



JULIE MALDONADO

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“Imagining a More Just World”: Interview with Julie Maldonado

*It is difficult to canonize anthropology and anthropological concepts, in part because of the creative tensions within the discipline’s contradictions: a desire and deep respect for local knowledge with a global, comparative perspective, what might be called the “anthropological imagination.” Firmly rooted in—and in defense of—an inclusive vision of humanity, an anthropological imagination inspires “radical empathy.” It offers the scaffolding of a coalitional politics that values the specificity of local struggles but also reaffirms and defends humanity. We must identify the humanity in others, and the common humanity in their struggle, while affirming particular identities and challenging differential privilege: an anthropological imagination inspires radical empathy and solidarity, reminding us, in the words of the World Social Forum, that “another world is possible.” How people learn to cultivate this anthropological imagination and bring it in the service of marginalized groups is not generally discussed, and rarely taught. This article aims to bridge this gap. On October 10, 2018, Julie Maldonado, Associate Director for the Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network (LiKEN), discussed her new book, *Seeking Justice in an Energy Sacrifice Zone: Standing on Vanishing Land in Coastal Louisiana*, via video-conference with Mark Schuller’s *Anthropology and Contemporary World Problems* class at Northern Illinois University. This interview offers one perspective of a career focused around advocacy anthropology that aims to reach public audiences and policy- and decision-makers in ways that translates scholarly research into information that is most useful for problem solving and enacting change in response to our climate crisis. [public anthropology, advocacy anthropology, climate change, social justice, environmental justice]*

It is difficult to canonize anthropology and anthropological concepts, in part because of the creative tensions within the discipline’s contradictions: a desire and deep respect for local knowledge with a global, comparative perspective, what might be called the “anthropological imagination.” Firmly rooted in—and in defense of—an inclusive vision of humanity, an anthropological imagination inspires “radical empathy.” It offers the scaffolding of a coalitional politics that values the specificity of local struggles but also reaffirms and defends humanity. An anthropological imagination connects the humanity level to lived experience, seeing particular local injustices as manifestations of global capitalism, built on plantation slavery and buttressed by patriarchy, and hence connected to one another. Products of human action, they are therefore changeable. Importantly, an anthropological imagination also sees these global and humanity-level phenomena as lived, understood, and confronted by real human beings. We must identify the humanity in others, and the common humanity in their struggle, while affirming particular identities and challenging differential privilege: an anthropological imagination inspires radical empathy and solidarity. But more than anything an anthropological imagination helps inspire, reminding us, in the words of the World Social Forum, that “another world is possible.”

How people learn to cultivate this anthropological imagination and bring it in the service of marginalized groups is not generally discussed, and rarely taught. A publicly engaged, advocacy anthropology is generally ignored in mainstream academia and anthropology departments, and when it is discussed, it is often done so implicitly or with very little guidance. Whether continuing in academia or not, this leaves most graduating anthropology students left to figure out on their own how to build radical empathy that is needed to be an effective ally and respectful public anthropologist. This article aims to bridge this gap. On October 10, 2018, Dr. Julie Maldonado, Associate Director for the Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network (LiKEN), discussed her new book, *Seeking Justice in an Energy Sacrifice Zone: Standing on Vanishing Land in Coastal Louisiana*, via video-conference with Dr. Mark Schuller’s *Anthropology and Contemporary World Problems* class at

Northern Illinois University. Applying a long-term, comparative “anthropological imagination,” tracking from the global to the local, humanity level to individual lived experience, the course analyzes selected world problems introduced or augmented by contemporary globalization. Dr. Schuller selected this particular book to provide students with a realistic description of conducting anthropological research. The students came up with questions and led and transcribed the video interview.

