



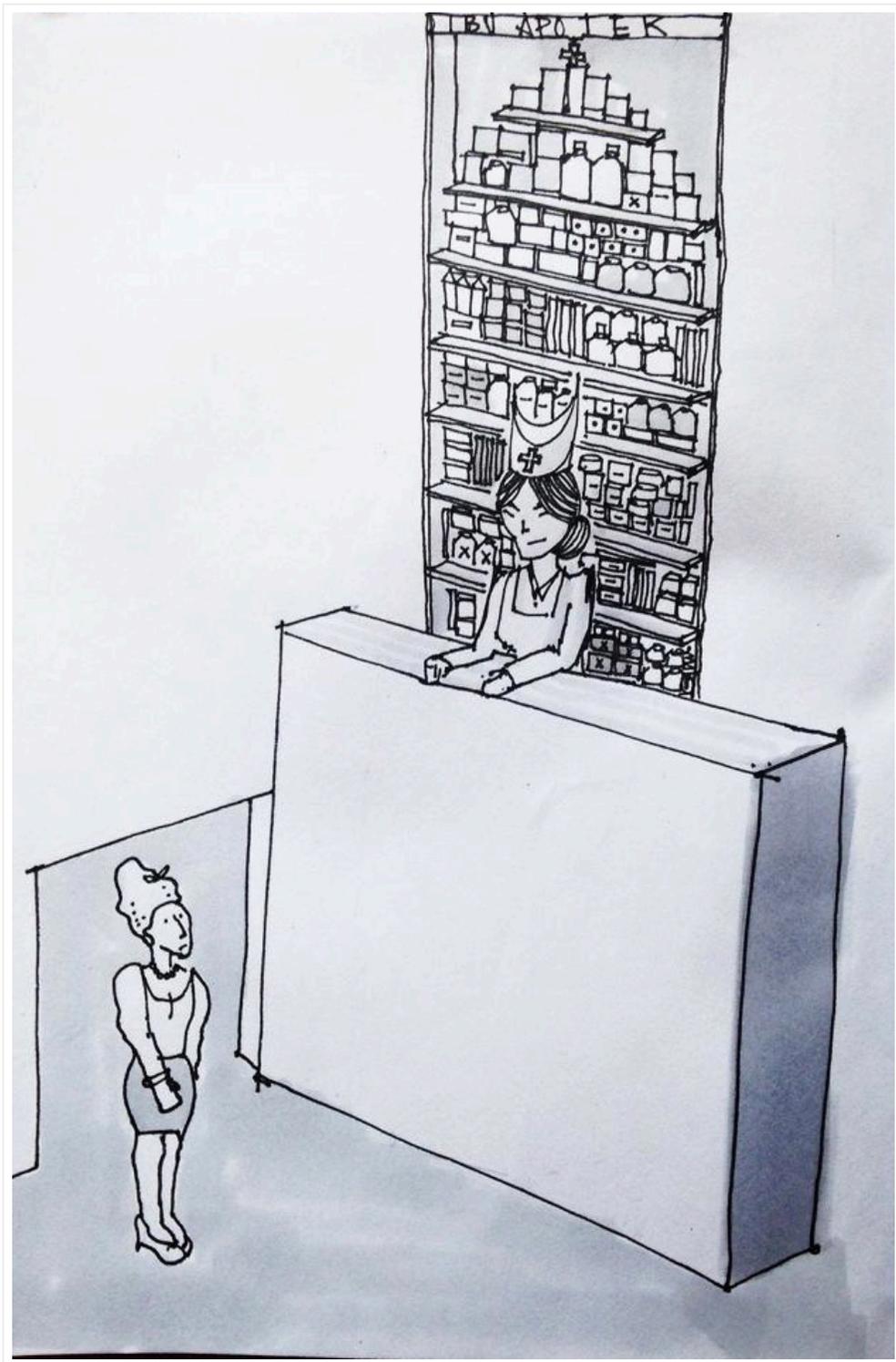
Thinking Through Activism, Sexuality, and Scholarship

