practical matters

Epistemological Privilege and Collaborative Research: A Reflection on Researching as an Outsider

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An Insider's Story

Imet Veronica while conducting research on Christian Marriage and the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Tanzania. Here is her story:[1] As the video makes clear, Veronica's story is one of survival. She cared for her husband until he died of AIDS, then she began to rebuild her life. She said she did forgive her husband, and she forgave those who stigmatized her, but the forgiveness did not change the fact that she felt her life was ruined. When she spoke her story, she mourned the loss of her childhood. She lamented that she had no parents to protect her. She blamed her brothers for taking money for a dowry and throwing her away to be married before she was grown. She blamed her church for forging her birth certificate and for not seeing her as a person, but only as a thing to be given away.

An Outsider's Story

When Veronica left home at twelve years old, I was also twelve years old. Veronica was born

just one month before me. If I had been born in her village, people would have called us age mates. We would have gone through initiation rituals together and celebrated sacred days as peers. But I was born in the U.S. in the Deep South, and when I was twelve years old, the worst thing that happened to me was the seventh grade.

When I was twelve, when Veronica was twelve, I didn't know anything about HIV or AIDS. AIDS was given a name in the U.S. in 1982, the year my brother was born. His birthday falls on World AIDS Day. I was five years old when my brother was born, when they found a name for AIDS, when they realized it wasn't just some disease that affected gay people in California.

I have a random memory of a disease without a name. I was a kid in kindergarten or grade school, and we heard about it on the news. At recess that day my friends and I decided we should think of names for this new disease in case the researchers needed help. I suggested "throw-up-a-lots" or something similar, because I imagined that anything that made you sick must make you throw up a lot. I didn't know anything about AIDS.

My first real memories of hearing about AIDS came when I was a freshman in high school in 1991, when a friend bought envelopes at a gag gift shop that said "AIDS TEST RESULTS" on the outside. I thought it was funny. And then there was the time my pastor said that AIDS wasn't God's judgment, but homosexuality was. I didn't know what to think. I now painfully remember that same year when I flew to Colorado for a student council conference. There was a gay pride parade in Colorado, and the plane was full of people who were going. One guy sitting beside me shared his cookie with me. I think he might have been the first openly gay man I'd ever met. Someone later worriedly warned me about the shared cookie, because of AIDS. We didn't know anything about AIDS.

When Veronica and I were thirteen years old, I was in eighth grade, and she was getting married. I loved eighth grade. I didn't hang out with the cool kids, but I had good friends. I was beginning to realize I was smart. I even took an advanced literature class with the honors kids. When Veronica and I were fourteen years old, I was starting high school, and she was pregnant with her first kid. I ran for president of every single club I could join. I was building my resume. Even though my family was barely middle class, I always knew I would go to college. Maybe it was my white privilege, maybe it was the Protestant work ethic, but I never had any doubts that I would live into whatever dream I could imagine. I thought I would just get a scholarship.

When I was in college, when Veronica and I were twenty, I went to Africa for the first time on what was designated simply as an "African Immersion" trip. I landed in Kenya on a study abroad not even knowing which side of the continent the country was on. It was here, in 1998, where I really learned about AIDS. We still weren't talking about it at home—at least not in my little corner of the South.

When I came home from my semester abroad in Kenya, people kept repeating a strange phrase when I told them where I'd been. They'd say, "Well, I guess that makes you grateful for how good we have it here." I once ran into a lady at the grocery store who liked my necklace and asked me

where I'd bought it. I told her it was from Kenya, which for some reason led to my telling her about my semester abroad. Then she told me I was lucky to be born "here, where we have so much." But I didn't feel lucky. I felt guilty. My twenty-something-year-old self was figuring out that my abundance was linked to someone else's resource-poor situation. I was figuring out, long before I met Veronica, that colonialism and neo-colonialism, that privilege or the lack of privilege, would deeply affect us both.

Ethnography and Critical Self-Reflexivity

During the year I did ethnographic fieldwork in Mwanza, Tanzania, I was profoundly affected by the stories of my research collaborators. Veronica's story greatly impacted me because we were so close in age. For this reason, I place our ethnographies side by side in the beginning of this article as a prolegomena to help us all reflect on the role of the researcher in the research process.

