Public Anthropology

Reviews

Crossing Over: A Review of Anthropology Now

Jeff Howe

There is much loose talk of ethnography among journalists. I’ve been writing for magazines for the past 20 years, and one almost gets the sense, among my colleagues, that we’re engaged in a form of social science: we, too, penetrate elusive groups, observe their rituals, and produce data that we then report to a larger community of interested readers. Moreover, we’re happily neither hobbled by the constraints of academic research nor faced with the dusty obscurity of traditional academic publishing. This is self-satisfied hogwash, of course. If there ever was a historical moment when the popular press engaged in the sort of rigorous, sustained research we associate with the academy, it ended a few bull markets ago. Journalists might fancy themselves social scientists, but our bosses will always consider us mere content providers.

That’s not to say general audiences don’t possess a healthy appetite for illuminating reports on strange and exotic peoples (even when those peoples are us) and under-appreciated dynamics of our contemporary world. It only means such material won’t usually appear in a for-profit magazine or newspaper. This creates a breach between supply and demand, into which a new magazine, Anthropology Now, has stepped. Published three times a year by Paradigm, beginning in 2009, Anthropology Now brings some of anthropology’s brightest minds to bear on “contemporary conversations and policy debates” (Anthropology Now n.d.). That’s a noble and uncontroversial goal. “We believe anthropology can enrich public understandings of the world,” write the editors (Anthropology Now n.d.). This should scratch just the right itch—especially in an era when the decline of newspapers demands new experiments in crossover publishing to fill the void in thoughtful media. “Anthropology Now will engage a wide range of audiences in 21st century anthropological conversations,” predicted cofounding editor Susan Harding of the University of California, Santa Cruz, “much as Margaret Mead engaged them in her generation’s anthropology” (Anthropology Now 2008). Such engagement is sorely needed and warmly welcome.

Anthropology Now does a fine job, in many spots, of fulfilling those lofty ambitions. An installment from the fall of 2009—the “atomic issue”—contains a range of relevant articles, including an account of the Rongelap islanders, who were exposed to fallout from U.S. nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands, then repatriated so that U.S. scientists might “study the movement of radiation through the environment, food chain, and the human body” (Johnston 2009). With false assurances that their island was safe, writes Barbara Rose Johnston, “the Rongelap community was shipped home” (2009). No detail from the Tuskegee syphilis experiment is more chilling than that simple sentence.

In the same issue, University of Chicago anthropologist Joseph Masco writes an informative consideration of the “long-term psychological consequences of living within a nuclear culture” (Masco 2009). Masco concentrates on the bunker—as an architectural notion, as an agglomeration of underground brick and mortar, and most of all as a metaphor that held sway over the imagination of the United States for the latter half of the 20th century. Masco reveals how a committee convened by President Eisenhower recommended a $55-billion shelter-building program not only to save U.S. lives but also to communicate a “will to live” to the Soviets. “Civil defense was theatrical as well as practical, a means of sending signals out into the world from underground bunker spaces, both real and imagined,” writes Masco (2009). This is great stuff. Masco retrieves an oft-ignored chapter of our recent past and combines thorough research with incisive, even imaginative analysis. This is why we read magazines, even—especially—when the articles touch on subjects we know little about.

If only Anthropology Now consistently cleared the high bar set by these few articles. Other features found in a review of the magazine’s first four issues suffer from a range of deficiencies, including scars from what must have been a difficult edit from academic into popular prose. In fact, one strongly suspects reading certain articles that they were first intended for an academic journal but, alas, were accepted by this one instead. Halfhearted attempts were then made at an act of translation, with predictable results. Cartesian dualism, we learn in one passage, is a “notion often challenged nowadays by the monistic concept of the biosocial” (Pålson 2010). This is followed by a citation, which would be all well and good if Anthropology Now were an academic journal. General audiences aren’t inclined to read references. They also believe that academia traffics in the gratuitously abstruse as a method of obtaining tenure and other tasty prizes. The goal of a crossover journal, I’d think, should be
to persuade them otherwise. Jargon like *monistic*, *biosocial*, and *reification* do nothing to accomplishing that task. It’s not that general audiences don’t understand what words like *reification* mean—they do. It’s that they know such words don’t facilitate understanding so much as inhibit it.

But this is a trifle compared to the sense that the articles themselves too rarely contain the kinds of genuinely fresh ideas—or better yet, fresh research—that academia should offer the public in such crossover literature. A piece on memory and Vietnam veterans starts out promisingly enough, pointing out that the image of hippies greeting returning vets with vitriol and spit may well be apocrypha that originated in the Reagan-era desire to rehabilitate the war and those who fought in it. Some deep-digging cultural archaeology would seem to be in store, but the piece instead takes us on a desultory tour of the author’s reminiscences, pop-cultural analytics, and some well-known recent U.S. history.

