

## Alternative and Activist Conceptions of Work from the Individual to the Organizational

### Introduction

These papers are connected by the concept of work. While the authors address distinct issues at different scales, all look at how people navigate inequalities, understand themselves as (dis)'empowered,' and address inequalities through work. Each author conceives of their own, anthropological work as engaged or activist, alongside the situations they discuss. Jennifer Ayres focuses on the secondary markets of two thrift stores, both of which are dedicated to confronting HIV/AIDS. She notes, however, that the aesthetics of each store provide divergent contexts and opportunities for envisioning and engaging in HIV/AIDS activism. Claudia Cojocaru compares the multiple ways women's sexual behavior in Japan is defined and marked by outsiders such as policy makers and activists. She suggests that the ascription of "victim" to women in sex trade is often hasty and arbitrary insofar as women themselves understand their work differently. Sarah Fessenden compares the anarchist-inspired work of Food Not Bombs to other charitable organizations in their approaches to hunger. Siobhán McGuirk assesses NGOs' ascription of "doubly marginalized" to LGBT asylum seekers, looking at the roots and consequences of this labeling. Together, these papers shift back and forth from organizational to individual ideas and practices about "work." Ayres and Fessenden explicitly engage with activist organizations and analyze their strategies for working with informal and secondary markets to affect social and political change. Conversely, Cojocaru and McGuirk focus on the contrast between organizationally imposed definitions and how people choose to represent themselves. All pay critical attention to pressing concerns, including HIV/AIDS, sex trafficking, hunger, and immigration rights. Through the authors' innovative engagement with the concept of work, this panel examines how serious social issues are envisioned – and how they might be more effectively confronted.

### Abstracts

#### *Competing Visions of Economic Justice: A Tale of Two Thrift Stores*

Jennifer Ayres

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Drawing from six months of participant observation and volunteer work, this essay analyzes the distinct aesthetics, culture, and store practices of two unique thrift stores committed to ending the HIV/AIDS crisis in New York City and Philadelphia. The two thrift stores are different in terms of location, age, and scale: one organization I call **Chic Goods**, was founded in 1995 and has over ten stores throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn, while the other organization I call **Kitsch Thrift** was founded in 2005 and is a local community institution in Philadelphia that is smaller in scale, with only one other retail venture. Emerging from 1980s-1990s grassroots urban social movements to fight AIDS, the two thrift stores have developed different strategies and taken divergent paths. Chic Goods has incorporated the "Silence = Death" logo into their very own organization's logo, which would suggest a sort of upfront activism about their identity and political project, but beyond that there is little aesthetically in the stores themselves that tie the stores to LGBTQ politics. The upscale and impeccably designed interiors of Chic Goods helps it avoid being identified as a LGBTQ space or even a thrift store—these identifications are obscured through the aesthetic management of its stores that closely resembles any other hip Soho or high-

end New York fashion boutique. Kitsch Thrift's aesthetics, on the other hand, are intentionally campy in order to accommodate a heterogeneous social space in which many diverse personal affinities, identities, and political projects may emerge.

Although both thrift stores have similar goals and missions, economic justice looks very different in practice. I argue that aesthetics are used to shape the spaces of the thrift store according to the priorities of each organization. I analyze how the corporate culture or funky camp aesthetics of the spaces shape the possible interactions: the small scale is welcoming and almost seems to double as a community space where people can linger and hang out, while the upscale thrift stores make socializing almost impossible because streamlined aesthetics direct customers to move through the store in an efficient and highly rationalized way (i.e. an Ikea maze). While the refined aesthetics of Chic Goods are implicitly exclusive, the high cost of merchandise is also prohibitive to the working class and poor. Kitsch Thrift's tongue-in-cheek camp is inclusive and their dedicated retail space to "\$1 Land" clothing room, "\$1 Jewelry Land", free bins outside of constantly rotating goods, and monthly "\$1 Heaven" sales that take up an entire floor is approachable and accessible to anyone. These aesthetics have real material ramifications for marginalized people who depend on the thrift stores for political sanctuary, community, and access to consumer goods. I suggest that it is the differences in scale that produces these stark contrasts in how aid for AIDS as a social and political cause is conceptualized, administered, and delivered.

