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# Toward a Critically Engaged Ethnographic Practice

by Kamari M. Clarke

This article interrogates what it means for anthropologists as “social critics” to be engaged in documenting efforts that not only have explanatory power but connect that power to praxis. The key here is to recognize how delimiting innocence and guilt in the context of war is clearly a political act that is not without problems. It involves identifying our public spheres and determining what has happened to those publics within which we speak. I suggest we first rethink what it means for ethnography to serve a public domain within which we speak. This involves rethinking what it means for ethnography to serve a public domain as a mechanism of engagement with all types of subjects—victims, warlords, negotiators, intermediaries, child soldiers, and even so-called terrorists. In this regard, I suggest that return to the intentions at the core of the anthropological code of ethics, codes that guide our commitment to our informant publics. By locating the limits of our code of ethics we can rectify the ways that the history of anthropological engagement in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been preoccupied with documenting “local” peoples as the “authentic” voices to be protected and understood while it has excluded other interlocutors. By rethinking the ethics of research we can use the tools of our discipline in principled forms of engagement with a range of publics.

The recent debates over the appropriateness of embedded American anthropologists serving U.S. military interests in Afghanistan and Iraq have raised some of the most controversial ethical questions in American anthropological circles today. Similarly, among Africanists, recent discussions about the U.S. Army’s involvement in outposts throughout Africa have raised concerns about the extent to which ethnographic knowledge should or should not be used to serve the interest of the United States Africa Command (AFRICOM), one of six of the U.S. Department of Defense’s regional headquarters. My own dilemma relating to the practice of ethnography and its application arose when I received an e-mail from a U.S. Army Study Office agent inviting me to participate in a 1-day seminar on “Extremism in West Africa: Groups and Conditions that Enable or Inhibit Them.” As described, the meeting’s objective was to consider the “potential activities of extremist groups” in West Africa with the goal of brainstorming with other “knowledgeable people about the possible directions these groups may take in the future.” The objectives outlined aimed to protect the innocent through educating frontline decision makers who might benefit from the insights of experts in academia. This attempt by governments to gain

intelligence from its specialists, whether government employees in the intelligence community or academics working in area studies, has its history in the development of a key field of study—anthropology. Called the “handmaiden of colonialism,”<sup>1</sup> anthropological knowledge has been known to have contributed to the colonization of various peoples in the global South and, of late, to the occupation of regions in the Middle East, Africa, the South Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean. These formations, mostly a result of U.S. occupations, have sparked vehement opposition in the anthropological community to the sharing of knowledge with such occupying forces. Some have responded with organizational boycotts, while others have engaged in petition-based protests. Further, public outcry led to the development of a code of ethics insisting that, given the history of anthropological knowledge used in particular regions by a potential foreign occupying agent, anthropological ethnographers today should be engaged in technologies of data procurement that study or protect the marginal or serve the disenfranchised. Such standards trace their origins to the inquiry of previous generations; to conflicts over colonial ethnography, for example, as well as to wide-scale reactions to the power abuses of Nazism.

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1. This phrase, often nonspecifically attributed to Claude Lévi-Strauss, was popularized by Talal Asad (1973). James Hooker (1963:455) used a similar construction, “handmaiden of colonial governments.”

Today, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) Code of Ethics has been radically revised (see American Anthropological Association 2009), and its uses are understood in terms that distinguish the powerful (the U.S. Army) from the powerless (civilians, often in the global South, but also those marginalized in the North). Similarly, many maintain that the imperative of ethnography is to protect those “locals” who are disenfranchised. The implication, of course, in protecting or studying only the “locals” or the “marginalized” is that those locals seen as engaging in the destruction of others—the victims who become killers, following Mahmood Mamdani (2001)—have been identified as those who do not merit study; they exist below the ethnographic radar and are neither to be understood nor protected.

Determining who the disenfranchised are, however, is a complex endeavor, for it often involves looking past models of individual criminal responsibility alone to articulations of root causes in which guilt or innocence exceed the enactment of individual violence. Going beyond individualization of responsibility and covering macroforces that shape the conditions under which perpetrators enact violence can move contemporary anthropology toward a more engaged form of social criticism. For unlike the past, in which ethnographers of Africa were hired to document strong rural systems under stress without noticing colonialism or larger spheres of power, ethnographers of Africa today are enjoined to document and help analyze conflict of various kinds. In my case, in response to the invitation by the U.S. Army, I willingly participated as a result of my conviction that principled anthropological engagement was critical for highlighting the dangers of additional military forces on the African continent. The possibility of not engaging at all, as a result of anthropological boycotts and petition campaigns, of not offering input or an alternate vision in the midst of the growing military complex under the leadership of George W. Bush made my intervention all the more critical. This is a reality that needs more attention in the academy but that requires asking what are the contexts in which such forms of engagements are important.

I shared insights on the macropolitics of violence in West Africa but was careful not to disclose information that might negatively affect the populations with whom I work. I was conscientious about protecting the names of my informants and those who wage war against them. Instead, I emphasized the larger conditions within which contemporary violence is made to thrive. This educational mission was not only directed to academics; it was also intended to inform members of the army—strategists and various decision makers working on the ground—whose sense that violence in sub-Saharan Africa was actually initiated by warlords alone.

This article examines the public face of ethnography and interrogates the paradoxes of action and inaction central to the moral and ethical codes in the field. One example to consider is ethnographic responses to violence and poverty in the Sudan; another pertains to the reconfiguration of the

postcolonial African state and ways that violence becomes a trajectory of our inquiry but rarely a trajectory of our intervention. The Nuer of the Sudan, a key anthropological object, has long served students of anthropological inquiry (see Evans-Pritchard 1940; Hutchinson 1996). However, as we see with changes in the region, some of the Sudan’s “local people” are “victims” of colonialism who have also become killers engaged in the restructuring of the postcolonial state. The same is true in Uganda, where child soldiers have been heavily involved in war efforts in the north but are themselves victims of childhood abduction (see Clarke 2007).