This interview with Dr. Maldonado offers one perspective of a career focused around advocacy and public anthropology that aims to reach public audiences and policy- and decision-makers in ways that translates scholarly research into information that is most useful for people to problem-solve. Advocacy anthropology is often seen more in light of protesting on the streets to criticize large unjust structures and institutions; however, such a lens can also be used to understand these structures better and work toward affecting a positive change that aligns with building radical empathy. What follows provides insight into what it means to engage in advocacy anthropology and what it looks like to be a practicing anthropologist, even when your job title never includes the word “anthropologist,” utilizing an anthropological training and lens through which to understand problems and enact change in response to our climate crisis.

What Originally Inspired You to Become an Anthropologist?

In my early 20s, I was part of the AmeriCorps program, the National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC). We were living on a naval base in North Charleston, South Carolina, and I was at a computer lab (personal laptops were not as prevalent then) looking over one of my friend’s shoulders. She was looking into applying to graduate school for this thing called cultural anthropology. At the time, I had no intention of going to graduate school. You can never say “never,” I guess. I was reading the description about cultural anthropology, thinking, “this sounds kind of like what I’ve been doing the last few years.” The seed was planted.

A few months later, I sat down on a bench in Cape Town, South Africa, and the seed grew. I was working out of the Community House at the time,

a vibrant place with a lot of grassroots community organizations and like-minded souls coming together, where several decades prior much of the anti-apartheid movement emerged in that part of South Africa. At the time I was struggling with what to do next, considering visa circumstances, and during a work break, went outside to the courtyard to sit down and think for a moment. A man sat down next to me and we started talking. Over the next few weeks, we became close friends. He was the leader of a group of Ogoni asylum-seekers who had been displaced from the Niger Delta by Shell Oil and the Government. They were in a unique situation, fleeing Nigeria after the year 2000, when Nigeria transformed from a military dictatorship to a “democracy” in name. It was a distinct challenge to receive refugee status when fleeing from a supposedly “democratic” nation-state, and with Nigeria having a strong economic stranglehold over Western Africa.

As a result, there were a lot of displaced Ogonis dwelling near refugee camps, in their own makeshift camps in Benin and other parts of West Africa. This particular leader and I collaborated together and received some funds through church groups around the Western Cape of South Africa and traveled together to carry out an educational project and community work with displaced Ogoni asylum-seekers in Benin. While there, I remember traveling to the capital of Benin to meet with a former ambassador to see if he could provide some support to the community. When I arrived at his gated entrance, and he came out and saw that I was White, the initial conversation shifted. In his eyes, because I was White and American I held a certain status and privilege. His response was mixed because I was a woman, so that was a distinct disadvantage, but that was trumped by being White and American. I realized over the course of our conversation that I was in this space of having certain access because of where I happened to be born and the color skin I happened to be born with; this innate privilege in our society of access granted, and that there were things I could do to leverage that privilege to better serve the people with whom I was working.

Remembering looking over my friend’s shoulder in South Carolina to this moment about a year later, I saw a connection of how there was potential to further my education leading to a position to be able to better support the kind of community work I was engaged in. And that took me down the path to public anthropology.

What Do You Think Is Your Greatest Professional Achievement?

I am raising two independent-minded, strong-willed young women. It might not be a professional achievement, but it's my greatest one!

I'm far from being the smartest person in the room or the most strategic, but I have created a pathway to work both inside and outside institutional structures and systems to better understand potential for affecting change. While living in Washington, D.C., I took employment at the World Bank, and then subsequently, the U.S. Global Change Research Program. I received a lot of negative feedback from some friends for working in "the belly of the beast" and that I was selling out through taking these positions.

Their perspective of, "well you're wasting energy, and we need to put everything into toppling this machine," did not account for the people trying to make the change from the inside and seeing that, "well, the machine isn't going to topple overnight." Both strategies are needed simultaneously—change created from within while also reimagining and creating just, equitable, and democratic transformations. I gained the perspective that to make transformative change, you need to have a deep, intimate understanding of what it is you're trying to change; spending some time understanding structures and institutions from the inside can make you more effective in trying to effect just, positive changes, and that it is not a dual dichotomy of inside vs. outside but there is a deeply complex and interwoven reality merging the two. You understand the minutiae of what's happening, the things that aren't making the headlines, that can often be what keeps the machine ticking and are what really needs to be deconstructed and transformed.