In their edited volume *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen begin to answer the question of "What is Ethnography" by focusing on the importance of critical self-reflexivity for the researcher.[2] This is a deeply important argument because ethnographic research is never merely a process of gathering "data" or letting the "data speak for itself." Even as we gather stories and generate "thick descriptions,"[3] what is "known" is changed by the researcher's own sense of knowing. There are no true "objective" observers, and in the midst of certain situations (such as war or violence) observers who remain "objective" likely compromise their own moral compass.[4] Even when qualitative "data" is gathered, it often does not speak for itself, but finds a voice when spoken to, so to speak. The editorial process of what is raised and what is ignored is deeply important in writing up the research, and this gives yet another reason for the insistence on critical self-reflexivity.

Scharen and Vigen describe it this way:

> Ethnography does not stand wholly outside that which it explores—it itself and its narrative is also part of the inquiry. Thus, it and the ethnographer need to interrogate themselves as much as they seek to learn from the people with whom a study is undertaken. There is an inescapable dimension of vulnerability—often most acutely felt on the part of the people studied. Yet, if it is done well, the researcher or academic will be vulnerable as well.[5]

Of course, vulnerability is not something academics are very good at. We "defend" our work, we "argue," we "assert," but we are learning to "reflect." Scharen and Vigen raise an important point as they remind us that critical self-reflexivity is not a box we check when the research is complete, but is rather a process we engage throughout in order to strengthen the quality and integrity of our collaborative work.

Scharen and Vigen continue, "Reflexivity means that the researcher is willing to look honestly at one's self—location, biases, etc. Critical self-reflection involves taking a hard look at one's own assumptions. … Simply put, ethnographers must be profoundly committed to learning from

research collaborators and informants."[6] Key to this pursuit of researchers learning from their research collaborators is the question of epistemological privilege and power in the research process. As a way of further examining these themes, and in an attempt to practice the type of self-reflexivity that Scharen and Vigen describe, I will now turn to the question of epistemological privilege and collaborative scholarship within the research project. Here, I hope to use the year of fieldwork I completed in Mwanza, Tanzania, which focused on Christian marriage as an HIV and AIDS risk factor, as a lens to explore research methodology and the researcher's self-reflexivity. While much has been written on these two topics in other academic fields, I hope my own reflections will make a particular contribution to the fields of theology and ethics, as fieldwork and qualitative research are now emerging as a growing edge in these and related disciplines.

On Epistemological Privilege

In defining epistemological privilege, I build on liberation theologies, more specifically the work of *mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz . In her foundational work articulating *mujerista* theology, Isasi-Díaz focused on the role of epistemological privilege, writing:

> One of the most pervasive themes of *mujerista* theology is the preferential option for the poor and oppressed. This preferential option is based on the epistemological privilege of the poor because they can see and understand what the rich and privileged cannot. It is not that the poor and oppressed are morally superior or that they can see better. Their epistemological privilege is based on the fact that, because their point of view is not distorted by power and riches, they can see differently.[7]

This understanding of preferential option and epistemological privilege is of great importance for the insider/outsider dynamics of research. For Isasi-Díaz, the first and last word comes from the oppressed.

This leads Isasi-Díaz to question what will become of the theologian if everyone can do theology. She answers:

> If the community as a whole does theology, what is the task of those of us who have called ourselves theologians? I believe there is no way of averting this identity crisis once the epistemological privilege of the poor is recognized and theology is understood as a praxis. The only way for academically trained theologians to resolve their dilemma is to participate fully in a community of struggle and to do theology as members of that community. The gifts of the academically trained theologian will not be wasted. The community needs some of its members to be enablers and facilitators during the reflective moment of the praxis—which does not happen only when one is sitting down.[8]

This same question can be applied to the researcher. If the community does research, if the community designs the research question and shapes the research plan, what is the role of the researcher? Isasi-Díaz reminds us that there is still work for academically-trained theologians and

ethnographers to do. They can record stories, facilitate conversations, and connect the struggle of everyday life with theological and religious themes.[9]

In designing a research project, our best *first questions* are born after an extended presence and deep listening with our collaborators. In this way, researchers often start with an idea only to find that they have not yet discovered the most important questions, contextually speaking. For example, I went to Tanzania to do a study on abstinence education and HIV/AIDS. When I started doing initial interviews in Mwanza, the women and girls I interviewed suggested that marriage might be a bigger problem in their context and that perhaps I should focus on this. They were right. In Mwanza and other places, abstinence education, religious or otherwise, does not always carry the problematic religious messages of virginity and purity for girls that can lead to gendered blame and stigma.[10] Instead, one of the main problems with abstinence education in this context is that it creates the myth that marriage is safe. In the initial interviews I learned that for these women, marriage was not a safe space.