Tom Boellstorff, Jul 23rd

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— Illustration: Salma Zavari

Opening: At the Disco

One Thursday night at a disco on the island of Sulawesi in Indonesia, the lights dimmed and the DJ announced that the Pathway Foundation^[i] was going to present a show about sex and AIDS. Together with several members of the Foundation, I walked out onto the dance floor, in full drag, with a *kebaya* (“traditional” skirt), *sanggul* (“traditional” hairstyle, in this case a wig), and makeup that together marked me as impersonating a middle-aged woman. Two members of the Pathway Foundation, in far more regal drag than I, took the microphone and talked to those present—a mixed crowd

but one in which *gay* men predominated—explaining that AIDS had already come to Indonesia, even to the island of Sulawesi, and people needed to be careful. One of the activist’s hands punctuated the air as he told the audience that if they had sex with other men, they should use condoms together with water-based lubricant. We then began our little skit: one of the activists took the role of a man entering a pharmacy to ask me, the “lady behind the counter,” for KY Jelly. When I rolled my eyes he stood firm: when I questioned his purpose in wanting to purchase lubricant, he simply answered that he wanted some and it was his own business. Afterwards, the Pathway Foundation activists were thrilled: they had shown that their new group could pull off an organized event and reach men who were otherwise ignored by the public health system. And I was happy that I had helped make the event memorable.

In 1993 this disco, the only “gay disco” in Makassar, Indonesia’s sixth largest city, was located in a large four-story building that functioned primarily as a (female sex worker) brothel. At that time, one of the greatest barriers to *gay* men using condoms for anal intercourse was not accessing condoms themselves, but accessing water-based lubricant. Indonesia’s massive family program had ensured that condoms were relatively inexpensive and ubiquitous, but these condoms were only lightly lubricated, since they were intended for vaginal intercourse.^[ii] The Indonesian condom companies manufactured the lubricant on those condoms, but did not sell lubricant separately (and would not do so for many years thereafter). In 1993, the only way to obtain water-based lubricant was to purchase imported XY Jelly. Many pharmacies sold KY Jelly, so it was relatively accessible; it was rather expensive for the average working-class Indonesian, but not prohibitively so.

It was clear that the primary barrier to accessing lubricant was that *gay* men were embarrassed to ask for it. In Indonesia at that time, KY Jelly was associated not with condoms and sex but with childbirth; it was most commonly used to lubricate the birth canal during delivery. Why would a man who was not a doctor walk into a pharmacy and ask for it? *Gay* men spoke explicitly of embarrassment in the face of the disapproving “lady behind the counter” (*ibu apotek*) as the reason they would never attempt to purchase KY Jelly, even though this meant they would either forego condoms for anal intercourse or use oil-based lubricants like body lotion, which often caused condoms to break.

Since the *gay* disco provided an opportunity to reach out to a relatively large number of *gay* men in a safe environment where (unlike a park) there was little fear of being overheard, the Pathway Foundation activists decided it would be a good venue for talking to *gay* men about the importance of lubricant. I was impressed with this creative and highly contextual approach to HIV prevention, but was taken aback when the Pathway Foundation staff asked me to play the role of the “lady behind the counter,” in drag. Their explanation was not that pharmacy staff were ever non-Indonesians (I would be speaking Indonesian anyway) but that my presence on stage would make the skit even more entertaining. While I was openly *gay* to the activists of the Pathway Foundation, I had never cross-dressed in the United States and had no real experience with drag. I trusted the activists, however, and acquiesced to their request.

