

# SONDRA HALE'S ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTABILITY

NADINE NABER



I have tried to position the research in relation to my long personal history in Sudan and to my equally long and problematic academic connection with anthropology. I have come to recognize that my complex personal, ethical, and methodological dilemmas are the product of shifting paradigms and ideologies.... My purpose is to examine some of my long-standing dilemmas, which have been not only academic and political but also ethical and personal.... (*Hale 1997, 8 – 9*)

To me, accountability means not only being accountable to the people with whom we are working, in terms of moral values, ethics, politics, honesty, and sharing one's work, but it also means being accountable to oneself—that is, being true to one's own moral values, ethics, and politics. (*Sondra Hale, personal communication, 2013*)

I first read Sondra Hale's ethnographic writing in the late 1990s, around the same time I was beginning the research for my book, *Arab America: Gender, Cultural Politics, and Activism* (Naber 2012). Over the years, Hale has served as a feminist-scholar-activist mentor to me. I have been thinking about how Hale's methodological commitments speak to two interrelated problems that often haunt social justice-based ethnographers working within the academy: 1) If ethnography reproduces colonial forms of power and knowledge, what are the possibilities for using ethnography as a de-colonizing tool? 2) If U.S.-based universities increasingly function to serve the neoliberal enterprise, then what are the possibilities for political dissent from within the university?

While critical scholarship has existed in anthropology, it has done so in tension with dominant strands of the institution that remain tied up in colonial forms of knowledge (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). More

recently, some strands of anthropology have aligned more explicitly with the military and intelligence agencies of the post-September 11 War on Terror—from embedded, militarized research teams to new secretive Central Intelligence Agency-linked fellowship programs that infiltrating U.S. universities, to the use of anthropological research in counter-insurgency manuals and paramilitary social science units (Price 2011). In its course offerings, publications, and graduate training, a great deal of U.S.-based anthropology seems to focus less and less on self-critique, the imbalances of power constituting the ethnographic method, and the meaning of social justice-based anthropology. Contributing to these problems is perhaps the dominant assumption within the field that there is no longer a need for such discussions since anthropology has already undergone a major political transformation beginning with 1960s activist anthropology and culminating in the 1990s with poststructuralist and post-colonial critique.

Within this context, Hale's critical approaches to anthropology provide many of my academic peers and me with a road map for preserving and advancing the tactic of anthropological self-critique and the commitment to de-colonizing ethnography within the confines of the academic industrial complex (Del Gandio 2010). Consider for instance how Hale has developed ethnographic methods that centralize the inter-related practices of political critique and activism, accountability and alliance building, and anthropological self-critique. Hale has practiced accountability beyond the conventional ethnographic commitment to one's research participants' individual needs and toward community-based agendas for social justice and self-determination. For instance, her own research centralizes political struggles that are profoundly relevant to her interlocutors' lives, and her publications offer local, national, and transnational analyses of both deeply intimate and structural-systemic dilemmas and problems such as state violence, militarism, patriarchy, classism, and racism. Hale also remains consistently accountable to the critical scholarship that has been written by her interlocutors and by Africa-based scholars more generally. By centering anti-colonial, de-colonizing, and post-colonial African studies frameworks in her own work and sustaining long-term relationships with scholars from within African contexts, Hale's work exemplifies the possible alternatives to the dominant practices in U.S.-based area studies—practices that often

overlook the critiques and research paradigms emerging out of the very context about which one is writing.

Unlike the typical leftist armchair professor asserting radicalism from the ivory tower, Hale developed her critical methodological practices out of fifty-two years of scholarly and political engagement, in addition to seven years of residence in Sudan. Hale once told me she hated the term “ethnography” because she did not perceive Sudanese as her anthropological Others, nor did she perceive herself as “someone going to make a profession out of Sudan.”

Putting the feminist critique of anthropological objectivity into practice, Hale boldly asserted the methodology of positionality. With the Sudanese, Hale built friendships and endured political struggles together against colonial, class, sexist, religious, racist, ethnic, and regional prejudices and oppression. She participated in women’s movements, working-class movements, and struggles of religious minorities or marginalized secular people. Refusing to self-identify as an “objective observer,” Hale took stances with or against political groups, offered her home as a “safe house,” served as a “mouthpiece” for Sudanese in criticizing their government, and built academic structures and support systems to make the participation of Sudanese in academic knowledge-making and the sharing of academic knowledge between the ivory tower and Sudanese communities possible.

For Hale, positionality has also entailed a consistent acknowledgement of the ways the U.S. state and corporate media have been complicit in a great deal of the violence facing the Arab, Muslim, and North African regions. She centralized this transnational analyses in her scholarly analyses, her political work, and the ways she has interacted with Arab, Muslim, and North African people more generally. In addition to practicing these alternatives to ethnographic approaches that reify the binary between the liberal-outsider-savior-researcher vs. the helpless-Third World-victim-research subject, Hale has used the privileged status she receives as “American university professor” on the world stage to advance struggles for dignity and self-determination for her interlocutors. Exemplifying how scholars can work as political allies, she has intervened, taken a stance, and challenged existing scholarship that represents Sudan and Sudanese people through colonialist lenses. Consider, for instance, her writings and lectures on the problems within

U.S. and European scholarship that reinforce colonial structures in its treatment of female circumcision. This research practice, which I would simply call “having your back,” entails not only extracting knowledge and information from one’s interlocutors but also mobilizing political analysis or action in support of interlocutors when they are under attack, assuring your interlocutors that you are standing by their side and will stand up for them, doing what you can to make sure they are making it through difficult times and are safe, and watching what may come from behind them while they are looking ahead.

The practice of self-criticism has also been crucial to Hale’s methods. Her newer work interrogates her older work, not only in public but collectively, with her interlocutors. She has continuously and systematically acknowledged working against her earlier ethnocentrism and white American privilege and the subtle forms of racism, such as romanticizing Sudanese people, that she had to work toward abandoning. Anyone who has heard Hale’s public lectures might remember thinking critically about her own work as she delivers it and continuously holding herself accountable—which means that she is willing to put in extensive labor toward stepping back to challenge and change herself.

For Hale, cultivating this relationship between research and community accountability and between political critique, political alliance, and self-critique has been decades in the making. She is not the researcher seeking to liberate herself from colonial anxieties or white guilt by writing a one-time report about her interviewees and mailing it to them after researching with them for years. She is the scholar who advocates and struggles in the university and on the streets, in Sudan and at home—as an activist, mentor, professor, community advocate, and program builder. She is the scholar who brings her commitments to the Arab, North African, and Muslim regions into her own everyday life-work and relations in the United States. Long before support for Palestinian self-determination became popular among U.S. progressive academics, Hale was one of the few U.S.-based professors who insisted that progressive U.S. academics apply the same principals of social justice to Palestine as they would to other political concerns—such as immigrant rights, ending war and racism, gender justice, and anti-Semitism.

To me, Hale has been a scholarly mentor supporting junior Arab, Muslim, and North African women scholars, among others, and an ally

working among radical Arab women's movements in the United States—an ally who was not interested in “leading” us or speaking on our behalf and who has been willing to face similar political risks and outcomes as those from which Arab, Muslim, and North African social justice activists in the United States cannot run or hide. Thank you, Sondra Hale, for helping to pave the way for critical transnational feminist ethnography and for always having my back.

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