The women's stories matched what I, as a researcher, knew from the literature on HIV and AIDS. Since 1992, the UN has named marriage as an HIV risk factor in sub-Saharan Africa.[11] Putting the "data" and the "stories" in dialogue, I then designed the fieldwork[12] around the question of whether Christian marriage made a difference, and whether it might offer a liberative space to mitigate risk. As the research refocused on marriage, the women changed the direction of the project by telling their stories. This redesign of the research project illustrates an example where epistemological privilege was centered with the research subjects, but where I as a researcher also contributed by putting the stories in dialogue with the literature.

In many ways, this example aptly models my research process as a whole. I have often experienced contestation between varying epistemologies as book knowledge met experiential knowledge, feminist theory met lived experience, theological scholarship met daily theological praxis, and the like. But even in naming these categories, we should not assume that the "book knowledge" came exclusively from the academic researcher and that the "lived experience" came exclusively from the research collaborators (or better, community researchers) in Mwanza. Here, there was also a give and take. While the women told stories about their own marriages, they also expected me to tell stories about mine. And while I would often bring in theological texts to discuss, such as the work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians, the women regularly brought their own texts—local novels, music, stories, and proverbs—to the discussion.

On Researching as an "Outsider"

In tackling the issue of epistemological privilege, it's important to ask why (and whether or not) an outsider should even do research with insiders. Why did I conduct this research at all? Why move to Tanzania to listen to the stories of HIV-positive women when other people are more qualified to tell these stories than I am? What are the obstacles and what are the advantages to conduct-

ing research outside of our own experience and social location?

In attempting to answer these questions, the insider/outsider dynamic within research provides an important space of discovery. In many ways, to do research outside of one's own geographic context is presumptuous and dangerously close to the colonial model of mining knowledge and resources from the colonized. Research between insiders and outsiders always presents the risk that researchers will get it wrong, or worse, that the research informants will be victimized in the process. But with this risk acknowledged, I also believe that collaborative research with insiders and outsiders offers an important possibility, particularly when issues of epistemological privilege are addressed from the beginning.

As I begin to reflect on the role of the researcher, the comparison between my lived experience and Veronica's lived experience can provide an important window for learning. Veronica's story is the story of an "insider." As a woman living with HIV and AIDS in Tanzania, she understands the central questions of my research far better than I ever will. My story is the story of an "outsider." Coming from a space of privilege and otherness, there are pieces of Veronica's story that I will never understand. There are complexities within the research that I will never be able to fully express.

Born only a month apart, if Veronica and I had shared a social location or even a geographical location, we would have been age mates and peers. Yet, instead, we were born worlds apart and our stories straddle opposite/different ends of privilege and knowledge. I place our stories together not to repeat the tired, inadequate illustration of who suffers and who experiences privilege in our world, but to make a point about where epistemological privilege should be located, and where solidarity might exist between any researcher and participants/collaborators in the research.

In comparing these two stories, there are obvious privileges that I embody as a white, feminist researcher from the West. White privilege is obvious, as are other locational privileges provided by my U.S. citizenship. Economic privilege is also a factor, as I have had access to resources and grants that have allowed me to conduct research abroad. A privilege less frequently considered is what I would call the privilege of academic mobility. This privilege allows academic researchers to pack up and go home when the research is complete, or even before the work is over if they feel they have done (or had) enough.

In an important article on solidarity, Isasi-Díaz told the story of her work as a missionary in Peru. When she lived there, she had a neighbor who was the father of four children and who worked as a painter when he could find work. She said that one day, on her way to catch the bus, he asked her why she left Cuba and the U.S. to work in Peru. She said that she tried to explain her sense of vocation and how she wanted to "live among the poor and to struggle for justice." After the conversation was over and Isasi-Díaz was walking away, her neighbor said to her, "Remember, you can always leave this place; we can't."[13]

The privilege embodied by academic researchers is the freedom, and even the obligation, to "leave this place" when the research is finished. Within the academy, most of us are given immense

freedom within our fields to choose how and where to direct our research in accord with our interests and passions. Though I have just written a book on my research on HIV and AIDS in Tanzania, there is no obligation put upon me by my university to do future research on the topic. In fact, some colleagues with tenure and experience have encouraged me to move on to another project now that my book is finished. I have the freedom to choose something closer to home or find another topic within my broad field of social ethics for future research.