Location Work: A Personal Activist History

I was first introduced to sexuality activism as an undergraduate at Stanford University in the late 1980s. A number of queer students had formed a group, Queerland (playing off “Leland” Stanford Jr. University, the full name of the institution). I was taken by this diverse group’s efforts to claim public space and visibility for non-heterosexual people, and involved myself in this group’s activities during my latter college years. As graduation approached, many of my fellow students made plans to travel abroad—some as tourists pure and simple, but others to engage in various forms of social justice work. Having grown up in Nebraska with little international experience in comparison to many of my more cosmopolitan (and usually wealthier) fellow Stanford students, I felt a need to gain a better understanding of life outside the United States and wanted to engage in social justice work if possible.

Seeking global activist connections, I had become involved in early 1991 with the newly-formed International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC), based in San Francisco, near Stanford. It was through IGLHRC that I gained my first contacts with activist organizations in Southeast Asia (Pink Triangle, in Malaysia, and GAYa Nusantara, in Indonesia). One San Francisco-based activist who participated in the 1991 IGLHRC conference was Pat Norman, Executive Director of the California AIDS Intervention Training Center (later renamed the Institute for Community Health Outreach

(ICHO)). At that time, Pat Norman was already an important activist in LGBT and African-American communities. She offered me the opportunity to become certified as a Community Health Outreach Worker at her organization, which would give me skills in HIV prevention education. ICHO's model of Community Health Outreach was explicitly based upon an ethnographic model. It understood outreach workers to be participant observers who did not necessarily have to "come from" the communities they served (particularly because belonging was understood as achieved and contextual), but who did need to understand any community from the perspective of its members to the greatest degree possible.

In 1992, I made my first trip to Southeast Asia, travelling first to Malaysia and then to Indonesia. In Malaysia's capital city, Kuala Lumpur, I was fortunate to participate in the work of a group of activists associated with [Pink Triangle](#). I used my training to assist Pink Triangle as it began outreach work to injecting drug users in Chow Kit, a district of Kuala Lumpur infamous for drug activity.

After a few months in Malaysia, I travelled to the city of Surabaya (in the province of East Java) to meet GAYa Nusantara, which at that time (and for many years thereafter) was based in the home of Dédé Oetomo, a legendary activist. As was the case in Malaysia, I was able in some small way to help in developing outreach programs for these organizations. Through working closely with these activists and the larger communities in which they participated, I started learning about the lives of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. Part of my education was learning that the Indonesian terms *gay* and *lesbi* were linked to the English terms "gay" and "lesbian" but were not merely derivative of Western subjectivities: they had their own histories and meanings in the Indonesian-language and Indonesia as they were instantiated in the everyday lives of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians (see [The Gay Archipelago](#)).

When I returned to the United States, these heady experiences had fostered an interest in learning more about the lifeworlds of *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians. My earlier political work in the United States had impressed upon me the importance of organizing across gendered lines: *gay* men had more access to public space than *lesbi* women, and were far more addressed in HIV/AIDS discourse, but I worked hard to socialize with *lesbi* women as much as I could, and to develop a gendered analysis that foundationally considered the perspectives of women and transgendered persons as well as men. My activism in Malaysia and Indonesia taught me that having a specific skill set could make me at least somewhat useful to groups outside the United States, and that activist work allowed me to participate in everyday life in an intense and rewarding manner.

To attend the Advanced Indonesian Institute organised by The US-based Consortium for the Teaching of Indonesian (COTI) [iii] I first moved to the city of Makassar in South Sulawesi province. Sulawesi is a large island near Borneo at some remove from the political, economic, and social power concentrated on the island of Java. Dédé Oetomo explained that he had been corresponding with a group of *gay* men in that city who wanted to start an organization to address HIV prevention (and indirectly, address the social isolation and rights of *gay* men as well). Dédé asked me to go to Makassar and support this group as I could.