At root is the “new scramble” for African resources: international corporations, whose missions go well beyond those of the state, work alongside various state and nonstate actors to procure and trade arms in exchange for mineral resources. This violence goes well beyond explicit forms of embattlement; it represents both the forms of symbolic power (Bourdieu 1991) that maintain violence of the postcolonial condition as well as the forms of violence within which ethnography participates. At issue is the complicity of ethnographic inaction. Even as ethnography requires a modicum of action through which to document and theorize social problems, its actors—ethnographers, who have deep knowledge of the histories and sociocultural and political contexts in all regions of the world—have been disengaged from the creation of public policy. But also at issue are corporate actors whose objectives are often commodity extraction and material self-interest. Unless they are stipulated as engaged in the “anthropology of corporations,” however, most ethnographers today, like ethnographers of the early to mid-twentieth century who neglected the relevance of colonialism, omit ethnographic framings that explore political economies of violence and their cultures of capitalist inequality. Additionally, the reality of failing to assign responsibility to offending companies themselves is itself an action. Here I interrogate what it means for anthropologists as “social critics” to be engaged in documenting efforts that not only have explanatory power but that connect that power to praxis. The key here is to recognize how delimiting innocence and guilt in contexts of war is clearly a political act that is not without problems. It involves identifying our public spheres and determining what has happened to those publics within which we speak. I suggest that we first rethink what it means for ethnography to serve a public domain as a mechanism of engagement with all types of subjects—victims, warlords, negotiators, intermediaries, child soldiers, and even so-called terrorists. In this regard, I suggest that we return to the intentions at the core of the anthropological code of ethics, codes that guide our commitment to our informant publics. By locating the limits of our code of ethics, we can rectify the ways that the history of anthropological engagement of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been preoccupied with documenting “local” peoples as the “authentic” voices to be protected and understood while it has excluded other interlocutors. In this way, by rethinking the ethics of research and broadening our con-

cerns to larger strategic collaborations, I suggest that we use the tools of our discipline in principled forms of engagement with a range of publics, including the state, our corporations, and those nonstate actors whose actions may produce violence.

The next section outlines one example of history, politics, and power relations within which a particular axis of engagement might be manifest. In the remainder of this article, I focus on the first principles “deemed fundamental to the anthropologist’s responsible, ethical pursuit of the profession”—those pertaining to “relations with those studied.”<sup>22</sup> Distinguishing between victims and perpetrators, between those in need of information and those whose privacy should be protected, highlights the central problematic in boycotting meetings that engage the army and explains why I accepted the offer to share some of my ethnographic knowledge and political criticisms with U.S. Army decision makers. I end by highlighting the limitations of the AAA Code of Ethics to define new terrain within which contemporary ethnographers might engage. This final section addresses how an engaged anthropology might assist our attempts to understand particular paramilitary operations alongside new supranational institutional forms of governance in which innocence and complicity are never clearly demarcated.

## Contemporary Ethnographic Engagements and Histories of Violence in Africa

At the close of the Cold War, a growing arms trade began to fuel African conflict zones in which rebel groups were vying for regional power. Throughout the 1990s, in regions such as Sierra Leone, the Ivory Coast, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Uganda, these conflicts and their resolutions found little international support for mitigating the colonial and economic production of volatile war lines despite obvious connections to global trade circuits. This is especially true in comparison to the significant international brokering at the end of the Cold War and the formative international justice interventions at the end of World War II. What resulted were extreme disparities in the lived worlds of national communities in which rich African leaders and business people closest to postcolonial power participated in the disenfranchisement of a growing underclass. In some sub-Saharan African countries, large segments of the population were subject to various forms of violence and death at the hands of particular ethnic or religious groups. And today, many suffering from poverty remain external to regimes of health and the amassing of wealth, while a small number remain at the center of new nodes of power. Indeed, we are witnessing the reconfiguration of the African postcolonial state in which African governance is being increasingly con-

trolled by nonstate actors and transnational circuits of capital engaged in economic speculation and investment. And we are witnessing a range of new enforcement domains where the management of violence is being shared by larger rule-of-law institutions.

Although more than 10 civil wars have been fought on the African continent over the past 2 decades and have been facilitated by the management of new paramilitary enclaves, many of these struggles—often fought in the name of ethnic strife and religious politics—have actually been rooted in mineral resource management and encouraged by economic speculation and capitalist logic. As a result, the African continent now leads the world in innovating various forms of international criminal adjudication, such as hybrid courts and international tribunals, which sit alongside various national and “traditional” forms of justice, truth, and reconciliation. Moreover, international treaties are increasingly being linked to democratic restructuring mandates as multiple brokers—including postcolonial state actors in Africa and elsewhere—compete with NGOs and paramilitary forces to control the terms of governance. Thus, signed and ratified treaties such as the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court are actually weakening the capacities of African states to protect their borders, manage their populations, and control their markets and currencies (Hansen and Stepputat 2005:32) even as regional competitors strengthen their own attempts to consolidate power for resource control.

Contrary to the perception that neoliberal policies are in play in the regulation of economies such as those of the Sudan and regional areas in and bordering the DRC, we are seeing what Janet Roitman (2004) refers to as alternate regulatory domains in which very powerful arms and military brokers harness power through highly formalized underground economies. In October 2008 the Pentagon, in response to these and other perceived paramilitary and Islamic nodes of power in Africa, launched AFRICOM, part of a global agenda for the U.S. war on terror and control of religious extremism. AFRICOM is the first such U.S. command on the continent, but there are already significant centers in the Middle East, South Asia, and elsewhere. The Bush administration had planned to put in place an interim headquarters in Stuttgart and to establish five new, small military bases in North Africa, “possibly Tunisia, West (either Ghana, Liberia or Senegal), East (likely around the current U.S. taskforce in Djibouti), and southern Africa (perhaps Botswana) with a further chapter in Addis Ababa” (De Lorenzo, McNamee, and Mills 2007). Although there is broad consensus by panels of experts in which I have been involved that such centers would create more problems than they would solve, the Bush administration until as late as January 20, 2009, was charting a path to add to the already established U.S. military presence on the continent.