I do not say this disparagingly. Researchers need this level of freedom and mobility to live into their vocations and pave new ground in their fields. We need for our research not to be co-opted by the academy. But this mobility must be recognized as privilege. And when we recognize this as privilege, we learn something new about which voices should carry the epistemological privilege within our research and writing.

As a person living with HIV and AIDS, Veronica's voice carries far more authority than my own. She cannot leave the "place" of being HIV positive. While I came into her life for a short period of time and asked her to share her lived experience as a person living with HIV, thinking about this virus was nothing new for her or for any of the women in this project. As a researcher, I can leave the "place" of thinking about the virus because it does not directly affect me on a daily basis.

For researchers working outside their own lived experience, the privilege of mobility demands that epistemological privilege be abdicated. This does not apply only to intercultural research, but to any research that lies outside of one's realm of lived experience. Liberation theologians have reminded us time and again that the first and last word is with the oppressed, with those who are experiencing life at the margins. When doing research "in the margins," the first and last word must come from those who cannot leave, whatever that might mean. When it comes to HIV and AIDS, these thick stories of lived experience help us as a global community to move beyond the statistical data and embrace the particularities of the epidemic.[14] To use Isasi-Díaz's term, these stories help us become "friends" who work for liberation.[15] But attention to epistemological privilege also has an impact on what data can be gathered and on the transformative potential of research itself. For research collaborators/participants, the process of telling one's story can initiate a move from margin to center. In an equally transformative way, an intentional shift in which epistemologies are privileged allows the researchers to be transformed by the work as they move from center to margin, taking on the role of active listener.

Privilege, Solidarity and Research Methodology

During the months I was doing research in Mwanza, Tanzania, the women in the project found multiple spaces of solidarity with one another. There were times when a person would tell a story about her life, and the room would grow silent. Soon, another woman would chime in and say that she had also experienced this, and until now, she thought she was the only one. This happened the day that Joyce told the group what would happen if a married woman refused sex. "I would be

beaten first and raped later," she said. The room grew quiet until I asked the question of whether this was true for others. Yes, the women said. And then they began to tell their own stories, echoing Joyce's words. As they listened to each other's stories week after week, their own voices grew stronger.

In many ways, solidarity with one another was what came naturally in the project. As a researcher, my primary task was to attempt to create a safe space and then blend into the background and listen. At times, the women became so engulfed in speaking their stories and listening to each other that they might have forgotten I was in the room. My own space of solidarity with the women was something I knew would not come easily. Even while giving attention to epistemological privilege, the outsider/researcher must work to find a space of true solidarity. In this project, my first attempt to create solidarity came through the research methodology and research design.

In designing my research methodology, my primary goal was to work collaboratively with the participants in the project. While this was my fifth qualitative research project, three of which I also conducted in East Africa, I decided that this particular project required a different research methodology. I settled on participatory action research (PAR) as my primary methodology because it offered an educational research model that made room for both the insider and outsider. Using this methodology also created valuable space to analyze the intercultural dimensions of HIV and AIDS as a pandemic that spreads across multiple continents and social contexts.

Action research, while often considered a form of qualitative research, is distinct in that it involves research participants in the process of designing and implementing the research project.[16] It also differs from qualitative interviewing methods in that the experience of interaction between the researcher and participants becomes the foundation for action, which then leads to further observation and reflection. Because PAR involves both the researcher and the participants in a process of collaborative solution building, when PAR is initiated by a researcher from outside a community, the researcher's "outsider" status is "tempered by collaboration with insiders."[17] Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson define action research thus:

> Action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them. It is a reflective process, but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions.[18]

The addition of the term "participatory" indicates the presence of both insiders and outsiders in the research process.[19] The PAR process engages both the researcher and the respondents in the process of collaborative solution building.

The PAR method is based on the work of Paulo Freire, who, in his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues that fatalism within oppressed communities can only be ended through "problem-posing education" in which participants do not memorize narrated content but become "agents of their own liberation."[20] Using Freire's method, we adopted the "plan-act-observe-reflect"[21] framework for our meetings as we explored the relationship between marriage and HIV

risk. Because liberation theology also has roots in Freire's work, this research methodology not only provided a creative way to collaboratively approach the topic, but also provided a rich framework for a liberation-based theological method of reflection.

Recruiting from connections with HIV and AIDS support groups in Mwanza, I conducted initial qualitative interviews with thirty-five individuals, most of whom were HIV-positive women.[22] I also observed support group meetings and actively participated in the Diocese of Victoria Nyanza support group, which was newly forming when I arrived. These interviews and observations laid the groundwork for the PAR phase of the project.