Brief introduction to Jen Ayres:

Jen Ayres is a fourth year American Studies PhD student in the department of Social and Cultural Analysis at NYU. As a lifelong thrifter and hoarder, her research investigates exchange and the production of value for vintage and secondhand clothes. In 2008 she earned her BA in Women and Gender Studies at the University of California Davis. That same year she opened up a vintage shop with her sister that ran successfully for six years until her sister closed the brick and mortar store and now maintains it as an Etsy shop. In 2011 she earned her MA in Apparel Design at Cornell University. Her thesis explored Goodwill Outlet thrift stores and the role these stores played as post-industrial worksites and community spaces in an evolving transnational and global trade of used goods. Currently, her research examines the secondhand clothing trade and the different stratified sites that comprise this alternative economic and aesthetic system. From flea markets, thrift stores, buy-sell-trade boutiques, and high-brow vintage archives, she analyzes the logic that organizes how each site values and prices used clothes and fashion competitively for a world market.

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*Commodification of Sex, Agency and the Coercion Consent Spectrum*

Claudia Cojocar

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Debates about how coercion, consent and agency are defined when it comes to sexuality, sexual labor and other aspects of women's sexual activities are central to humanitarian initiatives, social policies construction and victimhood discourse. In their efforts to administer these definitions feminists, lawmakers, social services agencies and communities struggle with

these constructs and with the way their attribution affect women's choices and lives. The targets of these definitions harbor different and at times, surprising attitudes and interpretations of their own position regarding consent, coercion and agency and refute the abstract categorization of victim, in which their life choices and experiences are arbitrarily forced. This paper provides a comparison of several definitions of coercion, consent and agency within the interpretation context from the point of view of voluntary and trafficked sex workers in Japan between 1998 and 2004, and is based on an analysis of ethnographic observations and personal experience in the Japanese and Romanian sex industry in the same time frame. This paper aims to provide the results of this intimate ethnography as a factor to consider in enunciation of these definitions and policy construction to better understand and serve women's needs and social standing.

Brief introduction to Claudia Cojocaru:

Claudia received her BA in Forensic Psychology at John Jay College. She is now an MA student in the Criminal Justice School at Rutgers University. "She is an ethnographer, researcher, writer and activist whose identities are complex and intertwined. She has walked the tightrope of trafficked forced sex worker in Romania and Japan from 1997 to 1999, and became an underground humanitarian worker while professing as a migrant hostess in the Japanese mizushiyoubai between 1999 and 2006. Her work as outreach and recovery specialist in Japanese underground sex industry, offering options like shelter, basic needs, protection, relocation and even repatriation to women of various cultural and national backgrounds, whose circumstances varied from trafficked for sexual labor to willing sex workers whose contracts and work environments proved unsatisfactory and violent, was as rewarding as it was dangerous. Her own lived experiences of degradation and survival inspired the work she has done without any support from institutionalized agents. As an independent actor within the humanitarian outreach work and social space and as she is becoming a researcher and ethnographer, Claudia's rich and rather unconventional experiences on both sides of the dominant cultural and social discourse afford her unique expertise on perspectives such as sex trafficking, labor migration, women rights and empowerment, sex work, anti-trafficking industrial complex, international human rights, abolitionist discourse, media, neo-liberal hegemonic discourse, exploitative humanitarianism, social movements and revitalization movements. From the vantage point of intersecting identities and lived experiences as a former victim of sexual exploitation and domestic violence, national and transnational trafficked individual, migrant woman, former sex worker, to writer, humanitarian outreach worker, ethnographer, activist, researcher and artist, Claudia's identities form a core personality whose sustenance depends on how she can help, empower and lift others, and gives a new meaning to the powerful concept of survivor."

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*"Solidarity not charity": Activist anthropology with Food Not Bombs and counter domination tactics in a globalizing world*

Sarah Fessenden

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Participating and researching with a global anarchist-inspired activist project, Food Not Bombs (FNB), over the last six years I have confronted inequality particularly vis-à-vis food and hunger. Within and against their (often privileged) positions, FNB participants draw on anarchist logics to subvert existing systems of domination while creating new, more egalitarian practices.