As of today, a base of 1,800 troops has already been established in Djibouti as well as in the recently created (2005) Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Initiative (TSCTI). An addi-

2. AAA “Principles of Professional Responsibility,” <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/ethstmnt.htm>.

tional 4,200 troops, spread throughout Egypt and other north African regions, are within striking range. And there is a significant U.S. military presence in Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger. In 2005, the initiative was extended to cover Algeria, Senegal, Nigeria, and Tunisia, with another fleet permanently stationed in the Gulf of Aden. United States government officials maintain that these deployments are intended to bolster Africa's weakening state capacities and insufficient military force to address challenges to its resources. Some suggest, however, the primary objective of the TSCTI is related to oil procurement and to limiting Chinese influence over the supply. This is further evidenced by the U.S. Army's newly established (2004) intelligence and research wing. Although its purported function is to protect U.S. security interests in the region, the research wing is in fact engaged in dialogues with various Northern academics—social and political scientists, historians, and especially anthropologists—with the goal of anticipating and advancing its broader U.S. interests.

Accession to these United States and U.S.-led military plans and operations has divided African leaders and policy makers on the continent, where there is also tremendous opposition. This is seen in the rejection of a U.S. military presence by South African and Nigerian governments and in the vows by the leaders of Mozambique, Botswana, and Zambia to resist the setting up of U.S. bases in their countries. Yet unlike Middle Eastern and Eastern European scholars, whose engagement with regional issues has been much more salient in the 20 years since cold war interventions in Africa ended, Africanist anthropologists have been late to intervene. The Bush administration's announced plans for AFRICOM also spurred debate in the academic world around American foreign policy strategy and engagement. These debates have brought into play two dueling approaches, one advocating further U.S. bases and a higher-profile presence in Africa for more direct military action, if needed, and the other contesting such militarization and instead promoting nonmilitary interests in Africa. At the intellectual center of U.S. military expansionist policies are conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Center for Security Policy. President Bush hailed AFRICOM as an initiative that would bring "peace and security to the people of Africa" as well as promote "our common goals of development, health, education, democracy, and economic growth in Africa."<sup>3</sup> The Obama administration's position differed sharply.

According to a February 2009 press release issued by the acting assistant secretary for African affairs,

an important step was taken in early 2007 when the decision was made to create a Department of Defense Unified Combatant Command for Africa—the U.S. Africa Command, or AFRICOM. This decision to create AFRICOM marks the

3. "President Bush Creates a Department of Defense Unified Combatant Command for Africa," White House press release, February 6, 2007. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2007/02/20070206-3.htm> (accessed December 1, 2007).

beginning of a new era where African security issues can be addressed from an Africa-centric perspective. AFRICOM is a new type of command that will focus on building African regional security and crisis response. Its objective is a more secure Africa, but it is not expected to have any assigned forces to the African continent. Rather, AFRICOM is a headquarters staff that coordinates the kind of support that will enable African Governments and existing regional organizations to have greater capacity to respond in time of need.<sup>4</sup>

This new emphasis on a regional security response system without American troops is a hopeful policy shift toward managing recourse struggles and postviolence conflict that, long after the Rwandan genocide, continues to create regional violence.

## The Political Economy of Northern Interests in Africa

AFRICOM is said by many to have been designed shortly after Ugandan miners found "black gold" in the western region of the country and Tanzania announced the availability of commercially viable oil deposits along its coast. A case in point would be the mid-November 2007 organization of meetings between the U.S. Army's research wing and a select group of Africanist academics in an attempt to understand Africa's northern, southern, eastern, and western geopolitical regions. But in response to this call, a loosely convened group calling itself the Network of Concerned Anthropologists circulated a petition calling on anthropologists to pledge their nonparticipation in U.S. military activities by refusing to engage in research and other activities that contribute to counterinsurgency operations in the war on terror (Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2007).

What are the terms of anthropological engagement here? The above initiatives speak to the central concern of this article: the connection between ethnographic knowledge and engagement (*praxis*),<sup>5</sup> with engagement at times being enacted as principled nonengagement. As stated, the expression of popular anthropological engagement against U.S. military action has ranged from public protests, teach-ins, and educational research to petition writing and circulation, but it has not transcended the liberal parameters of democratic discourse. That such (non)engagement is deemed principled rests on an assumed obligation to victims of war. Yet often the perpetrators of war are themselves conflicted actors embattled in practices whose causes are far from evident and demand further inquiry.

According to Marshall Sahlins, the U.S. military focuses on portraying anthropology's practical contribution as "collect-

4. <http://www.state.gov/p/af/rls/rm/2009/117326.htm> (accessed February 27, 2009).

5. *Praxis* is a central term popularized by early Frankfurt school scholars to highlight the necessary interrelatedness of theory and practice as a form of engaged politics. See Horkheimer and Adorno (1972 [1947]).



ing cultural data for winning local ‘hearts and minds’—which is again aid to serve the goal of improving American counterinsurgency and pacification efforts. This is also described as inculcating respect for the local culture among U.S. military personnel or even as providing a sense of cultural relativism.” As he observes, “Of course it is the opposite of cultural relativism—cultural cynicism one might call it—since the object is to appropriate the cultural practices of others to one’s own purposes, notably the purpose of dominating them.”<sup>6</sup> Sahlins’s observation, like other AAA statements against the U.S. war in the Gulf States, Afghanistan, and now Iraq, suggests the importance of disengaging from military operations.

Sahlins continues by noting that “the priority of the military mission over the welfare of the local people” and that “this kind of relation to the local people would hardly get through an [institutional review board] review on human subjects.” Notwithstanding his rejection of such engagement with the military, an unstated assumption here is worth making explicit because of its widespread relevance in anthropological circles, that these “local people” do not include members of militias committing violence or even high-ranking government officials, whether they came to power through military coups or democratic force. “Local people” are thus portrayed as being on the same side as seemingly progressive anthropologists. However, this assertion can be detrimental in its attempt to limit the wide range of ethnographic engagements that are possible in the complex domains of preemptive installations, esteemed sites of resource wealth, and in the formation of regional, local, and international actors engaged in negotiating the terms for access.