Based primarily on the interviews, I selected twelve women to participate in this latter portion of the research. The criteria for selection were that the participant had been married (formally or informally) and that they seemed willing to think deeply about the questions they were being asked. In the selection process, attention was also given to diversity. The women chosen represented six ethnic groups,[23] participated in various Christian churches, both Protestant and Catholic,[24] consisted of varying ages,[25] education and income levels,[26] and had differing opinions on the questions they were asked.[27] The answers the women gave to my preliminary questions were not a factor in their selection; rather, the primary qualification was their openness to engage a question and their willingness to be a part of this project.

Because each PAR project is unique, perhaps the best way to explain the methodology used in this project is to give an example. During the first week of the PAR project, our goal was to talk about marriage. We began the session by answering the statement that I created, "When I think of a good relationship, I think of… ." Women in the group listed five characteristics of good relationships, which included understanding, love, transparency, peace, faithfulness and freedom of speech.[28]

Following this first exercise, the group discussed various aspects of good relationships, and the women shared some of their own experiences of both good and bad relationships. From this discussion, we moved to the "plan" stage where we planned an activity for the following week. I suggested that each person bring pictures or a memento of their wedding day, but the women said that this didn't quite fit their experience. Some of them had not been married in the formal sense due to the requirement of expensive *mahari* (or dowry) payments, so they decided another option would be better. Here, the collaborative PAR methodology allowed me as an outsider to be corrected by insiders.

Instead, they suggested we create an activity where we showed the differences in marriage based on ethnic groups. The group decided to divide themselves into small groups based on the three major ethnic groups that were represented and act out a drama about marriage. The following week, we began our meeting in the "act" stage as the women acted out a drama. From there, we "observed" the drama and then "reflected" on it as it pushed us into the next topic of conversation coming out of the activity: *mahari* (or dowry). Then, the plan-act-observe-reflect cycle began again as we made preparations for the following week.

During these sessions, my role as an action researcher was to listen, take notes, facilitate questions when needed and observe the research process. Within the PAR process, sessions are organized around a theme, question, activity or experience, and questions or problems can be initiated either by the researcher or the participants.[29] Because action research is a collaborative process that seeks to transform existing power structures and problems, research collaborators were continually invited to ask their own questions or change the question being asked.

In many ways, choosing to utilize a PAR methodology rather than only conducting qualitative interviews or gather quantitative data changed the nature of the research entirely. In creating a research setting where both insiders and outsiders were invited to collaborate, as a researcher I moved from center to margin. The research methodology, in naming me as an outsider, created a space for me to confront my own spaces of privilege. The methodology itself was a reminder that as the researcher, I could never hold the epistemological privilege in the project due to the privilege of my mobility. Instead, I engaged the research more as a learner than as an authority figure. As this happened, I watched the women move from margin to center. As we named the space as safe, the women began to trust each other and began "hearing each other to speech."[30] To my surprise, the research space became (at least to me) a sacred space of transformation where we were all changed in the process of hearing each other. As an academically-trained researcher that meant recognizing that my privilege of mobility demanded a shift in epistemological privilege. For my collaborators in the research, it meant realizing that they had something tremendously valuable to say, that there was a privilege of knowing that they alone held.

Decolonizing Research, Decolonizing the Academy

This sacred space in the research was not an intention of the research design, but rather was something we stumbled upon during the research process itself. Admittedly, my western-trained academic mind imagined I was working in Mwanza to gather new "data" about the particularities of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. This, in itself, reveals something about the colonizing tendency in research. Whether down the street or across the ocean, when we set off on our research expeditions, we go to get new data, new stories. Like the colonizers before us who brought back ivory or gold, we imagine that we will stumble upon our own research treasures.

In order to commit ourselves to research that fosters solidarity, a decolonizing of research methodologies is in order. In the book *After Empire*, Sharon Welch uses a postcolonial feminist ethic to challenge the role of empire and begins autobiographically by locating herself as an activist who came from a family who saw activism as spirituality. Welch says it was here that she learned that "it is possible to work for justice without the self-righteous condemnation of others."[31] This point is central to Welch's development of creativity and imagination. She says, "Injustice flourishes because those who love justice are singularly lacking in creativity, content to denounce the structures we see causing harm, inept in producing other forms of art, other economic struc-

tures, other political systems."[32] In putting Welch's idea in dialogue with research methodologies, we must ask: What "other research methods" (or what "other academic paradigms") are needed to creatively address the pressing social issues that challenge human flourishing?

