing projects by transforming them into mixed-income developments, during which, however, many residents are relocated—or, as Harvey (2005) might point out, dispossessed. Each of these authors is decidedly using feminist ethnography, methodology, and theory to illustrate these neoliberal articulations. Yet, more approaches are needed to contribute to a larger feminist politics that seeks to drill down to the admittedly uneven impacts of neoliberal policy to simultaneously question its merits and goals.

There are several terrains that feminist ethnography crosses that serve as points of interrogation for some of neoliberalism's manifestations, and Bickham-Mendez's (2008) cogent discussion of the opportunities for scholarly activism informs our argument. There are three points to which we attend. First, we examine the use of epistemology, more specifically the validation of certain types of knowledge. Second, we explore the deployment of feminist ethnography in the service of what Bickham-Mendez calls "informational politics"—that is, compiling and packaging information in order to access and influence national public spheres (143). And third, we trace the theoretical and practical examination of power and its multiple locations. We use examples from both of our research projects to further interrogate the intersection of feminist ethnography, activism, and neoliberalism within these domains.

Feminist Epistemology

Micaela di Leonardo (2004) has pointed out that in the past quarter-century, feminist scholarship has matured in extraordinary ways, particularly through its engagement with investigating alternatives to the triumphant spread of capitalism and widespread commodification. Longstanding feminist concerns with inequality are undeniably intertwined with neoliberal policies and practices that reduce citizens' relationship to the state to one based solely upon the consumption of services. By interrogating these connections, feminist ethnography—with its focus on the particularity and importance of individual experience, situated within uneven systems of power—can be central in uncovering how neoliberalist policies lurk in people's lives; by locating knowledge often obfuscated by methodologies that survey efficacy, we can create a critical dialogue and reframe these central concerns about historical and emerging inequalities.

One way that neoliberal practice reproduces inequality is through the strategic use of neutrality—not only in terms of the researcher’s stance, but also in terms of the source of knowledge. The tenets of neutral positioning and objectivity “represent a smoke screen for an alignment with powerful interest” (Hale 2008, 8). Of course, this tension has existed long before neoliberalism, but it seems to wrestle with a different degree of vigor within it. Shifting the lens to the demands of positivism in the social sciences that recognizes “good” science as objective science, stakeholders operating in the folds of neoliberalism frequently also demand similar neutrality.

Davis’s (2006) work sheds light on how inequality is lived as a consequence of state policy—specifically, the implementation of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). PRWORA was an achievement of the state’s shift away from its previous commitment to provide a safety net for poor people. A series of restrictive mandates vilified poor people in general and black women in more strident ways, including time limits on receipt of aid, case closures, sanctions, forced engagement in low-wage work, and various degrees of surveillance that grew out of a belief that poor people were flawed and in dire need of supervision and discipline. The consequences were in many cases severe, including loss or reduction of food stamps, housing, and Medicaid.

Davis chose to uncover how these tensions were experienced by black women living in Angel House Shelter for battered women located in Lan-leville, an economically anemic city in upstate New York, between the years 1997–2000.² Since all of the women living at Angel House had to apply for social services to receive financial assistance, this project inherently was about the governed: Battered women whose lives were managed by the state because they lived in state-funded shelters and received welfare. It was also about the governing: Those who worked for the Department of Social Services (DSS) and implemented the directives of PRWORA, but through the lens of the governed. Thus, the research project necessarily intersected with neoliberal practices, in that it had to attend to the cumulative toxicity of violence, poverty, and race and gender politics and the state.

One of the first challenges Davis faced emerged when discussing the scope of the project with workers in DSS and was told that any “real” investigation into welfare-reform policy had to include social-service personnel—namely, those who were charged with implementing PRWORA—even though her primary feminist methodological choice was to draw on participant observation and the life histories of women who lived the policy. In short, Davis was presumed to not be doing real research, because her primary unit of analysis was dispossessed women.

The call for neutrality also befell Craven, but from a different source. Her research on midwifery advocates in Virginia between 1999 and 2005 began with the intent of addressing disparities in access to reproductive care

as it related to the history of midwifery. Already steeped in the literature on feminist ethnography as a project concerned with privileging women's voices in anthropological accounts, it was in that spirit that she sought out the voices of contemporary women being adversely affected by reproductive health policies—in this case, mothers who sought homebirth midwives, particularly those who lacked the resources to mobilize against the powerful (largely male) medical lobby whose opinions figured prominently in public debate and published writings against midwifery. When she initially applied for grants to support her research, reviewers expressed concerns that she did not include participants from “the other side”—those who did not support midwifery. They suggested that her own activism as a midwifery supporter limited her ability to pursue research on this issue. Although it is clear that some members of the general population do oppose midwifery, collective resistance to enhancing midwifery services comes almost exclusively from professional medical organizations that are well-situated, both professionally and politically, to express dissent over midwifery supporters' political efforts.