## American Anthropology and the Politics of Ethics: The AAA Code of Ethics

The AAA Code of Ethics was adopted in May 1971 as “Principles of Professional Responsibility,” amended in November 1986,<sup>7</sup> redrafted during the period from January 1995 to March 1997 by the Commission to Review the AAA Statements on Ethics and approved in June 1998, and most recently revised in 2009. In February 2009, the AAA executive board approved several proposed amendments to the 1998 version of the AAA Code of Ethics. These changes were introduced

6. Marshall Sahlins, in a blog dated November 7, 2007, re “AAA Board Statement on HTS,” <http://aaanewsinfo.blogspot.com/2007/11/aaa-board-statement-on-hts.html>; his comment was posted 10:56 a.m. the next day (accessed December 26, 2007).

7. The 1986 version of the “Statement on ethics: principles of professional responsibility” included the following article under the section “Responsibility to the Public” (sec. 2.d): “As people who devote their professional lives to understanding people, anthropologists bear a positive responsibility to speak out publicly, both individually and collectively, on what they know and what they believe as a result of their professional expertise gained in the study of human beings. That is, they bear a professional responsibility to contribute to an ‘adequate definition of reality’ upon which public opinion and public policy may be based.” <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/ethstmnt.htm> (accessed February 28, 2009).

for discussion at the association’s business meeting in November 2007 when anthropologist Terry Turner recommended restoring certain articles pertaining to the “circulation of knowledge” addressed in the 1971 version.<sup>8</sup>

The executive board established an ethics task force to review the recommended changes, to consult with other bodies of the AAA, and eventually to hold a vote for adoption by AAA members by November 2010 (Plemmons 2009). This renegotiation of code terms reflects recent attempts by a range of anthropologists to loosen the grip of leadership in the association. Like many American professional codes, the AAA Code of Ethics recognizes that anthropologists, as members of multiple groups, such as the family and religious communities, carry with them individual ethical principles and presumptions; its public statements of morality, however, assume that the code represents shared principles. Ethnographers often have to make choices that compete with the rules laid out in the code, so new changes were designed to provide guidelines for making decisions responsibly. As stated in the preamble of the Code of Ethics approved February 2009 (sec. I), in addition to their moral obligations to more personal groups,

anthropological researchers, teachers and practitioners . . . also have obligations to the scholarly discipline, to the wider society and culture, and to the human species, other species, and the environment. Furthermore, fieldworkers may develop close relationships with persons or animals with whom they work, generating an additional level of ethical considerations.

In a field of such complex involvements and obligations, it is inevitable that misunderstandings, conflicts, and the need to make choices among apparently incompatible values will arise. Anthropologists are responsible for grappling with such difficulties and struggling to resolve them in ways compatible with the principles stated here.<sup>9</sup>

In ethnographic fields of inquiry, we are told that the purpose of this code is to foster discussion and education, and although the AAA will not adjudicate claims for seemingly unethical behavior, we anthropologists are to take the principles of the code as tools to develop and maintain ethical frameworks “for all anthropological work” (end of sec. I). However, it is clear that in a rapidly changing world, in which different anthropologists engage in various activities, the assumption that a professional organization can and should

8. See “Acknowledgments” in American Anthropological Association (2009), the 2009 version of the “Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association.” Also, for the full text of the resolution introduced by Terry Turner, see <http://aaanewsinfo.blogspot.com/2008/09/proposed-changes-to-aaa-code-of-ethics.html> (accessed February 28, 2009).

9. “Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association,” approved February 2009. <http://www.aaanet.org/issues/policy-advocacy/Code-of-Ethics.cfm> (accessed February 28, 2009). All subsequent quotations are from this version.

broker such ethical power is naive at best. Instead, it is useful to see the code for what it is: an instrument through which to make sense of the world theoretically and practically and to govern action using a range of mentalities, techniques, and rationalities.

In the introduction (sec. II) to the 2009 code, anthropology is defined as having its roots “in the natural and social sciences and in the humanities, ranging in approach from basic to applied research and to scholarly interpretation.” Here it is clear that the foundations of the discipline remain deeply empirical. The AAA’s view of that discipline further represents that “the generation of anthropological knowledge is a dynamic process using many different and ever-evolving approaches; and that for moral and practical reasons, the generation and utilization of knowledge should be achieved in an ethical manner” (sec. II). In the realm of research, the first principle is that anthropologists “have primary ethical obligations to the people, species, and materials they study and to the people with whom they work.” The subsequent second to sixth principles highlight the importance of anthropological researchers.<sup>10</sup>

Since 9/11, the U.S. Army has increased its engagement

10. The first principle articulates the ethical obligations of anthropologists (sec. III.A.1): These obligations can supersede the goal of seeking new knowledge, and can lead to decisions not to undertake or to discontinue a research project when the primary obligation conflicts with other responsibilities, such as those owed to sponsors or clients. These ethical obligations include:

- To avoid harm or wrong, understanding that the development of knowledge can lead to change which may be positive or negative for the people or animals worked with or studied
- To respect the well-being of humans and nonhuman primates
- To work for the long-term conservation of the archaeological, fossil, and historical records
- To consult actively with the affected individuals or group(s), with the goal of establishing a working relationship that can be beneficial to all parties involved

The subsequent second to sixth principles highlight the importance of anthropological researchers (sec. III.A.2–6):

2. In conducting and publishing their research, or otherwise disseminating their research results, anthropological researchers must ensure that they do not harm the safety, dignity, or privacy of the people and animals with whom they work, conduct research, or perform other professional activities, or who might reasonably be thought to be affected by their research.

3. Determin[ing] in advance whether their hosts/providers of information wish to remain anonymous or receive recognition, and mak[ing] every effort to comply with those wishes.