Ethnography as a Growing Edge within Theological Ethics

Ethnography has become a growing edge within theology and ethics. While ethnographic fieldwork has enjoyed priority of place within related disciplines in the humanities such as anthropology, sociology and religious studies, it has been a marginal methodology for theology and ethics. One possible reason for this is that unlike the academic study of religion, theology and ethics sometimes (though not always) speak in confessional or normative discourses. The question has been asked as to how the researcher might maintain objectivity in the midst of these "non-objective" discourses. For some scholars of religion, ethnographic research does not come with any other moral obligation than to act ethically within the research process itself. This leads to the question of how a social ethicist like myself might do research differently by seeing transformation as central to the research project. For the ethicist or theologian, some models of research within anthropology, sociology, religious studies or related disciplines might be inadequate when it comes to decolonizing research.[33]

In creating this project, I followed the lead of African feminist/womanist theologies by turning first to fieldwork. Members of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians widely use the practice of incorporating ethnographic fieldwork into writing and research. One example can be found in Musa Dube's work on African Independent Churches[34] and her pedagogical use of fieldwork with her students to understand issues relating to HIV/AIDS in Botswana.[35] Daisy Nwachuku[36] and Bernadette Mbuy Beya[37] use ethnographic fieldwork with women in Nigeria and the Congo to explore sexuality in relation to widowhood and prostitution, respectively, in their articles in *The Will to Arise* volume published by the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. Christina Landman uses ethnographic research to create a model of spiritual care-giving to HIV-positive women.[38] Beverley Haddad uses both qualitative research and PAR in her work with women and churches in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, particularly on issues related to violence and stigma.[39]

The work of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians represents an important model for theology and ethics through both its collaborative approach to scholarship and incorporating fieldwork into academic research. Circle member Beverley Haddad exemplifies this approach as she names her work as that of an "activist-intellectual." Haddad argues that for change to happen, safe spaces for women must be created where they can speak freely about issues and solutions. She examines the development of "infrapolitics," which is defined as a form of discourse that has one meaning in public, but an entirely different meaning in the private (hidden) realm. In creating safe spaces, Haddad sees women being given the chance to articulate these "hidden

transcripts" away from the control of those in power, such as men.[40] Haddad's approach represents a unique model of PAR (or participatory learning) in that it names transformation as a goal of the research while modeling the balance between recognizing and relocating privilege and fostering solidarity.

Future Directions for Ethnographic Methodologies in Theology and Ethics

While I have argued that the privilege of mobility necessitates a shift in epistemological privilege, I must further revisit this argument to say that privilege of mobility also necessitates that researchers be grounded in a community of accountability.[41] For academically-trained researchers, our community of accountability cannot be other academics who read our articles. It cannot be our tenure and promotion committees. This is particularly true for those of us who use research to explore issues related to oppression, power and privilege.

My colleague and former professor, Aana Marie Vigen, often tells her students that your community of accountability is made up of the people who have a stake in your work. In my office there is a framed portrait of the women who participated in my research in Mwanza. I have it positioned where it overlooks my keyboard, keeping me accountable for the words I write. These women in Mwanza are my community of accountability. They not only have epistemological privilege in this research, but I believe their evaluation of my published work, of what is produced in this research, is more valuable than any other critique or review.

This brings me to another salient issue regarding insider/outsider research and the problem of privilege. As I write this article, I am finishing my first year of a new tenure-track teaching position. In this position, the book I just sent to my publisher on my fieldwork in Mwanza will literally help me climb the ladder of academic privilege. It will give me even greater "academic mobility" than I had when I began this project. The book will be seen as a personal accomplishment on my tenure file and be scored as an even greater accomplishment because it is a single-author work. Yet while I alone wrote the book, it feels unfair to name it as a single-author text rather than a collaborative work of scholarship. The words of my collaborators are the most important words in the text.

This brings me back to the goal of decolonizing research and decolonizing the academy. If academically-trained researchers seek to truly collaborate with participants in the research process, then there will need to be some push-back against the academy, which often wrongly evaluates our work. Multi-voice scholarship, collaborative fieldwork and public scholarship are all undervalued in terms of rank and tenure but are extremely important, especially for those of us who work on social issues such as HIV and AIDS. Or to put it another more personal way, in light of my work with women living with HIV and AIDS in Mwanza, tenure seems trivial and unimportant.