Acknowledging everyday experiences of inequality such as hunger as well as the systems that perpetuate these injustices, FNB uses direct action tactics to both ease these moments of suffering and critique systems that cause oppression in a globalizing world. In order to confront oppression while resisting new forms of domination, FNB participants distribute food in such a way as to exhibit solidarity (horizontality), not charity (verticality). This paper draws on research and participation with FNB Vancouver in their weekly food distributions and protest actions; it looks at the potential for “solidarity not charity” from the (inter)personal experience of privilege as well as the organizational practice of direct action. First, I suggest that “solidarity” is not aimed at erasing lines of difference but at negotiating allied relationships. Second, I argue that FNB’s belief in and practice of “solidarity not charity” should be distinguished from vertical organization in movements of ‘globalization from below.’ Finally, I propose that FNB’s horizontal organizing and tactical counter domination confronts forms of oppression that are encountered both as structural injustices (e.g. systemic poverty) and in moments of everyday life (e.g. daily experience of hunger).

Brief introduction to Sarah Fessenden:

Sarah Fessenden is a Ph.D. Candidate in Socio-Cultural Anthropology at the University of British Columbia. She completed her MA Cultural Anthropology at California State University Long Beach in 2011, conducting research with anarcho-punk squatters engaged in activist food distribution in Barcelona, Spain. Her primary research interests include ethnography of direct action, urban anthropology, food(-waste), ‘public’ space, and anti-capitalist and autonomous forms of production and exchange. Theoretically, she is inspired by anarchism, feminism, marxist political economy, and anthropologies of materiality that integrate space, affect, and moral-aesthetics. Currently, she is conducting research aimed at understanding the work of an activist project, Food Not Bombs (FNB), which practically asserts food is a right and not a privilege. Over the last six years both participating as a volunteer and researching with Food Not Bombs in California, Spain, Pennsylvania, and British Columbia, she has observed several themes. Through participation with food recovery in dumpsters, she sees how much edible food is wasted. At cooking events, she is exposed to activist ideas and other radical projects. At food distributions, she encounters individuals and families experiencing serious hunger and housing insecurity. Finally, at protest actions she engages with activists “on the ground”—or, rather, in the streets—to ideologically and physically oppose multiple intersecting forms of oppression.

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*NGOs and the construction of LGBT asylum seekers as exceptionally deserving immigrants*

Siobhán McGuirk

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Over the past decade, pockets of activists across the United States have founded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to support and advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans\* (LGBT) asylum seekers. Many of these organizations are local, volunteer-run and small-scale, providing resources to only handfuls of people at a time. In their fundraising literature and info sheets, these NGOs frequently emphasize the exceptional nature of LGBT asylum seekers’ suffering and need, differentiating them from other, non-LGBT asylum claimants as “doubly marginalized” and “extremely vulnerable.” In this paper, I examine the ideological basis and

unintended consequences of these discursive practices. While recognizing the pernicious nature of transphobic and homophobic persecution, I argue that LGBT asylum seeker advocacy efforts often bolster dominant, liberal categorizations of deserving migrants and acceptable behaviors. I base my argument on ethnographic data collected over fourteen months at LGBT asylum-support NGOs in three US states: Massachusetts, California, and Washington DC. I consider NGO volunteers' motivations, noting their emphasis on global LGBT kinship as inspiring them to this work, coupled with the desire to help others in need. I first demonstrate how these ideas serve to regulate the behavior of asylum seekers receiving NGO support. I then note how NGOs' understandings of certain diaspora communities as inherently homophobic can undermine efforts towards solidarity between immigrant rights campaigns. Finally, I reflect on the obligation of anthropologists working on the ground to continue engaging constructively with well-intentioned advocacy efforts, even despite their negative outcomes.

Brief introduction to Siobhán McGuirk:

Siobhán McGuirk is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Anthropology American University. She received her BA and MA in Visual Anthropology from the University of Manchester. Prior to undertaking her PhD, Siobhan worked as a freelance filmmaker and journalist. Her current research focuses on sexuality and migration, in particular how LGBTQ-identified asylum seekers navigate life in the US, both with and without NGO support. In her research she examines the discursive construction of 'deserving' immigrants and acceptable sexual subjectivities. Current non-academic writing activities include co-authoring a Best Practices Guide for groups working with LGBTQ-identified immigrant populations and working as a Commissioning Editor for Red Pepper magazine.