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Fighting Foreclosure in the Bay Area and Beyond: SUNTA'S Conversation with Housing Activist Jesse Trepper ; By Elizabeth Youngling

On November 16, 2012, the Society for Urban, National, and Transnational/Global Anthropology (SUNTA) hosted its annual community interlocutor session at the American Anthropological Association meetings in San Francisco. With these sessions, SUNTA considers issues relevant to the meetings' host city by inviting a local non-anthropologist to join us in conversation. We held the 2012 session, "*A Conversation with Bay Area Housing Activist Jesse Trepper,*" as a roundtable to promote open dialogue. This format gave six anthropologists a chance to share their research on housing and activism in their field sites with our community interlocutor, Ms. Trepper, who discussed some of the challenges and successes of her work fighting foreclosures and evictions in the Bay Area. Given the extent of the mortgage crisis in California and the wellspring of protests against foreclosure in the Bay Area, we were confident that this was a timely topic for people living in and around San Francisco and that it would be of interest to anthropologists as well.

Ms. Trepper participates in housing activism through Foreclosure and Eviction Free Oakland, the East Bay Solidarity Network, and the Occupy Oakland Foreclosure Defense Group. She was involved in Occupy Oakland in its early days, and still collaborates with Occupy members, but much of her current work focuses on neighborhood-based foreclosure and eviction prevention in West Oakland. During the roundtable, Ms. Trepper described her efforts as an activist to turn the momentum of the broader Occupy movement into locally meaningful change. She sees the mortgage crisis as a site of political, racial, and socioeconomic inequality and foreclosure as a community problem, not just an

individual concern. The groups with whom she works use a variety of direct action tactics to highlight the crisis's structural dimensions. In preventing foreclosure, they seek to build solidarity for fights against other forms of inequality as well.

Catherine Fennell, Susan Greenbaum, Edward Murphy, James Holston, and I were the anthropologists on the roundtable, although many audience members also contributed. Dr. Fennell opened our conversation with an overview of housing policy and home foreclosure in the United States, and later drew on her own work on public housing reform in Chicago. Dr. Greenbaum shared her impressions of the mortgage crisis in Florida, her home state and frequent field site. Like California, Florida has been hard hit by foreclosure. But activist groups such as Occupy have not found a foothold, and the political climate is such that many homeowners are too ashamed to protest against their lenders. Dr. Murphy drew on his ethnographic and archival work on the formalization of land rights for poor Chileans under the Pinochet dictatorship. There, as in the U.S., pro-homeownership policies were not neutral, but linked to Chicago School Economics and anti-Socialism. Dr. Holston reflected on the conditions of possibility for a more progressive approach to housing, reminding us of the 1930s eviction strikes in U.S. cities led by a then-strong American Communist Party. Finally, I shared some of my preliminary findings on community responses to foreclosure in Chicago and in the Bay Area, where varied housing histories, racial and class dynamics, and activism styles result in divergent approaches to home loss.

Reflecting back on our conversation, I am reminded of the value of ethnographic, regional, and historical comparison in understanding complex issues such as foreclosure. Clearly, increasing homeownership does not end housing inequality. Sometimes, it

perpetuates it. Yet how can that knowledge be used, given the historical links among homeownership, social class, and race in the United States? As anthropologists, we work, largely individually, to grasp the specificity of a particular place, group of people, and set of circumstances in a given moment and convey that to our audiences. But we enrich our understanding through comparison and collaboration—not just with other academics in our field, but also with the activists, intellectuals, and visionaries in our midst. If we do work that reflects and is responsive to the people and places we study, those outside of anthropology can also benefit from working with us.

The SUNTA Board welcomes suggestions from its members for a non-anthropologist community interlocutor for our next meeting in Chicago, and hopes that the sessions continue to be a high point in meetings to come.

*\*If you have an idea for a SUNTA Anthropology News Column – news and views, reports from the field, and book reviews welcome, please contact Susan Falls at [sfalls@scad.edu](mailto:sfalls@scad.edu)*