During my months in Makassar in 1993, I studied the Indonesian language in formal classes during the day, and at night spent time in the parks and salons where many *gay* men socialized. These men had a difficult time finding a place where they could speak privately about their hopes and dreams, and I offered them the small front room of Surya's Makassar office. The building was only about a mile from Karebosi, the town square that was one of the most popular places for *gay* men to socialize, and the reporters all left the office in the afternoon, so that I had the building to myself at night. One night about twenty men crowded into the small room; an animated discussion ensued about their isolation, their need to support each other, and their need to better understand HIV—at a time when no one knew any fellow Indonesians infected with the virus and it seemed a disease of the West. They decided to form an organization, and I remember when one man said "let's call it The Pathway Foundation!"—a name the organization used ever since. [iv]

Activist Listening

The activism I describe above took place before I became an anthropologist—indeed, was the inspiration for me to enter graduate school in anthropology (my undergraduate degrees were in linguistics and music). In later years, I still helped

provide space for groups to meet whenever I could, a precious resource in a context where few persons live alone. I did drag on a handful of other occasions for the purpose of HIV/AIDS entertainment events.[v] As my linguistic abilities progressed, I was able to conduct outreach worker trainings in the Indonesian language, helping provide activists with new skills. I have helped write many grants for *gay* and *lesbi* groups formalized enough to be registered as nonprofit organizations (NGOs); many (but not all) of these grants have been in the realm of HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, and include what is to my knowledge the first HIV prevention program in Indonesia specifically serving *lesbi* women. In some cases, activists would invite me to come with them to meetings with local or national officials, because the mere presence of an American (particularly one who spoke Indonesian) could help legitimate the activists and ensure they would be granted access. I consider my academic writing on *gay* and *lesbi* culture to be a form of activism, helping legitimate the lifeworlds of these Indonesians, showing the complexity of their lives and its theoretical significance.

Throughout this work I have encountered surprisingly few ethical quandaries, despite always being conscious of my status as a white, male American. I have found one principle particularly useful in mitigating ethical quandaries is what I term “activist listening,” and this principle has broader theoretical implications. In a rush to do good (or to make money, or any number of other motivations), we have seen a long history of Westerners attempting to impose their worldview in non-Western contexts. For instance, in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment the notion of “best practice” has often been misused to imply that an approach effective in one place can be transplanted with minimal reworking. Listening implies an investment of time: it can mean weeks or months of informal socializing. Listening also implies understanding the language being spoken, literally and metaphorically. It means patience and attention to context, allowing oneself to be transformed by a range of social actors, not only people who are known as leaders (or claim the status of leader), or people who can speak English.

Activist listening is an exercise in vulnerability, “a method of being at risk in the face of the practices and discourses into which one inquires... [a] serious nonidentity that challenges previous stabilities, convictions, or ways of being... a mode of practical and theoretical attention, a way of remaining mindful and accountable” (Haraway 1997:190–91). What makes this listening “activist” is not any self-claimed identity of the listener, but that the listening actively engages with the social context in question. It means listening not just to stories, but to agendas. It means working as an activist in service of priorities set by persons who are otherwise in a structurally disempowered position. Activist listening, as I define it, is thus predicated on recognizing Western privilege but striving to put that privilege to work for non-Western interests. I do not mean that Western activists need disavow their personal and political motivations, but that these motivations be realigned given what non-Westerners say needs to be done. For instance, I went to Makassar at the request of Dédé Oetomo, but in Makassar I was not only able to improve my skills in the Indonesian language, but establish connections that led to Makassar becoming one of my primary ethnographic fieldsites.

This idea of realignment is predicated on the idea that “Western interests” and “non-Western interests,” themselves each internally diverse, are not inevitably opposed. For instance, I would argue that it is “in the interest” of Westerners that non-Western persons with non-normative sexual and gendered subjectivities and practices enjoy full legal rights and social affirmation. It is “in the interest” of Westerners that these non-Westerners enjoy these rights in cases where they do not have lexicalized subjectivities, or have subjectivities radically different from dominant Western notions of gay and lesbian identity. It is also “in the interest” of Westerners that these non-Westerners enjoy these rights in cases where they use terms derived from the English terms “gay” or “lesbian” to understand their sexualities and communities, rather than being dismissed as lackeys of the West or victims of global gay imperialism.