4. Obtain[ing] in advance the informed consent of persons being studied, providing information, owning or controlling access to material being studied, or otherwise identified as having interests which might be impacted by the research. . . . It is the quality of the consent, not the format, that is relevant.

5. Adher[ing] [in covenantal relationships] to the obligations of openness and informed consent, while carefully and respectfully negotiating the limits of the relationship.

6. Not exploit[ing] individuals, groups, animals, or cultural or biological materials [and] recogniz[ing] their debt to the societies in which they work and their obligation to reciprocate with people studied in appropriate ways.

with anthropologists—among other researchers and experts such as linguists and policy makers—resulting in the formation of the Human Terrain System project (HTS). News of the HTS and its relation to the U.S. military war of aggression in Iraq has shown how the deployment of new governance measures has far exceeded the study of Iraqis for the sake of understanding in order to rewrite Iraq’s national constitution and reorganize its “civil society.” The new measures appear to involve the formation of various military units to better control, monitor, or organize new forms of state building, which in turn entails finding more effective strategies for military action.

This phenomenon has raised heated debate among AAA members as well as among general communities at large, prompting the executive board to deem “that the HTS project raises sufficiently troubling and urgent ethical issues to warrant a statement from the Executive Board at this time.”<sup>11</sup> As a result, on October 31, 2007, the board, under the leadership of Alan Goodman, released a statement of resolution concluding

- (i) that the HTS program creates conditions which are likely to place anthropologists in positions in which their work will be in violation of the AAA Code of Ethics and (ii) that its use of anthropologists poses a danger to both other anthropologists and persons other anthropologists study. Thus the Executive Board expresses its disapproval of the HTS program.

The statement made clear that anthropology “is obliged to help improve U.S. government policies through the widest possible circulation of anthropological understanding in the public sphere” and to engage in the “development and implementation of U.S. policy” through the democratic process. It is in this way that “anthropology can legitimately and effectively help guide U.S. policy to serve the humane causes of global peace and social justice.” The board disapproved of HTS in particular “in the context of a war that is widely recognized as a denial of human rights and based on faulty intelligence and undemocratic principles.” HTS was thus presented on ethical grounds, owing to “grave concerns” with the currently articulated HTS project, which it called “an unacceptable application of anthropological expertise.”

The conditions of ethical concern were enumerated as follows. (1) “As military contractors working in settings of war,” anthropologists would have trouble sufficiently distinguishing themselves from the military, thus placing “a significant constraint on their ability to fulfill their ethical responsibility as anthropologists to disclose who they are and what they are doing.” (2) Given their “responsibility for negotiating relations among a number or groups, . . . HTS anthropologists

11. American Anthropological Association, “Executive Board Statement on the Human Terrain System Project,” October 31, 2007. <http://www.aaanet.org/blog/resolution.htm> (accessed December 26, 2007; at this writing, this page is no longer available).

may have responsibilities to their U.S. military units in war zones that conflict with their obligations to the persons they study or consult.” (3) The ethical imperative of voluntary, informed consent is compromised, because “HTS anthropologists work . . . under conditions that make it difficult for those they communicate with to give ‘informed consent’ without coercion, or for this consent to be taken at face value or freely refused.” (4) There is a “risk that information provided by HTS anthropologists could be used to make decisions about identifying and selecting specific populations as targets of U.S. military operations”; this “would violate the stipulations in the AAA Code of Ethics that those studied not be harmed” (sec. III.A.1). (5) The program’s conflation of “anthropologists with U.S. military operations . . . may create serious difficulties for, including grave risks to the personal safety of, many non-HTS anthropologists and the people they study.”

These rationales highlight the challenges of ethnography in violence-related operations. A program such as HTS is said to offend key tenets of protection in the AAA Code of Ethics that are very much in keeping with the establishment and maintenance of the rights and protections for all humans enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and with the related implication that to contravene those principles is to remove first-generation rights. As we shall see in the next section of this article, the assumption that these rights should at all times override second-generation rights, such as economic and cultural rights—the right to live free from poverty, and in the context of the full expression of one’s social world—must be critically rethought.

## AFRICOM and Principles of Professional Responsibility

Constructed when anthropology was an elite discipline, the 1971 Principles of Professional Responsibility, now known as the Code of Ethics, set in place social rules to protect local peoples from the abuses of colonial states as well as structures of accountability to the peoples being studied. The recent AFRICOM initiative raises concerns analogous to those that prompted the AAA to create its Code of Ethics. The details of future military and nonmilitary conduct of the Africa Command are unknown because that body’s management wing will be controlled unilaterally by the Pentagon, putting the participation of African-based governance and its local communities secondary to the operation of this supranational initiative. At the time of this writing, the AAA executive board has not directly ruled on AFRICOM itself. However, the mobilizations of the ad hoc Network of Concerned Anthropologists and their commitment to disengagement from military participation highlight a key trend in anthropological engagement. The 1980s break from serving as the “handmaiden of colonialism” and anthropologists’ later engagement in oppositional and antiwar positions represent a new trajectory

over the second half of the twentieth century and the basis for twenty-first-century organizing.