I learned that in some ways you can do both, be on both the inside and outside at the same time. I think my best day working at the [World] Bank was taking my badge off at lunch and going outside and protesting against the Bank, hoping my supervisor didn't notice me, and then putting my badge back on and going inside back to work. I think these experiences and perspective have made me more effective in my current work in the nonprofit sector to better understand some of the challenges and barriers we're up against, and how to work within the blurred spaces.

What Part of Your Work Are You Most Proud About Being Involved in?

The aspect I love most about my work is the privilege and responsibility of bringing people together from diverse knowledge systems and backgrounds and making networked connections between groups focused around relationship building. I appreciate that LiKEN, the organization for which I serve as an Associate Director, is a *link*-tank. People often pause when they hear me describe it, assuming I have said *think*-tank. We link people together across cultures, disciplines, geographies, and backgrounds, working together on evidence-based, policy-relevant action research. I witness collaborations and relationships develop over years between people who maybe would have never encountered each other, or who might have really diverging backgrounds and histories, and there is a lot of history and trauma and pain and healing to work through. To build the trust to even initiate such conversations takes a very, very long time and a lot of patience and radical empathy. You get to a point in the relationship building where the pain can come right out at the center and it is raw and unmasked and uncomfortable. Yet, that's where a lot of positive change can emerge, and continuing to listen and learn and work to heal and transform through collaborative partnerships. A lot of times, because of funding cycles and the way structures and institutions work, we aren't often allowed or privileged to get to that place of healing, or even initial relationship building steps. Being able to do this kind of work over time and facilitating building relationships between people and partners who create a whole new pathway together has been what I have enjoyed the most.

Were Those Relationships Difficult to Get Started?

Yes! It is like a giant boulder you are trying to slowly move up a mountain. And it's getting harder. That said, what's heartening is seeing more people, groups, and organizations coming together to form alliances and ally-ships, to support long-term relationship building and not being always confined to granting agencies' funding cycles. It's a slow shift, but I'm hopeful it will continue to move in a positive direction.

In Chapter Two of Your Book, You Mention That One of the Biggest Challenges of Anthropological Fieldwork Is Figuring Out How to Place One's Self. How Long Does it Normally Take You to Feel Situated and When Does Your Work Begin to Feel Complete?

To the second part of that question, I would say never. What I've enjoyed about the work I do is that it has been continuing. That can be frustrating to some people, to have no clear beginning or end, but I suppose that's why we do what we do, embracing the nonlinear process. I've been privileged to build relationships with people all over the world who, at the end of the day, are among the family I turn to. That does not come and go based on a project cycle. The work and relationships become interconnected, which also means it never quite feels complete or ends. Working on climate adaptation and actions is cyclical and ongoing, and to feel situated is very context dependent.

I often work in places where I'm brought in by a trusted source or specifically invited in, allowing the work to feel much less extractive and transactional, and more founded on community priorities. However, thinking about this from the context of being a student and perhaps considering your work in the future, it's important to know that this is a long process. What comes before any research is initiated is the often invisible work that is the heart of ethical research, the relationship and trust building.

It's a similar challenge of cross-disciplinary work. I work with a number of scientists and engineers, and work to shift their understanding of when the collaborative work begins. Actual data might not be generated for years, but we are starting the heart of the work on day one—and long before then to even get to the point of starting a project together—but you need a lot of that time to build trust and to understand the questions that are most important to the community engaged.

How Did You Originally Become Interested in the Tribes of Southern Louisiana? Was There a Specific Moment That Inspired You to Become Involved?

When I decided to continue from my Masters work to pursue a doctorate, my original intent was to return to Ouidah, Benin and work with the Ogoni community there with whom I had maintained a relationship. However, there was tremendous political violence around the Nigeria/Benin border at that time and in consultation with my graduate advisers, there were concerns that the work I was proposing to do—which would have entailed a lot of border crossing—was too risky for both me and those with whom I would be working.