Here, Todd David Whitmore's work is particularly helpful in thinking through the complex relations between the disciplines of anthropology and theology and their relationship to fieldwork. Whitmore notes that it was a "crisis of vocation" that led him to the field. He says, "I could no

longer in good conscience ply my trade while working from only libraries and speaking to only academic guilds." Whitmore goes on to argue that ethnographic methods might be the best "corrective" for the discipline of theology as it helps further the theological praxis of liberation theology and ethics.[42]

A true community of accountability calls the privilege of academic mobility into question. I began thinking about this recently when I heard my religious studies and African studies colleague Robert Baum talk about his research and spending thirty years working in the same community in Senegal. After this extended period of research, he is now considered an elder in the community and is invited to participate in religious rituals that the community will not even let him write about because of their secretive nature. This brings to light the question of what our obligations to the communities where we do our research are. Should we commit ourselves to longevity and abdicate (at least somewhat) the privileges of our academic mobility? For those of us doing work in social ethics, are we willing to stick with our issues until they are no more, until flourishing replaces marginalization and oppression? Should this, too, be considered a goal of our research?

In many ways this article represents a pause in my own conversation, where I've attempted to reflect on my own research and the ways it intersects with privilege and solidarity. I do not claim in this article to speak authoritatively for anyone but myself. Like the research I've done on HIV and AIDS in this project, my own reflections represent the particular and likely cannot be easily generalized to other researchers or research projects. I do hope that in voicing this reflection it becomes part of the larger conversation where we reflect on the opportunities and obstacles inherent in our research methodologies.

In speaking on solidarity, Ada María Isasi-Díaz not only articulates the importance of epistemological privilege residing with the oppressed, but also articulates the role of the "friend." She argues that oppressors only become former oppressors when they become "friends" of the oppressed. After renouncing their participation in oppression, "friends" have important work to do, for they "are able to demystify the world of the oppressors from within, to expose its weakness and incoherence, to point out its lies."[43] As academic researchers with the privilege of mobility, we may be able to leave the places of our research. But hopefully we will leave and return again with the knowledge of how to be "friends" within our communities of accountability. This lesson is one that is never fully learned, but must always be the goal of the work that we do.

(Endnotes)

1 Veronica's story is one of many chronicled in a book by the author, *When Marriage Becomes Risky: Reflections from Tanzania on Christian Marriage in an HIV Positive World* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013, forthcoming).

2 Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*, (London: Continuum, 2011), 16-27.

3 Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.

4 For a helpful discussion on objectivity in fieldwork, particularly in light of war and violence, see Todd David Whitmore, "'If They Kill Us, At Least Others Will Have More Time to Get Away': The Ethics of Risk in Ethnographic Practice," *Practical Matters* 3 (Spring 2010), http://practicalmattersjournal.org/issue/3/analyzing-matters/if-they-kill-us-at-least-others-will-have-more-time-to-get-away (accessed March 15, 2013).

5 Scharen and Vigen, 16.

6 Ibid., 19.

7 Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Mujeristas: A Name of Our Own," *Christian Century*, May 24-31, 1989, 560.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 In a previous article I've argued that these problematic messages tend to come from organizations such as True Love Waits, who see "abstinence-only education" as the solution to the African AIDS epidemic. For more on this argument, see Browning, "HIV/AIDS Prevention and Sexed Bodies: Rethinking Abstinence in Light of the African AIDS Epidemic," *Theology and Sexuality* 15, no.1 (2009): 27-46. Additionally, as Jenny Trinitapoli and Alexander Weinreb have noted that in their research, abstinence messages tend to focus more on positive imagery of getting an education and having a future than religious purity. See Jenny Trinitapoli and Alexander Weinreb, *Religion and AIDS in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

11 For more on women and HIV/AIDS in Africa, and on marriage as a risk factor, see Avert.org, "Women, HIV and AIDS," http://www.avert.org/women-hiv-aids.htm (accessed November 22, 2012).

12 The fieldwork conducted in this project included four qualitative methodologies: open-ended initial interviews, participatory observation, focus groups organized around specific topics, and my primary research methodology: a participatory action research focus group.

13 Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, ed. Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engel (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), page numbers of chapter.

14 For more on the particular in HIV and AIDS research, see Sarojini Nadar and Isabel Phiri, "Charting the Paradigm Shifts in HIV Research: The Contribution of Gender and Religion Studies," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2012): 121-129.