Listening is never truly passive, but I am here gesturing toward a practice of listening that takes into account how activists always come from a background shaped by personal motivations and agendas, regardless of the degree to which the activist is an “outsider.” For the Western activist working in a non-Western context, activist listening can be one way to counter, even partially, a colonial and capitalist history in which the West spoke and the non-West listened, or the West compelled the non-West to speak in a language intelligible to preexisting Western frameworks. It is a means to work against dynamics of global inequality, rather than seek paralyzing refuge in some fantasy of disengagement or separation. I contend that “activism” founded in what is often glossed as the “passive” stance of listening is theoretically, politically, and ethically preferable to either of the most common alternatives one encounters. The first of these is the idea that activists stand in an automatic global solidarity that makes listening superfluous (because we all share universal values of

human rights, equality, and tolerance). The second unsatisfactory alternative is that contemporary capitalist oppressions are so totalizing that Western activists can by definition never truly listen to non-Westerners, and thus that coalition-building across lines of inequality between West and non-West is impossible.

Privilege and Similitude

My other two responses to the question of how sexuality activism by Westerners can effectively and ethically take place in non-Western contexts (so that we avoid ceding social action outside the West to corporations and development agencies) take the form of more general principles, but also originate in my activist experiences. In contrast to reflexivity, the concept of recursivity is concerned with the discursive constitution of the “there”, “the other”, the location of ethnographic authority often termed the “fieldsite” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

With the phrase “recursive privilege” I mean that Western sexuality activists can acknowledge and leverage their privilege, rather than apologize for or disavow that privilege. The phrase “Western privilege” accurately names the privilege in question, because that privilege is not only a (reflexive) consequence of embodied subjectivity—gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class—but a (recursive) consequence of emplaced subjectivity as Western. Privilege is locational, not just existential, and locations can be decentered and enrolled in alternative geographies. As noted at the outset of this essay, those parts of the world termed “Western” are not identical to each other, nor are they all wealthy or influential. Hegemonic power is not totalizing power: it is contested and partial, sustained through the manufacture of consent as well as through force, as emphasized by Gramsci in his classic analysis of hegemony. Western activists often have forms of power their non-Western interlocutors do not—skills in English, in computer use, in grantwriting; financial resources and networks that make travel easier; access to resources for education and advocacy. Claims to solidarity that deny these forms of privilege are problematic. Even as a jobless activist in 1992, I had access to forms of privilege that I could put in service of my Indonesian colleagues’ agendas. Thus, one key to Western sexuality activism in non-Western contexts is to account for one’s privilege as a Westerner, and then permit non-Westerners to “interrupt” this privilege and deploy it for goals they articulate.

My third response to the question of how sexuality activism by Westerners can effectively and ethically take place in non-Western contexts, a politics of similitude, might seem to contradict the notion of recursive privilege just discussed, wherein I emphasized the value of acknowledging a relative position of power. However, my activist and ethnographic experiences convince me that the problematic assumption of an “automatic global solidarity” mentioned earlier is not the only way to conceptualize similitude. In the understandable rush Western sexuality activists may feel to acknowledge difference, we do not want to lose sight of the forms of similitude that make “difference” comprehensible. In terms of effective and ethical activism, I cannot overemphasize the importance of developing a theory of similitude, which does not assume that apparent sameness is a symptom of homogenization or a betrayal of the authentic and indigenous. If, say, some non-Western men use an identity term derived from the English word “gay,” or like to wear blue jeans, listen to Madonna, or use Facebook, it is politically and theoretically unacceptable to presume that such men are less authentic than non-Western men who reject the term “gay” or wear traditional clothing.