Around this time I was becoming more concerned about issues around climate change and displacement, and outside of my graduate work, started working for the U.S. Global Change Research Program, specifically on the U.S. National Climate Assessment. Through that, I became more engaged in climate-related work and the intersection of climate change, development, and displacement. I started asking questions around what brings about broader environmental change, change being produced by development, climate, and political, economic, and historical processes. And I started looking closer to home, at least within the U.S.

Through a series of connections, I was put in touch with another anthropologist and researcher whose life-work was embedded in community engagement and organizing, and who had moved to southern Louisiana, having built long-standing relationships over years with communities there around disaster recovery processes. Building a relationship with her, she introduced me to local residents and community organizers and leaders. Being introduced through a trusted collaborator was vital.

My initial intent was not to focus solely on tribal communities in coastal Louisiana, and this is actually one of the shortcomings I see in my work, reminding folks that there are a lot of historic, place-based communities along the Gulf Coast that are

going through similar, albeit different, processes. But through the connections I made and the people I began engaging with, I worked specifically with tribal communities. Still living in DC at the time, I started making visits to southern Louisiana a few months before the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Disaster happened. This was key because after the spill happened, the community leaders and residents I'd started engaging with knew I wasn't there because of the spill. As you can imagine, researchers and journalists inundated the region and communities following the spill; but having initiated relationships before the spill, I was not perceived, by most at least, as doing the kind of helicoptering in. That was a big part that enabled the trust building, and not being another researcher swooping in, chasing the front-page news headlines, to extract information from the latest breaking news story.

As Dr. Schuller well knows from working in disaster and postdisaster contexts, sometimes there is support that can be provided through a research lens in a disaster situation, but it's also important to remember when it's an appropriate moment for research and when it's not, and that people's lived reality is not often based on one disaster outcome, but a continuity of atrocities over time leading to habitual, cascading disasters and outcomes. In my work in Louisiana I tried to not focus solely on one specific hurricane or one oil spill but that it's about this sweep of repeat disasters that continues to hit communities. This will become even more important in the context of our new climate future.

Would Federal Recognition Help These Groups Become Part of the Hurricane Protection Zone and What Other Methods Could People Use to Receive the Help That They Need?

That is a great question. In terms of helping them to be included in the hurricane protection, I'm not overly optimistic that federal recognition would enable that because it's not going to change the cost-benefit equation that's used to make the decision, when colonial agendas drive who and what counts as a "benefit." Saying that, it's important to remember that when we say the United States we think of

one country. How many sovereign nations are in the U.S.?

573 or 576 or something like that?

Yes, currently 574! That's critical to keep in mind because when you think about countries and governments negotiating for things like land rights, water rights, for healthcare. What's happening now under the Trump administration, for example, it was put forward to designate tribes as an ethnic group and by doing that it strips them of their sovereign rights. It strips them of their access to distinct health care and education and a lot of other benefits that they would—and rightfully should—otherwise receive. It strips them of reparations. This is really important because if you're the U.S. government and you're dealing with a federally recognized tribe, that's a government to government relationship that needs to be respected as such.

What Is the Process of Calculating the Displacement of People from Disasters? Is There One?

This gets tricky because doing this through census or survey and sampling and then extrapolating from the calculation—while providing a baseline understanding—does not account for actual shifts, for example, when you look at the difference in population movement along the shoreline of southern Louisiana post-Katrina. Some parishes (similar to a county) have notable changes in population where a lot of people have moved inland or moved away. Yet, in other parishes, people have moved closer to the coast. When calculations are made it doesn't account for any of the reasons why that might be happening. For example, a place like New Orleans which has seen a major shift in a loss of the black population and a tremendous increase in the white population. The statistics tell you the numerical difference. They don't tell you why that's happening, the violent structures, acts and policies enabling and pushing the shift, and what that means for the place or for the people who were forced out. And we know that most often the numbers put forward are grossly underestimated and do not account for indirect or

second-order effects or lasting impacts into the next generations. The numbers also do not account for why it is so important for Indigenous and other place-based populations to stay in place and protect where they live.

