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5-2-2018

# The Complicit Anthropologist

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## Recommended Citation

Gomberg-Muñoz, Ruth. The Complicit Anthropologist. *Journal for the Anthropology of North America*, 21, 1: 36-37, 2018. Retrieved from Loyola eCommons, Anthropology: Faculty Publications and Other Works, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/nad.12070>

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The Complicit Anthropologist  
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The invitation to become “accomplices, not allies” is a timely and urgent summons to a political left that has recently swelled with renewed vigor. Galvanized to contest the Trump administration, freshly politicized young people and veteran activists alike have a spectrum of options for political engagement—few of which seriously threaten to dismantle broader systems of inequality and injustice. In line with Rosa and Bonilla’s (2017) call to avoid exceptionalizing Trump in favor of more critical and robust analyses of colonialism, racism and U.S. statehood, the call to become accomplices urges progressives to avoid the deceptive comfort of allyship, and, instead, to pursue complicity with criminalized communities.<sup>i</sup>

Calling attention to the distinction between accomplices and allies is not merely a question of political action, but seeks to disrupt broader racialized binaries of innocence and criminality. By its very nature, allyship is typically a position of relative innocence: if you identify as an ally, you are likely white, middle-class, and occupying a social status where you are perceived as innocuous. This perception confers some protection from state violence and oppression—and it is precisely that protection that makes a person an ally rather than someone who is “directly targeted” by the state.

The invitation to complicity, rather than allyship, asks us to acknowledge that what distinguishes legality from illegality, innocence from criminality, is a matter of power. Laws are policy decisions made by people in power; they are not neutral moral decrees, much less instruments of radical liberation. Slavery was legal. Forced racial segregation was legal. Military invasion is legal. Colonialism is legal. Detention of children is legal. In contrast, sleeping on a park bench is illegal. Selling cigarettes on a sidewalk is illegal; it can even be a death sentence. The invitation to complicity is a reminder that illegality is created in the stroke of a pen; criminality in the utterance of police.

The invitation to be an accomplice is a call to recognize that innocence and safety—and thus the ability to be an ally itself—are always predicated on cooperation with the system that creates and upholds such laws. The invitation to be an accomplice calls on us to “criminaliz[e] support and solidarity” because refusal to cooperate with unjust laws is itself a criminalized act. To be an accomplice is to recognize that racialized populations are not allowed even the illusion of public safety—their very presence can be considered a threat, and they are gunned down by police, taken from their homes in the middle of the night, imprisoned, detained, and deported, all in the name of upholding the law. The invitation to be an accomplice is a call to recognize that this system makes all of us already complicit—we are complicit when we allow it to persist. Being an accomplice with oppressed peoples demands that we take an unambiguous stance in a struggle that already envelopes us, and that we leverage and sacrifice relative protection, access, and prestige in service to the subversion of oppressive systems. Finally, the invitation to be an accomplice asks allies to surrender their always-contingent claim to innocence and become part of a community that is fighting to build a more equal world.

Critical anthropologists have long called for ever more engaged, participatory, and collaborative research practices. The call to be an accomplice is an invitation to deepen and transform these commitments, ultimately calling into question the viability of boundaries between anthropologists and subjects in research and praxis. Indeed, as the current political moment unmask the naked

brutality of aggressive policing measures on marginalized and racialized communities, so too does it render an anthropology that expects to be politically neutral or detached in its research with marginalized peoples less tenable than ever.

Ruth Gomberg-Muñoz is an associate professor of anthropology at Loyola University Chicago. She thanks Ana Croegaert and Paul Gomberg for their helpful thoughts on this commentary.

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<sup>i</sup> ROSA, J. and BONILLA, Y. (2017), Deprovincializing Trump, decolonizing diversity, and unsettling anthropology. *American Ethnologist*, 44: 201–208. doi:10.1111/amet.12468