We both made what we consider to be feminist choices when we elected to highlight women's struggles and legitimated their experiences as authentic and important. We came to our methodological choices with a keen awareness of the scholarship generated by feminists of color (namely, Anzaldúa 1987; Mohanty 2003; Mullings 1997; Zavella 1996), whose critiques bolstered the production of work in which women's voices were underscored and understood to be legitimate, authentic, and authoritative. In this vein, we actively insisted that the particular “truths” we uncovered were valid on their own terms, and thus we privileged them. In both instances, a strategic feminist choice was made to produce knowledge about the impact of welfare reform and the activist efforts of midwives, respectively, from the perspective of those most affected—not the perspective of those with situated powers (social-service workers and professional medical organizations).

Any efforts to diminish the voices “from below” and reify those with more power seem to reflect Henry Giroux's (2004) insights that a critique of limited access to resources constructed by privatized market-based approaches is impossible or, at the very least, in need of a rational set of opinions. In Davis's case, it was the state, and in Craven's case, elite funders. The presumption from both sets of stakeholders was that women's narratives “needed” to be neutralized by what they viewed as “rational” perspectives. From our perspectives, this reflects yet another mechanism of dispossession at the behest of those who systematically wield more power; we can only hope that in the post-neoliberal moment, or at least in this new political climate, this will not continue to be the case.

Generally, feminist ethnography has sought to raise the volume of subjugated voices. Whereas neoliberalism seeks to dispossess and render subjects undifferentiated from the elite by perversely claiming equal access and engaging in seemingly quotidian activities, our deployment of the feminist ethnographic

project sought to show differences and to stake out our political alliances to advance the struggles of battered women on welfare and low-income midwifery activists, which is discussed at greater length in the conclusion of this article. Of course, it is important to acknowledge that strategic decisions about whose voices to highlight in our work inevitably made our ethnographic accounts partial, a charge that Stacey (1988) and others have aptly articulated.

Informational Politics

From the outset, it was clear to both of us that our research could be used for local, national, and even transnational organizing. As Bickham-Mendez (2008) cogently articulates, preparing research to meet the need of an informational politics puts academics' cultural capital to work as "translators who package oppositional narratives or lived realities so that they resonate with policy makers. Decision makers often assume research presented by academics to be more rigorous and reliable than those put forth by campaigns, lending a degree of legitimacy and credibility to social justice struggles" (144).

Craven's (2010) study sought to examine contemporary disparities in access to reproductive care as it related to the history of midwifery in Virginia. As Gertrude Fraser (1998) has shown, the collusion of medical and state interests in eliminating African American midwives was largely a completed project in Virginia by the 1970s. Yet, as Craven began her research in the late 1990s, she joined Fraser in her frustration with the tendency of many contemporary activists, including scholars writing about the history of midwifery in the United States, to draw what Fraser (1995) has called an "almost reflexive link" between the struggles of African American midwives in the early 1900s and the contemporary "rebirth of midwifery" (55). Thus, it became a central part of her feminist ethnographic project to re-envision a history of midwifery that was attentive to both race and class differences. The informational politics in which Craven engaged included writing a cultural history of midwifery for local activists, since the presentation of a seamless history of "sister" midwives in struggle ultimately overlooks vast historical and contemporary disparities in women's access to maternity care in the United States.³

Additionally, throughout her research, Craven found that the focus on consumer identity endorsed by many supportive scholars and middle-class midwifery organizers was not shared among all midwifery supporters, particularly among low-income women and their families. She summarized data throughout the research process on listservs and at gatherings of midwifery supporters to initiate discussions of the benefits and drawbacks of "consumer rights" arguments between both local and national midwifery organizers. This often meant having difficult—although, she argues (2010), essential and constructive—conversations with some participants in her research, who saw little reason to question consumer-based strategies that had proven useful in conversations with

legislators. In some cases, these conversations contributed to the inclusion of broader advocacy strategies, such as highlighting the importance of midwives in improving access to prenatal care among low-income, rural populations.