What Is One Thing About Climate Change That You Learned That You Would Want to Convey to the World?

I don't know if you remember that movie *Day After Tomorrow*? Think about the giant wave that comes and sweeps you off your feet. That became, for a bit and in some places, the public imagination of what climate change looks like. What can be hard to wrap our minds and imagination around is how subtle most of the impacts are, but yet so pervasive through the most critical parts of our lives. What happens when a river no longer flows where it once did, when fish are no longer available for human subsistence, sustenance, and ceremony, for other dependent species and relatives, to bring balance to the ecosystem? When plants used for medicines and spiritual healing are gone? When you think about these changes, it's not just a physical manifestation, it's very much a spiritual and emotional one—especially for people who are deeply connected to that place. As you see these changes shift, what does it mean? I remember a couple of years ago I was running in a place in the mountains I've gone to throughout my life; it has been *that* place for me. The place I went to grieve my brother's death, to celebrate getting married, to reflect on becoming a mother. I've always known the way based on how the creek flowed down from the base of the mountain and a pool of water that formed near a rock outcropping. It had been some time since I had been there—not since the extensive drought really took hold throughout California—and as I tried to make my way along, I realized I was lost. I could not find my way. Everything had dried up; there was no water to follow. I was lost in this place that I'd long known, which had been my refuge. And I had the good fortune of a home and shelter to return to, clean water and food to access, land beneath my

feet. I paused to wonder what this all meant for my children's future. And what I could do in response.

For Someone Who's Studying Anthropology and Wants to Go Into Anthropology in the Future, How Would You Convince Them That It's the Right Choice? How Did You Know That This Was the Right Choice for You?

You're saying that like I now know something . . . [laughter] . . . I currently teach in an environmental studies program, which is similar to anthropology in that it's not a very linear field of study, it's not "I'm studying this, so, therefore, I go do this." When I appreciate anthropology is when my work carries me far from anthropology land, I realize the distinct, particular view that anthropology offers in uncovering the root causes and injustices when looking at the system level, and how anthropological work, when done ethically and following appropriate protocols, can offer a lens at which to imagine a more just world. And so, for example, from a formal educational perspective, when you go to law school, you're taught a certain lens to view, interpret, and understand the world. If you go through business school, you're taught a different lens through which to see the world. An anthropological lens can provide a way to view a system's approach, and a holistic look at a problem. Considering work on climate adaptation and actions, much of this is done in isolation in a siloed approach. If you do not include nonclimatic stressors such as colonial legacies, historical violences and traumas, continued racism and sexism, and unsustainable development practices that intersect with and exacerbate the climatic stressor like sea-level rise or rising air temperatures, you will likely not achieve the expected outcome and could be planning for a skewed, partial reality. Human and natural systems are innately and intimately coupled, unlike the manifested separation produced in the modern capitalist-driven paradigm. Keep in mind

that whatever you go out and do, you have been trained through a specific lens, a way to view the world, and to listen actively and give attention to what is going on around you.

Do You Have Any Final Advice for Students?

Show up for what you believe in, vote for what you believe in, join movements working for socially just transformation. Listen and learn from those who hold generational knowledge and wisdom and personal experience of advocating for justice. The road is long and winding. You will make mistakes along the way. Ask for forgiveness. It is your choice of how you learn from these mistakes, and continue to show up to work toward a more sustainable, just world. Keep on.

As Maldonado's experience highlights, an anthropological imagination highlights connections between what often seem disparate, particular local issues. Reviving W. E. B. Du Bois' vision articulated in the *Talented Tenth* might be useful precisely now: "I insist that the object of all true education is not to make men carpenters, it is to make carpenters men." Published two generations before the second wave of feminism, the gendered language needs updating. The larger point remains that universities *can* be sites for encounter, for coming together, for debating and identifying coalitional solutions, and then educating and mobilizing the public.

