

CASE STUDY

## How to Do Accompaniment

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### Abstract

This essay examines the integration of accompaniment methodology with public humanities and policy work through case studies from activist research in New Orleans. The concept of accompaniment involves providing active, supportive engagement alongside marginalized communities to address systemic barriers and foster mutual understandings. This essay highlights how accompaniment can provide support in navigating bureaucratic challenges and inform immigration policy. It also explores how accompaniment can inform public humanities work, like the development of a digital timeline and physical exhibition documenting Black labor history in New Orleans. This approach underscores the transformative potential of combining accompaniment with public humanities to enhance community empowerment, inform policy, and challenge systemic inequities. By engaging with community experiences and integrating insights from both historical and contemporary struggles, this essay chronicles the development of accompaniment methodology and shows how this approach can enrich public humanities scholarship and policy work, creating more inclusive and responsive solutions to social challenges. Accompaniment serves as a vital tool for bridging academic inquiry with social justice, making public humanities research more relevant, ethical, equitable, and impactful.

**Keywords:** accompaniment; activist research; ethnography; immigration; labor

I first encountered the term “accompaniment” (or “*acompañando*”) at the 2016 Global Studies Association conference: “Crossing Borders: People, Capital, Culture.” During Alfonso Gonzales’s keynote, “*Derechos en Crisis: Mexican and Central American Asylum Claims in the Age of Authoritarian Neoliberalism*,” he advocated for migration scholars to adopt the accompaniment methodology. He argued that, paired with ethnography, this approach provides deeper insights into immigrants’ experiences navigating systems such as U.S. refugee policy.

At that moment, I realized I had been unknowingly practicing accompaniment methodology as part of my activist work with the New Orleans Worker Center for Racial Justice (Worker Center). Founded in 2006 to address injustices in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Worker Center unites three groups: the Congress of Day Laborers, Stand with

Dignity (a Black-led working-class organization), and the National Guestworker Alliance. Its mission was to build multiracial worker power to tackle civil, labor, and immigrant rights abuses in the city. From 2011 to 2017, as I finished my doctoral work at Tulane University, I primarily worked with the Congress of Day Laborers while also occasionally supporting the other two groups. As a white, queer burgeoning activist scholar who speaks Spanish, I wanted to leverage my positionality and privilege to support workers' rights in the city.<sup>1</sup>

When I returned to New Orleans after the conference, Chloe Sigal, an organizer with the Worker Center, used the same language of “accompaniment” to emphasize a need for volunteers to go with day laborers and their families to ICE check-ins and immigration court. She also gave a name to the approach I was already engaged in. As she called it, “*acompañando*,” provided logistical support for immigrants while also offering broader insights into their experiences navigating exclusionary systems.

### I. Defining accompaniment

Accompaniment began as a theological concept reflecting a commitment to marginalized communities, with roots in Liberation Theology particularly the work of theologians like Gustavo Gutiérrez and Oscar Romero.<sup>2</sup> Advancing into more secular fields, anthropologist and physician Paul Farmer's adaptation of accompaniment involves continuous, holistic engagement with those facing health and social challenges. This method addresses not just individual symptoms but the broader structural violence, reflecting a commitment to justice and solidarity.<sup>3</sup>

Accompaniment has evolved into a versatile methodology, emphasizing shared experiences between researchers and community members. Adams et al. define accompaniment as “researchers from mainstream academic settings travel to colonized, racialized, or otherwise marginal communities to lend expertise and work alongside local inhabitants in struggles for social justice.”<sup>4</sup> The labor activist Staughton Lynd argues, “‘Accompaniment’ is simply the idea of walking side by side with another on a common journey. The idea is that when a university-trained person undertakes to walk beside someone rich in experience but lacking formal skills, each contributes something to the process. ‘Accompaniment’ thus understood presupposes no uncritical deference, but equality.”<sup>5</sup>

In their collaborative work, Barbara Tomlinson and George Lipsitz explicitly call on American Studies scholars to engage in more direct and practical application of research with communities. They describe accompaniment as “asking and answering questions important to the increasing numbers of displaceable, disposable, and deportable people in this society.” They urge scholars to engage with individuals in social movement organizations to “respond honestly and honorably to the indignities and injustices we see.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pulido 2008, 341–45.

<sup>2</sup> Nicholson 2021, 281–83.