Thus, Craven's dual goals became to challenge the consumer-based politics of the midwifery movement internally, and to simultaneously work to support, as many scholars of midwifery have done over the past few decades (see, for example, Davis-Floyd and Johnson 2006), homebirth mothers' efforts to gain legal access to midwives. Shortly after she completed her fieldwork, Virginia midwifery advocates were successful in their efforts toward licensure for Certified Professional Midwives (CPMs), a national credential for direct-entry or non-nurse midwives, in 2005, and legislation that reduced restrictive requirements for Certified Nurse-Midwives (CNMs) (2006).

Davis also used data for informational politics. Annually, battered women participate in a lobby day in Albany, New York, meeting with legislators and speaking out at the capitol to raise awareness about battered women's needs for shelter and other services. Nearing the second year of the project, some of the women attending the lobby day asked that she prepare a summary of findings for them to draw upon as talking points to facilitate explaining the impact of welfare-reform policy on women's lives. The talking points were organized into categories like educational access and training programs. For the latter, Davis drew from women's narratives to explain how participating in training primarily led to low-wage work, and highlighted that the "skills" garnered in those programs only allowed women to make lateral moves across an industry like home healthcare. This was juxtaposed against the skills they could have garnered in higher wage sectors, such as information technology, which was a major economic development focus of the city. With regard to the former, the summary illustrated PRWORA's restrictive educational attainment, which did not permit recipients to receive assistance if they were enrolled in college to attain a bachelor's degree. Over the long-term, educational restrictions would result in lower wages over one's lifetime; for every year of college one completes, there is a payoff in terms of the potential in increased earnings per year (Carnevale and Reich 2000). By translating some data into talking points, women were able to offer arguments and counter-arguments when meeting with legislators.

For feminist ethnographers, it becomes important to figure out how to produce materials that speak to both academic and nonacademic audiences alike. Faye Harrison (2008) has so eloquently stated that "[t]he discursive circle around the ivory tower can become a vicious cycle if little input or direction is offered to those worldly debates that have practical consequences for real people's daily lives" (280). We see an ongoing need to intentionally move our work off the shelf, by becoming proficient translators of academic language and disseminating our findings in meaningful ways (see also Waterston and Vesperi 2009), which can be achieved by writing for and distributing findings to community and working groups to stimulate discussions about various aspects

of neoliberalism, and to use research in the service of changing policies that refract neoliberal ideology.

Bickham-Mendez's (2008) use of the term "informational politics" is an elaboration of Manuel Castell's (1993) analysis in which governments and political parties act not through traditional government–citizen exchanges, but through mediated forums like newspapers, broadcasting media, and the Internet. Our reading of Bickham-Mendez's view is that cyberspace is not the penultimate space for opening up opportunities for raising issues in the public sphere because of disparities in access; instead, she advocates engaging in activities that assist in campaigns against practices like privatization efforts, developing mechanisms to analyze discourse, or offering information to assist in a range of efforts. For instance, Bickham-Mendez participated in the union-organizing effort at the College of William and Mary, where faculty researchers prepared an informational flyer on right-to-work and right-to-unionize for service employees. She goes further in her argument, that informational politics also encompasses using the academic privilege that grants greater access to public spheres, thus opening up opportunities for political representation.

For example, Davis had the opportunity to meet with the deputy mayor for health and human services of New York City. The conversation centered on a 2006 report titled *Increasing Opportunity and Decreasing Poverty*, which had been prepared for Mayor Bloomberg by the city's Commission for Economic Opportunity. One of its recommendations to reduce poverty involved funneling resources into training programs, and Davis reported some of the findings from her research that challenged limiting access to higher education. Craven also met with several legislators during and following her fieldwork; in one instance, she presented findings from her research to the Virginia Governor's Work Group on Rural Obstetrical Care in 2004, with recommendations to license CPMs and to remove regulations requiring physician supervision of CNMs.

Power

Insomuch as neoliberal imperatives represent and shape relationships of power, particularly the maintenance of elite power (whether it is intentional or consequential), one of the more significant contributions of feminist theory that is drawn out in feminist ethnography is that conceptualizations of power are multi-sited, intersectional, and multiplicitous. So often, U.S.-based research situates the neoliberal project in terms of the state's nefarious neglect of citizens, viewing power primarily as a consolidated domain trickling down from elites or the government as against citizens. In fact, it may be argued that the interdisciplinary literature addressing neoliberalism explicates the power dynamics from the subject–state position. Theoretically, some feminisms do not limit the inquiry of power to the economics of state institutions, but instead view power's constitution in "micro-level dynamics" (Bickham-Mendez 2008, 155).