However, in their current form, universities are far from ideal. They, and particularly under-funded public universities, reinforce the inequalities and injustices within society at large. In order to fulfill this promise and potential, we need to dismantle the ivory tower, reimagining and rearticulating an alternative university in defense of the public, of humanity. Anthropology in particular needs to continue what Jaskiran Dhillon (2018) called "cleaning house from within." As Faye Harrison (2010/1991) implored 25 years before Trump's election, anthropology needs to be decolonized, and continue its self-critique. Anthropologists who believe in liberation need to change the rules of the game, to support engagement with the public and build synergies with organizing. In addition to actually practicing reciprocity, we need to build collaborative relationships and structures of accountability.

Accountability to marginalized individuals and communities is key to dismantling the ivory tower. It

requires changes to the reward structures, and transformative, radical reciprocity behind a true spirit of community collaboration. Specifically:

- Today's urgent world problems require intentional collaborations of activists bridging "town and gown."
- Resources of the university need to be defended as public goods and shared equitably among students and communities, particularly marginalized groups.
- Particularly public universities should fulfill their role as spaces of encounter and discussion, deliberating on the urgent issues facing communities, identifying solutions, and then training and mobilizing communities.
- Organizing offers potential synergy with an anthropological imagination dedicated to human liberation.
- Before any of this is possible, individuals within the university need to divest ourselves of internalized capitalist, colonialist, racist logics of inequality. Particularly those most privileged within the system need to do the necessary work to own—and then dismantle—our privilege.
- Decolonization must always be accompanied by action, to change the institutional structures and rules of the game. Simply acknowledging whose stolen land your university sits upon, for example, is far from enough. It should be accompanied by real, concrete action to redress dispossession.
- Activist and community partners need to be co-creators of knowledge, having a say in crafting the research agenda, process and outcomes, and empowered to call professors out keeping them accountable (Schuller, 2021).

Notes

1. Interviewed and transcribed by: Lacey Benedeck, Evan Blankenberger, Halle Boddy, Ardyn Cieslak, Christine Jenkins, and Katelyn Kramer

2. **Dr. Julie Maldonado** (Ph.D., anthropology, American University) is the Associate Director for the *Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Network (LiKEN)*, a nonprofit, link-tank for policy-relevant research toward postcarbon livelihoods and communities. In this

capacity, she serves as Co-Director of *Rising Voices: Climate Resilience through Indigenous and Earth Sciences*, a program that facilitates intercultural approaches for understanding and adapting to extreme weather and climate events, variability, and change, and is the executive producer of the Paper Rocket Productions film, *PROTECT*, to be released by LiKEN in 2020. She works with the Institute for Tribal Environmental Professionals as an instructor and facilitator to support tribes' climate change adaptation planning. Dr. Maldonado is also a lecturer in the University of California-Santa Barbara's Environmental Studies Program. As a public anthropologist, Julie has been consulted for the United Nations Development Programme and World Bank on resettlement, postdisaster needs assessments, and climate change. She worked for the U.S. Global Change Research Program and is an author on the 3rd and 4th US National Climate Assessments. Her recent book, *Seeking Justice in an Energy Sacrifice Zone: Standing on Vanishing Land in Coastal Louisiana*, emerged from years of collaborative work with Tribal communities in coastal Louisiana experiencing and responding to repeat disasters and climate chaos. The book was released in 2018, shortly before the release of her co-edited volume, *Challenging the Prevailing Paradigm of Displacement and Resettlement: Risks, Impoverishment, Legacies, Solutions*.

3. **Lacey Benedeck, Halle Boddy, and Katelyn Kramer** are Nonprofit and NGO Studies majors;

Evan Blankenberger is an Anthropology/Global Studies/Political Science major; **Ardyn Cieslak** is a Sociology and Anthropology major; and **Christine Jenkins** is a Business Administration and Political Science major at Northern Illinois University.

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