<sup>3</sup> Kleinman 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Adams et al. 2015, 226.

<sup>5</sup> Lynd 2010, 21; Risen 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Tomlinson and Lipsitz 2013, 12.

Addressing the power dynamics of this work, psychologist Mary Watkins explores accompaniment and mutual aid, cautioning that “efforts at accompaniment can easily go awry if the colonial framework of ‘helping,’ ‘charity,’ and ‘being of service’ are not thematized and deconstructed.”<sup>7</sup> Watkins warns that accompaniment needs to be grounded horizontality and efforts can go amiss if they aren’t critically examined through the lens of the colonial frameworks of (white) savior complexes. By acknowledging one’s own positionality and inherent power dynamics, researchers can better navigate these challenges, ensuring that their work supports collaboration and empowerment rather than reproducing racial inequalities.

These perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of accompaniment across disciplines, emphasizing that effective accompaniment requires reciprocal relationships and a commitment to addressing systemic issues. In this process, researchers learn to take cues from people most impacted by these issues, making the research more responsive and inclusive. Instead of imposing outsider perspective and research questions, which might fill gaps in scholarship but not reflect the community’s needs, the focus should be on aligning with what is significant to those involved.<sup>8</sup>

Accompaniment can be seen as a method in public humanities because it deeply engages with communities and brings academic research into real-world contexts. At its core, public humanities connect scholarly work with the broader public, making it relevant, accessible, and impactful. Through this approach, scholars aren’t just observers; they actively participate in the lives of those they accompany, building trust and co-creating knowledge that reflects the community’s experiences. It’s a step beyond participant observation by actively engaging with community members to address their needs and support their interests. And, unlike charrettes and focus groups, which can be brief and compulsory with a focus on generating ideas, accompaniment prioritizes long-term, supportive relationships and immersive engagement to understand the nuanced, everyday realities of communities.

In this sense, accompaniment aligns with the public humanities’ commitment to ethical engagement and social justice.<sup>9</sup> In her essay, “Why Public Humanities,” Susan Smulyan calls for a focus on social and racial justice which parallels accompaniment’s commitment to addressing inequality through supportive, engaged relationships. Each approach seeks to transform traditional scholarship by integrating community voices and experiences, highlighting a shared goal of redefining academic practices to prioritize meaningful, collaborative partnerships. Both are process-centered.<sup>10</sup>

By working alongside communities, researchers doing accompaniment help to center voices that go unheard and bring archives to life, making academic research relevant and turning it into a tool for education, reflection, and action. This approach aligns with key scholars like Judith Butler who argues that the humanities have a crucial role in demonstrating their distinct value by engaging with the public and “illuminating” humanities work beyond the traditional canon. By redefining the role of the humanities both within and outside the university, Butler challenges the neoliberal expectations that prioritize market-driven outcomes and efficiency over critical inquiry and social impact. Butler also shows the

<sup>7</sup> Watkins 2019, 168.

<sup>8</sup> Academic research and accompaniment informed policy/public humanities work can happen in tandem where the researcher is also gathering fieldwork for an academic project. I used ethnographic fieldwork while doing accompaniment for my monograph. See Fouts 2025.

<sup>9</sup> Smulyan 2020, 1–12.

<sup>10</sup> Smulyan 2022, 124–37.

importance of the humanities in envisioning a more equitable future.<sup>11</sup> This forward-thinking approach aligns with social justice goals by critiquing existing systems of power and inequality while imagining and working toward more just and sustainable futures. They emphasize the importance of critically reflecting on societal structures and proposing alternative visions.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Watkins argues, “Disempowerment of community members prevails, when outsiders’ ‘solutions’ are imposed without any knowledge of the particular site they are being applied.”<sup>13</sup> This reflects Paolo Freire’s distinction between cultural invasion and cultural synthesis: the former imposes external interpretations and interventions, whereas the latter involves learning from and directly with the community.<sup>14</sup> Thus, accompaniment methodology is central to this process because it involves those most affected in shaping and implementing these alternative futures. Accompaniment integrated with public humanities is essential for driving social change, advancing a more inclusive understanding of history and culture, and collaboratively helping shape policies that challenge neoliberalism.