By thinking about power in this way, feminist ethnographic approaches can illuminate various fields of relations that exist within neoliberalism's spheres. The feminist ethnographic lens seeks to shed light on some of the interstitial spaces where power is exerted, and here we offer two brief examples to illustrate these sometimes awkward, and at other times hidden, spaces.

The mandatory work component of the Welfare Reform Act of 1997 placed a number of women in the position of being exploited by employers. Since recipients are required to work and often receive their work referral from DSS, employers know who among their staff receives support from the department. Further, supervisors have to verify that recipients have come to work and use the power of this arrangement to intimidate workers, such as forcing them to do things that are beyond their job descriptions. These women fear harassment, because employers can report them to their caseworker if they fail to comply with employer demands. Attempts to challenge harassment come with the risk of being fired.

This is what happened to Lydia, an African American woman, who worked part-time. Although she worked as mandated by the welfare-reform policy, Lydia was fifteen hours short of the requisite thirty-hours of work, or work-related-activity, workweek. To make up those additional hours, her caseworker then mandated that she attend a training program. The problem was that her part-time job was based on a flexible schedule and the hours changed weekly. The training program met at a regularly scheduled time, which meant that Lydia required a regular work schedule, thereby generating a competition of her allegiance between DSS and her employer. The department would not revise its mandate by offering an exemption from the training, nor did her employer want to give up her flexible labor. Whose directive could she ignore? Ultimately she "chose" to meet DSS's requirements over her employer, displaying what she believed to be her own power to choose. After calling in absent to attend the training, ultimately she was threatened with being fired, prompting her to quit her job, which then put her in the position of losing her benefits due to noncompliance, since quitting a job under almost any circumstance was not permitted. The convoluted location of power revolved around tension between the state and a private employer, who, in fact, received a tax credit for hiring a social-service recipient in the first place. This power dynamic between state and employer is not unusual, but its dimensions became triangulated when in Davis's fieldwork it was clear employees like Lydia assumed that they possessed the independent decision-making power to choose between them.

In another example of uneven structures of power, early in Craven's (2010) fieldwork she noticed that many grassroots organizers for midwifery had begun to refer to themselves, as well as to other homebirth mothers, as "consumers." This disabling discourse both deflected attention from the ways in which reproductive health is packaged in market terms and created an acceptable discourse around which some organizers coalesced, having found the term useful

in lobbying legislators for the “consumer’s right” to choose a midwife. Although it was clear that middle-class homebirthers found market-based identity and activist strategies useful as a means to draw together women from across the political spectrum and promote midwifery, consumption-oriented terminology also highlighted power imbalances within cross-class organizing efforts. Most low-income women had not benefited from the proliferation of “consumer choices” within the enhanced market of reproductive services that developed during the late-twentieth century, and thus they did not find identification as consumers useful to address their continued concerns over restricted access to reproductive options.

For example, one low-income homebirth mother, Paula, explained to Craven that her “choice” to homebirth, as well as to become an advocate of midwifery, was mediated by both her financial circumstances and what she described as “being raped” in the hospital during previous births—by the medicalization forced upon her by hospital staff, as well as the “big hand of government” that refused her legal access to midwives for homebirth. Paula described her experience of attempting to join with other homebirth mothers to support midwives as one of further humiliation and marginalization. Although she hastened to add that her fellow homebirthers were well-intentioned and supportive of her childbirth choices, Paula confided that she had been scolded at grassroots-organizing meetings for saying that she “homebirthed because [she] was poor,” after she refused to return to the hospital and bartered with an underground midwife to attend her homebirth (Craven 2010, 101, 133). Since the majority of published research on midwifery and the written testimonies of homebirthers have focused on middle-class women’s experiences, a central part of Craven’s feminist ethnographic project was to draw attention to the experiences of low-income women like Paula who had otherwise been silenced, by both the medical community and fellow midwifery supporters.

In these examples, we see the divisiveness of power within a movement and the creation of uncomfortable alliances. The point is to suggest that feminist ethnography and theory looks for hidden transcripts of power and collusions with neoliberal policy or ideology that ultimately reproduces dispossession.

Conclusion: Feminist Ethnography and Activism in the Wake of (Post-)Neoliberalism

In this historical moment, when human rights and social justice are increasingly subordinated to the incoherence of “market fundamentalism” (Holland et al. 2007), it is critical that U.S. feminist ethnographers expand their activist scholarship. Recently, several anthropological collections have called for a more engaged, public, and activist orientation within the discipline (Hale 2008; Holland et al. 2007; Sanford and Angel-Ajani 2006), yet too few of the works have incorporated interdisciplinary approaches to feminist ethnography. This is not

an argument to displace other ethnographic endeavors, but a recommendation that feminist ethnography is poised to expose and challenge the encroachment of neoliberalism in women's daily lives.⁴ In essence, it is not that politically engaged feminist ethnography is something uniquely new, but that tacitly, neoliberalism has set a new agenda for feminist research.