The critical issues under debate are far more complicated, however, than these oppositional movements suggest. For instance, such positions do not take into account the complex location of power and the structures of domination whose inscriptions go well beyond those directly engaged in enacting violence. Still, anthropologists have often been involved in documenting those data sets that can be disclosed, because their ethical responsibilities have been harnessed by a public set of principles—to protect local peoples, to maintain their anonymity. As the preamble to the AAA’s “Principles of Professional Responsibility” states, the goal of ethnography is to study the “processes and issues affecting general human welfare.” In fulfillment of these principles, though, anthropologists are enjoined to do damage neither to those whom they study nor, insofar as possible, to their scholarly community. Where these conditions cannot be met, the anthropologist would be well-advised not to pursue the particular piece of research.”<sup>12</sup>

But what of the need for ethnographies of war written from the other side? Resource wars and new imperialist interventions are connected to disclosure and alliances (or not) with subjects in interesting ways and remain important components of understanding and addressing root causes of violence of all types. Carolyn Nordstrom’s *A Different Kind of War Story* makes clear that “an ethnography of war is not the same as the ethnography of the effect of war on a particular locale” (1997:78). Here, although we get the story of violence from various ambits, diverse notions of political violence are explored. It is the suffering of the articulated victim to be protected that looms large. But what of the story of men from Serbia who voluntarily participated in wars that followed the breakup of the former Yugoslavia—or of men who fled those wars (Milicevic 2006)? How might participation in war be explained through the eyes of volunteers or draft dodgers? And what of victims turned killers, such as those child soldiers in the DRC who have been engaged in submitting testimony to explain their inculcation into the military countermovement? What of the U.S. Army soldier or marine fighting the U.S. war on terror—one of the most imperialist resource wars of our time—whose story has yet to be incorporated and represented fully in ethnographic accounts? What of the smugglers and paramilitary intermediaries in the work of Janet Roitman (2004)? Yet these are not the types of subjects with whom anthropology has been traditionally engaged. Rather, the voice of Western sympathies with “victims” have often been articulated through popular ethnographies of the 1980s and 1990s. The voices of the so-called perpetrators

12. American Anthropological Association, “Statements on Ethics: Principles of Professional Responsibility, adopted by the Council of the American Anthropological Association May 1971 (as amended through November 1986).” <http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/ethstmnt.htm> (accessed December 19, 2007).



themselves have yet to be fully engaged and developed. And the complicity of corporations that further provoke resource violence remains underexamined.

What kind of engagement, then, might be at the center of an anthropological intervention that goes beyond public social criticism? I ask not because I have a principled disagreement with the ethical-political position taken by the AAA but because the history of anthropological ethnographies of war reflect the wide-ranging positions taken by the AAA, a professional organization that purports to serve a broad spectrum of people differently located in the landscape of knowledge production and political causes. To establish terms of ethnographic and professional engagement that delimit action based on core principles that are not universally shared by its broad and diverse membership is to represent the problematic roots of anthropology in which its role as executor for colonialism represents the elite or the local underclass of a given group or society. It seems to me that in the project of rethinking the underpinnings of the code, a first step is to revive the study of inequalities that were once, for example, at the center of 1960s British social anthropology (e.g., Rhodes-Livingston Institute) or to revisit the work of 1970s U.S., French, and UK Marxists once at the forefront of political economic inquiry that formed the basis for interrogating social inequalities. It is essential today that we incorporate a lineage of engagement that takes seriously the insights of social criticism and that also examines the complexities by which seemingly “local people” are on opposing sides of many issues.

Ethnographic ethics have historically been concerned with the lifeways of “local peoples,” always identifying “local” as those underprivileged whose circumstances resemble an absence of power. This one-sidedness points to limitations in the field and our need to push beyond them. The perspectives of American anthropologists are no different, and it is therefore important that we recognize how and why anthropologists are engaged in various political positions for different ends. Some have loyalties to Iraqi, Sudanese, and Rwandan former perpetrators of violence—even “freedom fighters”—and see this affiliation as a political entitlement of sorts.

## An Anthropological Approach to Ethnographic Engagement

In keeping with Laura Nader’s (1972) provocative “Up the Anthropologist,” it is clear that contemporary anthropological studies have heard the call to move beyond studying the underclass or the traditionally identified “innocent” informant. I suggest that like the new trends of widespread students engaged in joint professional training spheres combining law and anthropology, medicine and anthropology, or environmental studies and anthropology, ethnographers similarly must learn multiple field languages—of law, of medicine, of science, or of business—that govern the regimes of practice within which we work. This work involves using these knowl-

edge regimes and fields of study to understand not only particular social norms but also to move toward new ways of opening proficient discussion in the fields in which we claim scholarly specialization. Ethnography is now being used as much in corporate domains; spheres of political governance; and judicial, NGO, and war contexts as it is in the lives and practices of disenfranchised farmers and divinatory healers. And these newly expanded iterations are being deployed to capture the complex study of emergent markets. Consequently, ethnographic techniques are being developed that at times involve more participant observation and engagement on the part of the increasing number of PhD’s in anthropology who are pursuing adjunct professional degrees.

A case in point is my own return to further professional training after receiving my PhD. In 2002–2003, I pursued a Master in the Study of Law degree at Yale Law School. There, I developed a technical understanding of the foundations of law—those principles of law in which first-year law students at Yale are trained. This study provided firsthand insights into the making of legal minds who would go on to engage in the widespread export of American jurisprudence in the field sites in which I work as well as to participate in different advisory roles for legal, nongovernmental, and governmental projects. Today, increasing numbers of legal anthropology scholars are using their legal training to work with NGOs, state bodies, or with international institutions such as the World Bank and the World Health Organization. Yet legal anthropology emerged from a multilayered trajectory that tended to separate legal practitioners from legal scholars. The first significant body of scholarship in the field came from E. Adamson-Hoebel’s (1954) “neo-evolutionist” perspective, which located transformations in the law as adaptation to changes in the means and relations of production. He argued that all societies followed a single path of development from primitive (e.g., hunting and gathering) to more advanced (e.g., agriculture, industry) economic modes.

Adamson-Hoebel’s (1954) evolutionary trajectory was soon overtaken by a new anthropological preoccupation: that of disputes.<sup>13</sup> Laura Nader’s “Village Projects” dispatched graduate students to small-scale societies to collect data on dispute processes (see Nader and Todd 1978) and stimulated a florescence of related studies (Abel, Felstiner, and Sarat 1981; Canter 1978; Collier 1988; Mather and Yngvesson 1980; Moore 1978; Roberts 1979; Starr 1978, 1989, 1992; Yngvesson 1985, 1988). In this body of work, disputes were conceived of as processes and emphasis was placed on the individual disputant and his/her decision-making process. By the end of the 1970s, dispute processing had become the dominant subject of legal anthropological inquiry and had established new directions in legal pluralist theory (Moore 1977, 1978).