## 2. Case studies

### 2.1. Navigating bureaucracy

I first met Magda in 2012 when she was working on taco trucks across New Orleans and actively involved in the Congress of Day Laborers. In 2014, during my accompaniment work with the Worker Center, I was tasked to assist Magda and her business partner, Juan, through the bureaucratic process of obtaining a food truck license at City Hall. Although I translated the English-only online guidelines for Magda and Juan and helped them connect with the right people to secure insurance and ensure their taco truck met safety codes, they still faced unexpected obstacles. Despite following every step correctly and spending a year completing the process, they encountered an unforeseen requirement for a self-propelled vehicle with a double-axel – specifications not listed online. They had invested over \$15,000 in a single-axel taco truck trailer hauled by a truck (not self-propelled). This bureaucratic thump led to a significant financial loss and a nearly year-long delay in opening their business.

Even though acquiring the license failed in that moment (she eventually procured one and now owns three trucks with her siblings), accompaniment was crucial because it provided Magda with support to navigate complex bureaucratic processes while also highlighting gaps in communication and accessibility that City Hall failed to address. As part of my food and immigration upper-level course at Tulane, we read articles on language access and workshopped ideas to improve these processes for Spanish-speaking clientele. We petitioned City Hall and they added Spanish and Vietnamese language access. One group of students designed a brochure to help individuals like Magda and Juan. They provided clear, jargon-free instructions, translations, visual guides, personal stories, local contacts, and links for additional resources. The brochure project aimed to reduce barriers and provide tangible steps for the immigrant community. Public humanities and accompaniment can help to improve access and support for individuals navigating complex licensing processes.

<sup>11</sup> Butler 2022, 40–53.

<sup>12</sup> Butler 2022.

<sup>13</sup> Watkins 2019, 168.

<sup>14</sup> Freire 2000.

## 2.2. *Accompanying for immigration and asylum cases*

After two years of accompaniment with immigrant workers and their families – attending ICE check-ins, court hearings, weekly meetings, and medical appointments – I built trust and lasting friendships within these communities. This foundation allowed me to travel to Honduras for two summers of fieldwork (2013 and 2015), where I visited the families of Honduran immigrants living in New Orleans. This experience deepened my understanding of the transnational challenges facing these communities, providing context for their struggles with the drivers of forced migration – including violence, corruption, and limited educational and job opportunities – giving me a more holistic, informed perspective.

In 2015, Al Page, an immigration lawyer based in New Orleans, approached me to consider leveraging this experience in supporting clients with Special Immigrant Juvenile Status (SIJS) and asylum cases. Both SIJS and asylum offer legal protection to vulnerable individuals, but SIJS serves abused or abandoned minors, while asylum protects all ages facing persecution. Al's question, inspired by a juvenile court judge's doubt about New Orleans being safer than Honduras, shaped our collaborative research efforts.

Drawing on my prior work and field insights, I formed a team to conduct a survey with Honduran youth in New Orleans. We worked with my Tulane service learning students who tutored Honduran youth at International High School and with youth who attended the Congress of Day Laborer meetings. In 2018, our team co-published an article in the *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* to document the perceptions of safety between the two places.<sup>15</sup> Our research illustrated that New Orleans, despite its challenges, offers far greater legal protections, resources, and community support compared to the instability and dangers endemic, especially in that time, to Honduras. During this process, I became a qualified expert witness on two SIJS cases, enabling those youth to secure a pathway to citizenship. Accompaniment can be a tool in public humanities to foster trust and understanding, taking cues from collaborators and enabling scholars to address complex issues and directly support vulnerable communities.

Accompaniment has its limitations. In one instance, I accompanied a Honduran man facing an outstanding court record for minor traffic offenses. I served as his interpreter during the court proceedings, which occurred during the Obama administration's deportation policies, where any guilty charge could lead to deportation for undocumented immigrants. When the district attorney offered him a guilty plea with a fee instead of a not guilty plea and enrollment in a diversion program, I interpreted the options for him. He chose the guilty plea to avoid the rigmarole of the diversion process. Later, when I reported back to the lead organizer at the Congress of Day Laborers, she cautioned me about the risks of accepting a guilty plea, emphasizing the importance of pleading not guilty. While he was grateful for a quick resolution, I realized that I had not provided him with the best advice, underscoring the shortcomings of accompaniment in navigating the legal system. It was a critical lesson learned.