Effective Western sexuality activism in non-Western contexts requires a politics of similitude that does not prejudge questions of authenticity and belonging. If we assume that the relationship between “Western” and “non-Western” is inevitably one of alterity, we foreclose crucial forms of coalition-building. If we assume that outsider activism of any kind effaces difference, we lose sight of the ways that such activism, like globalization more generally, can result in new forms of difference. A politics of similitude has been absolutely vital to my work in Indonesia. To dare to take the stage with my Indonesian colleagues, to help them write grants or develop an outreach program for sex workers—all these things and more are predicated on the idea that some shared ground exists between the Western and non-Western sexuality activist.

Conclusion: the Non-Activist Ethnographer

The issues I have raised in this essay are personal—originating in my activist work in Indonesia and beyond—but clearly resonate with dilemmas and debates that are not unique to the topic of sexuality or to the Southeast Asian region. Activist listening, recursive privilege, and a politics of similitude are all heuristics that I have developed in the context of many years of activist anthropology. However, I do not wish to leave the reader with a sense that activism is restricted to or necessary for good anthropological practice, or ethnography.

Speaking for myself, activism and ethnography are two sides of the same coin: from methodological and ethical perspectives, I find it difficult to imagine not engaging in activism. I simply do not know what I would do with myself in my everyday life in Indonesia if I did not engage in activist work. Nonetheless, not all good social scientific research must involve the kind of activism I discuss here. There are myriad ways in which scholars give back to the communities in which they conduct research that may not be named “activism.” And even the most activist scholars do not engage in activism every minute of the day, or with every interlocutor they encounter.

My two key conclusions are not about activism as an obligatory component of anthropological and more generally academic work, but about broader questions of power, knowledge, and politics with regard to activism and scholarship. First, activism and scholarship can be powerfully synergistic. Fieldwork need not be bifurcated into time spent “doing activism” and time spent “doing research.”

Second, while there are certainly political and ethical concerns when Westerners engage in activism in non-Western contexts, attempting to avoid such translocal connections carries political and ethical concerns of its own. As **Ferguson (1999)** describes, forms of “global disconnect” can be as problematic as forms of engagement. Globalizing forces are expanding, regardless of what activists do. Corporations, mass media, governments, non-governmental organizations, religious movements, and a range of other actors refuse to limit themselves to the nation-state as the ultimate spatial scale. There is no easy “outside” to globalization and a stance of refusal acts only to trap activism in a reified (and often romanticized) notion of “the local,” a form of “spatial incarceration” that was crucial to the colonial forms of governance that laid the groundwork for the contemporary global order (**Mamdani 1996**).

In my activist work in Indonesia, I have always been struck by the ways in which the West is present in Indonesia, whether Western activists are in the archipelago or not. That presence—a material and discursive presence—is in myriad ways embraced, rejected, and transformed by Indonesians themselves. My goal is to listen to how *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians engage with that presence, as well as how they engage with the nation-state, local cultures, and other forms of translocal power (like the “world religions” of Islam and Christianity). That listening is an activist act and can engender other forms of activism. Linked to a politics of similitude, such activism can be a powerful means for Westerners to use their privilege in service of social justice. Such activism can, at the same time, be a powerful means for effective research, research whose activist effects include contributing to a better understanding of both unique and shared aspects of the human journey.

[i] ‘Pathway Foundation’ is an anonymised name.

[ii] Many Indonesian men prefer “dry” vaginal sex, with a minimum of lubrication (this was not necessarily preferred by their female partners, but the Indonesian state, unsurprisingly, paid less attention to the perspective of women). For further discussion of Indonesia’s family planning program, see Dwyer 2000.

[iii] Later renamed the Consortium for the Teaching of Indonesian and Malaysian (COTIM).

[iv] Because this is a smaller organization; I have changed its name for anonymity. I discuss the work of this organization in “Nuri’s testimony: HIV/AIDS in Indonesia and bare knowledge,” *American Ethnologist* 36:2 (2009), pp. 351–363.

[v] See, for instance, *A Coincidence of Desires: Anthropology, Queer Studies, Indonesia*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007, p106.

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