Contemporary changes in law making are profound, and ethnographic approaches are becoming equally innovative.

13. Gulliver’s “Social Control in an African Society” (1963) built on the work of Llewellyn and Hoebel (1941) and Gluckman (1955).

Today, though cultural anthropology lies somewhere between humanities and social sciences, its professional principles have been central in debates about and constraints on its own disciplinary purview. The merger between theory and practice, objectivity and subjectivity, continues to shape new projects and the tools that ethnographers bring to bear to the fieldwork terrain. In this way, the type of training that ethnographers bring to the field is growing, particularly with regard to those with joint advanced degrees and professional degrees.

Over time, cutting-edge scholars have conducted ethnographic studies that explore multiple legal formations in newly developing transnational realms. With publications in the late 1990s and early 2000s from scholarship by Annelise Riles (2001), Sally Merry (2006), Richard Wilson (2005), Susan Hirsch (2006), Jean and John Comaroff (2006), Laura Nader (Nader 2002; Nader and Todd 1978), Mark Goodale (2008, 2009), Elizabeth Drexler (2008), Carol Greenhouse (2005), and Bill Maurer (Maurer and Schwab 2006), among others, legal scholars and anthropologists began to use ethnography to examine the ways global and local connections are mediated by political institutions, organizations, and practices as well as by agents working on behalf of state institutions. Significantly, subsequent generations of anthropology PhD graduates with law degrees from Yale Law School—Donald Brahma, Jed Kronkite, Galit Sarfaty, Daryll Li, Anya Bernstein—and others from Duke, Jason Cross among them—all scholars and legal practitioners, represent a new generation of ethnographers who are versed in both regional anthropological work and in legal professional training. By mobilizing forms of inquiry that highlight spaces of legal engagement and put into practice a form of ethnography of international relations, this new generation of young scholars is carving out a new domain of praxis that connects law with ethnographic analysis and public policy projects.

The absence of American anthropologists from the creation of and influence over concepts for the 1948 UDHR is noteworthy (Goodale 2008). The profession changed significantly over the four to five decades that followed. This absence is important to mark, given the fear that the globalizing impact of such principles would negatively affect local communities and the reality that the UDHR's construction of universality out of locally shaped conceptions that became hegemonic. However, the increased merging of professional and scholarly projects has facilitated ethnographers' contributions to social action in ways that could be conceivably imagined as educational and even progressive. In order to reflect the realities of inequality and violence in the social worlds we study, contemporary anthropology has also been engaged in reconceptualizing violence in social and political domains and representations of it thereof (see Appadurai 2006; Das 1985; Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Tobias 2006). For postcolonial interlocutors engaged in the production of anthropological and ethnographic knowledge as well as in the perpetuation and silencing of violence, easy criticisms of inequality and affiliation and the assignment of local/marginal/dominated/

black/brown categories are far more complex. Historically, anthropology has approached inequality as a theoretical agenda, while its critical engagement has mostly hovered over its objects as mere commentary. As we know, social violence and its threats do not represent a sociocultural exception to be studied outside of local cultural processes. Such scholarship has not contributed to the reduction of the very violence that it studies; instead, social violence has been understood in relation to the workings of religion, ethnicity, and the economy. However, the contemporary literature on violence has shown that it is intrinsic to modernity—the modernity of poverty, of race, of sexual exploitation, of science; it is the articulation that designates those who are deserving of recompense and that facilitates other exclusions in the process. Violence is an inseparable feature of modernity in the contemporary world; it is often an extension of the inequalities of modernity and cannot be disengaged or disarticulated from them. Nevertheless, both in and beyond the academy, ethnographers today are under increasing pressure to engage in various social projects and with diverse publics—the military, corporations, and judiciaries. Advocacy and participatory research may challenge ethnography on the one hand yet also appropriate it for new social uses on the other. To what extent, however, do current anthropological ethics restrict the spaces of investigation, collaboration, and even transformative praxis in war-torn contexts in which many militia members are both victims and perpetrators? How might a rethinking of AAA ethical codes turn a constrained yet narrowly engaged anthropology into a field of vibrant theory and praxis, one whose ideological positioning is less restrictive and, where relevant, more directed toward various forms of social action? What does it mean for American anthropologists to move toward a more engaged anthropology at a time when American military clout is being exercised globally both to support various perpetrators of violence and to defend some of its victims? And how can contemporary engagements with violence of all forms—social, economic, political, symbolic, and explicitly physical—be situated in a variety of emerging social fields? Anthropologists engaged in the revision of the Code of Ethics have attempted to address the problem of social action in the newly introduced article 2 (American Anthropological Association 2009), under “Responsibility to the Public.” There they state, “In relation with his or her own government, host governments, or sponsors of research, an anthropologist should be honest and candid. Anthropologists must not compromise their professional responsibilities and ethics should not agree to conditions which inappropriately change the purpose, focus or intended outcomes of their research.” This addition highlights the value of disclosure and integrity as important.

In his seminal work *When Victims Become Killers*, Mahmood Mamdani (2001) interrogated the complex complicity of those who engage in violence, stressing the need to look actively to the ways that colonial inscriptions and their contemporary manifestations are part of the explicit enactment

of this violence. In the Sudan—as in other postcolonial and sub-Saharan African contexts where the complexities of agency and the complicity of violence are at once deeply historical and clearly embedded in related contemporary “dilemmas”—the specter of the victim rests alongside a range of institutional and individual phenomena. Burgeoning resource extraction and the military deployed to protect it through force, however, can no longer remain apparitions—specters of a sort that loom in the shadows but whose effects underlie forms of political economy.