## 2.3. *Shared authority and connecting the past with the present*

Accompaniment can also help to understand broader issues and connect the past with the present to complement direct policy work. While I primarily worked with the Congress of

<sup>15</sup> Cannon, Fouts, and Stramel 2018.

Day Laborers, I also supported Stand with Dignity by attending meetings, driving members to events, and providing accompaniment for their campaigns. They achieved key victories to improve wages and job accessibility including enforcing a Section 3 local hiring policy and removing the felony box on job applications through their Ban the Box campaign. Given our long-standing relationship working together, Stand leaders approached me in 2015 to develop a Black-led labor history in New Orleans to connect past struggles with current campaigns. “How about you use those Tulane resources to Stand’s work, too?” said one leader outside a fundraiser event. “Sure!” I said, eager to dig into the archives to examine this history. Collaborating with Stand leaders and Tulane students, we created a digital timeline using Knight Lab Software, archives, and oral histories collected from members by members (I co-led an oral history workshop as part of the process). Launched on Juneteenth 2016 with a teach-in, this Black-led labor history project preserves Black community narratives, fosters collective memory, and promotes social justice through popular education and exhibitions.<sup>16</sup>

After I left New Orleans for UMBC, I stayed on the project with limited capacity as a consultant. The team expanded to include professors at Tulane and University of New Orleans and an advisory committee made up of community members, union reps, and educators. The project culminated in the “Don’t Stand Alone: Black Labor Organizing” physical exhibition, which opened in March 2024. At an event, union leader Willie Woods emphasized the project’s impact: “This is what we [the workers] need – to hear and see our own story.”

Accompaniment involved active participation in policy campaigns, while public humanities work emerged from these campaigns to connect historical struggles and resistance with contemporary issues. During the project, Stand members and community partners led the way, defining the project’s purpose, shaping its content, and setting its direction. Rooted in shared authority and accompaniment, this approach prioritized their voices and leadership, while I offered support through co-led workshops and resource sharing. This collaborative process honors community expertise, fostering mutual respect, a feminist ethic of care, and a shared commitment to documenting Black labor histories and support future worker-led movements that came out of trust built through accompaniment work.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Four guidelines to do accompaniment methodology

While accompaniment offers a powerful approach to community engagement, there is no blueprint for entering this work. As an outsider, it does involve being connected with a local organization or community group. Each situation demands adaptability and a willingness to learn from those directly impacted, allowing their needs, voices, and leadership to shape the path forward. Here are four guidelines to approaching this work:

1. *Show up and build trust*: Accompaniment begins with the act of showing up – physically and emotionally – to demonstrate solidarity, establish trust, and be a reliable presence over time. Consistently showing up signals commitment, care, and a willingness to listen, laying the groundwork for meaningful collaboration.

<sup>16</sup> Pedagogical process documented in Fouts 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Caswell and Cifor 2016, 25.

2. *Listen and learn from the community:* Understanding the priorities and realities of the community is essential. This means approaching each situation with humility and an open mind, while deeply listening as community members lead the way.
3. *Be flexible to respond to emergent needs:* Communities face shifting challenges that require adaptability.<sup>18</sup> While long-term projects like labor rights campaigns may be the ultimate goal, immediate crises often take precedence or need to be addressed in these moments. Being responsive in these cases means adjusting your role as needed. Scholar activists can address immediate challenges, allowing organizers to focus on broader goals.
4. *Engage in shared work with equal accountability:* Accompaniment is about working alongside, not for, the community. Shared work requires navigating power dynamics and ensuring the community's leadership is central. Holding yourself accountable means prioritizing their feedback, goals, and ethics throughout the process while being open to adjusting your methods to better align with the community's needs and values.

Amid growing systemic inequalities, exploitative practices, and entrenched barriers, each of these steps becomes essential to safeguarding and supporting vulnerable communities. By combining immediate, tangible support with efforts to address root causes, accompaniment can foster systemic change in the face of ongoing and imminent challenges. Public humanities tools complement accompaniment by fostering sustained engagement and addressing the root causes of systemic issues through community-driven knowledge, collaborative storytelling, and critical reflection. Breaking down barriers between universities and communities is widely discussed, but the effort must go beyond performative gestures and symbolic actions. Combining accompaniment methodology with public humanities provides a tangible model to address urgent and pressing issues in meaningful and, at times, transformative ways.

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<sup>18</sup> King, Mahdi, and Fouts 2024, 64–65, 75.

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