15 Isasi-Díaz, 37.

16 Kathryn Herr and Gary Anderson, *The Action Research Dissertation: A Guide for Students and Faculty* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2005), 1.

17 Ibid., 2.

18 Ibid., 3.

19 Ibid., 30.

20 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continnum, 1997), 52-67.

21 Herr and Anderson, 76.

22 As part of the research, I interviewed an additional twenty-two women and men working in the fish industry (primarily women fish sellers) about the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the Lake region. Because the research project ultimately ended up focusing on Christian marriage and HIV-positive women, these additional interviews are not systematically analyzed in this dissertation, but do provide additional data that is occasionally used to support the claims of the primary participants in this project.

23 The Haya, Sukuma, Luo Mnyamwezi, Muha and Yao ethnic groups were all represented in the participatory action research portion of this project.

24 Seven women identified as Roman Catholic, two as Anglican, and three as Pentecostal, including Church of God, Tanzania Assemblies of God (not affiliated with the U.S.-based Assemblies of God denomination) and Free Pentecostal Church of Tanzania.

25 Of the participants who participated in action research, the youngest was twenty-eight, and the oldest was forty-nine.

26 While most women in the research made their money from informal labor (such as selling vegetables or sewing clothes), three of the women held professional positions: one was a teacher's aid, one was a counselor, and one helped run an HIV/AIDS non-profit group. All but one of the women had finished primary school, most had at least attended secondary school, and three women had completed some college or a certificate course.

27 In individual interviews, participants had varying views on the questions asked. For example, some were against condoms and some thought condoms should be used; some expressed a level of satisfaction with their marriages while others expressed disappointment. While both similarities and differences emerged, the specific content of participant answers was not used to determine who was invited to participate in the group. For example, some participants felt strongly that churches should advocate for condom use while others felt condoms did not protect individuals or promoted promiscuity.

28 In Kiswahili the women named *maelewano kati ya mume na mke* (harmony or understanding between husband and wife), *upendo* (love), *uwazi* (transparency), *amani* (peace) and *ukweli na uaminifu* (honesty and trust).

29 Herr and Anderson, 102.

30 Nelle Morton, "The Rising of Women's Consciousness in a Male Language Structure," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 12, no. 4 (March 1972): 177-190.

31 Sharon Welch, *After Empire: The Art and Ethos of Enduring Peace* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2004), 5.

32 Ibid., 19.

33 For an excellent treatment of ethnography as theological method, see Scharen and Vigen, *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics*. [Since this book already appears in the endnotes, I do not think you need a full citation here.]

34 Musa Dube, "Consuming a Colonial Cultural Bomb: Translating Badimo into 'Demons' in the Setswana Bible (Matthew 8.28-34; 15.22; 10.8)," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 21 , (July 1999): 33-59.

35 Musa Dube, "Healing Where There is No Healing: Reading the Miracles of Healing in an AIDS Context," in *Reading Communities, Reading Scripture: Essays in Honor of Daniel Patte*, ed. Gary A. Phillips and Nicole Wilkinson Duran (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002), 121-133.

36 Daisy N. Nwachuku, "The Christian Widow in African Culture," in *The Will to Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 54-73.

37 Bernadette Mbuy Beya, "Human Sexuality, Marriage and Prostitution," in *The Will to Arise: Arise: Women, Tradition and the Church in Africa*, ed. Mercy Amba Oduyoye and Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 155-179.

38 Christina Landman, "Spiritual Care-giving to Women Affected by HIV/AIDS," in *African Women, HIV/AIDS and Faith Communities,* ed. Isabel Apawo Phiri, Beverley Haddad, and Madipoane Masenya (ngwana' Mphahlele) (South Africa: Cluster Publications, 2003): 189-208.

39 Beverley Haddad, "Faith Resources and Sites as Critical to Participatory Learning with Rural South African Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): page numbers. See also Haddad, "'We Pray but We Cannot Heal': Theological Challenges Posed by the HIV/AIDS Crisis," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 125(July 2006): 80-90.

40 Beverly Haddad, "Faith Resources," 135-154.

41 I am grateful to my colleague Aana Marie Vigen for the important ways she has helped me think through the idea of a community of accountability in my own research. For more on Vigen's ethnographic work see, Aana Marie Vigen, *Women, Ethics, and Inequality in U.S. Healthcare: "To Count among the Living"* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

42 Whitmore, "'If They Kill Us."

43 Isasi-Díaz, 38.