In the past decades, most cultural anthropologists have sought to understand structures of power without significantly intervening in the substance of study. While thus preserving our interest in the relationships between culture and power, the insights of ethnography as a discipline have rarely moved beyond social criticism. Indeed, social activism is often left by the American anthropological academy to development organizations, human rights NGOs, or the political scientists or journalists who often represent the face and controversies of public policy. Abandoning the possibility of praxis has gravely reduced the relevance of anthropology in a world of complex social dynamics. Our tool kit of ethnographic methods—the long-term and detailed forms of collecting data that emerge from the voices of a people—has neither served nor protected the disenfranchised nor does it have the structural design to do so. For while over the past two decades, institutions such as the World Bank or social work institutions have looked to ethnographic methods for cultural explanation, more recent reflexive inquiries, or complex theoretical articulations about the transnational and global arena, are often not the useful insights that our legal, activist, political science, and journalistic collaborators look for as they, too, search for deeper meaning (Paine 1996).

Many would insist that poststructuralism makes action impossible because each construct is a reconfiguration of domination of sorts that does not help to pinpoint complicity. When violence is seen as a form of politics and action, however, and its study is taken up both as a way to document and understand such actions as central to daily life, then collaborating with others in order to mitigate against tyranny in an age of extremism, resource wars, and current agendas of imperial intervention presents an important ground for merging theory and praxis. To identify some of the most central issues of our time by illuminating only the processes through which these practices are taking shape is to engage in theorization that has its place in the contribution of scholarly knowledge. To keep all ethnographic insights in the domain of theory and observation, however, is to participate in the complicity of reproduction in which one documents various forms of violence and powerlessness by providing the means to measure its significance.<sup>14</sup> However, the tenets of its reproduction remain intact.

14. In the 2009 revision to the code, an entire section on the dissemination of results has been added to the 2009 version. See “VI. Dissemination

of Results” in the code (American Anthropological Association 2009). They mark a shift toward sharing knowledge to broader audiences while also making a point against working in the field covertly.

## Toward an Engaged American Anthropology

Military action in Iraq or in the Sudan that offends our moral consciences should provoke more than the signing of proclamations pledging disengagement with American war efforts. Anthropologists so inclined must be willing to engage with key government policy and decision makers on both sides of the aisle and to see the various social processes (democratic or nondemocratic) in which those differently positioned are also engaged.

There is no formula for engagement, but the options must go well beyond nonengagement with military forces as the basis for praxis. Considerations vary with the contexts at hand and should not be foreclosed by a fixed professional code-based dictate. In this regard, ethnographers can document empirically the realities of social power—enfranchisement, inequality, and power abuses—in order to intervene before and during conflict contexts. The form and structure of the problem should be identified according to ethnographic insights that shape how those findings might be used to participate in locally relevant politics. Collaborative action, larger forms of mobilization, strategic forms of writing, and documentation are all useful strategies for consideration. Others abound and can be generated through internal processes of negotiation and assessment. For those interested in such uses of critical theory, considerations for action range from the contextual relevance, the potential impact and transformative possibilities, the pinpointing of domains of support, and the highlighting and consideration of relevant threats.

I recast the role of ethnography as a technology of knowledge and power whose methods can capture the complexities of ruptures and entanglements or histories of violence of all forms and suggest lessons that might be learned from these complex social contexts. Meeting this challenge means ex-

ination of Results” in the code (American Anthropological Association 2009). They mark a shift toward sharing knowledge to broader audiences while also making a point against working in the field covertly.

aming the relationship between theory and praxis as the basis for mainstream anthropological inquiry as well as exploring the range of imbricated inquiries that influence research, writing, and practice—our codes of regulation and our modalities of inquiry. And, just as ethnography has responded to the challenge of understanding new engagements with transnational connections, neoliberal governmentality, and empire, and has fostered the burgeoning study of various appendages, so too must understanding violence in those field sites involve new considerations. We must rethink the role and limits of anthropological ethnography by exploring the ways that knowledge-producing mechanisms such as ethnography are enmeshed within relationships that require thorough explanation. Such an approach to *engaged anthropology* follows a tradition with a broad-ranging genealogy from the history of applied anthropology to public anthropology to anthropology and activism to militant anthropology. Yet as I have indicated, there is no one definition of engaged anthropology. Its specific meanings are shaped by the contexts from which their dilemmas emerge. The engaged anthropology I suggest addresses the conceptual distinction between theory and praxis, the perceived gap between embedded and empirical work. This gap, with its ghosts of objectivity and insistent hierarchy, has produced stereotypes that suggest that “applied anthropologists”—nonobjective and nontheoretical—are void of legitimate conclusions. Such compartmentalization is false and has no place in the context of an unfurling new world order in whose presence anthropology has a far from public face and risks becoming divided between those in “ivory towers” and those who are exiled from academia because of the work they do. Instead, what is needed more than ever is social theory practically applied in a way that enables transformative possibilities that move us from merely documenting or disengaging to taking the practice of ethnography to its limits. In other words, those interested in the project of engagement can use their field knowledge and technical advisory capacities to attend to social inequalities.

The discipline will only benefit from unraveling the basis for social injustice by taking legible public positions within relevant fields of social and political power. Scholarly theory that is critically and reflexively informed by efforts to rethink and generate new perspectives on social criticism and practice are key. The link between state-making and life-protecting mechanisms for guarding innocence is not always evident. Nowhere else is this dilemma made more obvious than in conditions of war. The ugly realities of war-engaged violence are not simply about the embattlement of those visibly wounded. War is about the use of violence to achieve particular ends—often land, resources, and the power to construct the rules of law and procedure related to procuring and controlling those resources in legal terms. At times, those who are the most complicit in brokering conditions for conflict—such as international and national governments—are also the most legally protected. This is the case in sub-Saharan Africa, where the colonial history of anthropological knowl-

edge and the realities of engagement (or lack thereof) have failed to transcend empirical conclusions that have characterized our discipline from the beginning. Thus, the site of an engaged ethnography is actually the site of the convergence of an engaged practice of knowledge making and sharing with a highly circumscribed decision-making process that considers how one shares that knowledge, on whose terms, and for what purpose. These queries are vital for exploring the ways we ask and answer questions and for the ways that we revisit those intellectual and practical histories that have influenced our practices and enabled various sites of inequality to flourish.

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