As neoliberal policies continue to stratify access to resources and reconfigure relationships to the state, our efforts to generate activist feminist ethnography comes from a shared experience. Both of us have conducted research with people who strenuously vocalized their opposition to policies and neoliberal beliefs that undermined their well being, as well as those who benefited from such public services and suppositions. Even as the possibility of a post-neoliberalism exists, which would assert the strengthened role of the state, an activist feminist ethnography is still necessary to translate the policies that will emerge from reformulated functions of the state from "above," to how these policies will continue to impact those "below."

Echoing Laura Nader (1972), we see feminist ethnography as a process of studying both "up" and "down." In fact, critical feminist ethnography that endeavors to "study up" may well require an even more interventionist approach. As we have noted in this article, studying "down" frequently places the anthropologist in a position of advocacy for those they study. Yet, studying those in positions of power, particularly those who may themselves embrace the persuasive narratives of neoliberal ideology, may put the anthropologist in the position of trying to change participants' beliefs. This was a challenge that both of us encountered in our attempt to study both welfare recipients and low-income midwifery supporters, but also social-service agents, bureaucrats, and middle-class and affluent activists for whom neoliberal ideology was far more palatable.

Often, various participants demanded of us a commitment to advocate either on their behalf or with them (though sometimes in conflict with one another), in exchange for their participation in our research. In this regard, we were not faced with a conundrum around whether to engage in activism to support their work because we see ourselves as activist feminist scholars who make strategic, if sometimes difficult, choices in this regard. The positions we came to understand as researchers, based upon the narratives various participants shared with us, propelled us to become activists specifically to upend policies that were directed at limiting our most vulnerable participants' access to resources. We both joined public-advocacy efforts to destabilize policies that attempted to make women's lives harder.

Davis participated in New York City's Welfare Reform and Human Rights Documentation Project, a coalition of six anti-poverty organizations that monitored New York City's welfare-reform policies. She was trained to administer a survey to gather quantitative and qualitative information from current welfare recipients, individuals who had attempted to obtain welfare benefits and failed, and those who had lost benefits because of sanctions. The main objectives were

to document human-rights abuses as they relate to welfare reform, and to provide quantitative and qualitative data to the media, public-interest litigators, community organizations, and elected officials to progressively change public opinion and welfare policy. Craven joined the struggles for legal access to midwives in Virginia and elsewhere during her research, while at the same time advocating for alternatives to consumer-rights strategies within midwifery and homebirth organizations. These challenges met with greater and lesser degrees of receptivity, but frequently generated productive conversation about expanding the scope of midwifery activism to include the broader goals of reproductive justice, such as the availability and accessibility of midwives in low-income communities.

Ultimately, we both aimed to use our own research to benefit the least powerful of those we studied, even as we supported projects with broader goals, such as restructuring welfare reform and legalizing midwifery services. The continuing challenges that feminist ethnographers face in the wake of neoliberalism, with its faulty assumption that the market will ameliorate all social and economic ills, heightens the need for scholarship that decisively intersects with longstanding feminist commitments to alleviating inequality. It becomes essential that feminist ethnographers commit to putting their research to use in the service of organizations, people, communities, and issues, because epistemology, informational politics, and power will continue to be germane, even as the tenets of less government (neoliberalism) shift in new directions.

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Notes

1. For example, see Patricia Hill Collins (1998), who notes that in developing a black feminist praxis, standpoint theory has provided one important source of analytical guidance and intellectual legitimating for African American women. The theory argues that group location in hierarchical power relations produces shared challenges. Group standpoints are situated in unjust power relations, which reflect those power relations and helps shape them.

2. All names and locations have been changed throughout this article to protect the anonymity of participants in our research.

3. Craven’s history, titled “Educated, Eliminated, Criminalized & Rediscovered: A History of Midwives and Grassroots Organizing for Midwifery in Virginia,” was originally published in 2003 on the Web site for *Virginia Friends of Midwives*. Subsequent updates were included on midwivespac.org, and it was last available at vabirthpac.org in 2009.

4. Just as recent womanist scholarship has highlighted the importance of socially transformative methods and the broader goals of social justice (see Phillips 2006, xxvii), we view feminist ethnography as being at its strongest when it intersects with complementary activist efforts and scholarship on social justice.

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