This, then, is the problem with too many of the features published so far in *Anthropology Now*: they don’t read as rigorous, or specialized enough, to be published in an academic journal (perhaps because they are diluted versions of academic articles?). And unfortunately, they don’t trade that rigor for that slightly—let’s be honest here—sensational quality possessed by even the most intellectual pieces in, say, the *New Yorker* or the *Atlantic Monthly*. Which is another way of saying the articles just aren’t that interesting.

We need—desperately, perhaps—bridges between the academy and the rest of us. The popular press suffered a spotty record in this regard in even the best of times. And these are not the best of times. The gauntlet is at the feet of good folks like those behind *Anthropology Now*. I just hope they can try a bit harder to carry it.

Jeff Howe  School of Journalism, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115, and Contributing Editor, Wired Magazine, San Francisco, CA 94107; bellarosey@gmail.com

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Organs Watch: Possibilities and Perils for Public Anthropology

Roberto Abadie

Recent technological advances in biomedicine have introduced new therapeutic possibilities but have also contributed to the emergence of a global market for human bodies and body parts. For example, artificial modes of human reproduction created a market for eggs, semen, and surrogate wombs. In addition, organ transfer generated a demand for kidneys and half livers. The whole body has become a valuable commodity as professional research subjects venture into the economy of Phase I Clinical Trials, testing drug safety for pharmaceutical companies. In the process, the trade has become a deeply unequal one in which poor, vulnerable, and easily exploited women and men, in the United States and, increasingly, in the global south, exchange their bodies for cash. Yet, these economic transactions are often obscured by buyers—either individuals or corporations—frequently using the language of donation, voluntarism, and “gift” giving.

This unjust and exploitative trade is one that anthropologists have documented and denounced since its inception in the 1990s. Few were more forceful in understanding the forces behind body commodification and in opposing the most abusive aspects of this trade than anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes. As an author, Scheper-Hughes has documented the ideologies, institutions, and social networks behind organ trafficking, one of the most egregious examples of bodily commerce. More than a decade of dedicated ethnographic research has allowed Scheper-Hughes to follow these transactions, leading her to Israel, Turkey, Brazil, South Africa, Western Europe, and the United States, among other sites. In Malinowskian fashion, she has uncovered the circulation of organs and other body parts: “In general, the flow of organs, tissues, and body parts follows the modern routes of capital: from South to North, from third to first world, from poor to rich, from black and brown to white, and from female to male bodies,” she writes (Scheper-Hughes 2001). According to Scheper-Hughes, organ trafficking both illuminates
and exacerbates existing social and racial inequalities. For example, a kidney from a Brazilian slum dweller costs 2,000 dollars while a kidney from an Israeli seller can be priced ten times higher (Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2004).

Of course, the selling of an organ for transplant purposes is illegal in most countries, but according to Scheper-Hughes, it is conducted regularly with the support of a complex and shady network of buyers, sellers, brokers, surgeons, and medical hospitals. Poor, desperate sellers—sometimes entire families—from Brazilian and Indian slums or Moldovan cities often consent to sell a kidney or other body part as a strategy of survival. Executed Chinese prisoners have their organs removed and integrated into this global trade. Between sellers and buyers stands a group of brokers in charge of “organ procurement” who use cash, promises, deception, and even ties with criminal mafias that also traffic women for sexual work and engage in other illicit trades to get the organs they need. Relatively wealthy Western buyers willing to bypass waiting lists and regulations, as well as rich Middle Eastern, Asian, and Latin American patients, procure coveted organs with the complicity of specialized medical-tourism entrepreneurs that offer an available organ—no questions asked—in sometimes exotic or luxurious hospital accommodations set in an otherwise impoverished country. According to Scheper-Hughes, U.S.-based hospitals and surgeons in some cases do not seem to ask many questions about organ provenance either. For Scheper-Hughes, this trade is not only illicit but also unethical, furthering social inequalities while also dehumanizing and endangering organ sellers who are left to fend for themselves after an organ is removed, leaving lifelong social and physical scars.

But her work has not stopped at understanding how organ trafficking works. She has also taken steps to uncover, prevent, and help prosecute it through the Organs Watch program founded with her colleague Lawrence Cohen in 1996. In the absence of an international body, Organs Watch was created as a temporary entity to “explore allegations of unethical and human rights violations in organs procurement and transplant surgery and to make recommendations to the appropriate medical bodies, such as the World Medical association, of strategies that might be used to enforce existing, but ineffectual, international regulations and standards on organs procurement and transplant” (Scheper-Hughes 2001). Among other accomplishments, her work with Organs Watch has alerted the Federal Bureau of Investigation to the existence of a Brooklyn-based illegal organs racket that was successfully prosecuted in 2009.

Perhaps the most interesting and replicable aspect of Scheper-Hughes’s work is the partnership Organs Watch has established with journalists. Scientists and anthropologists have often been wary of collaborating with journalists, fearing that the need for expediency and catchy headlines would compromise the nuances and complexities involved in scientific inquiry. However, as Scheper-Hughes and Cohen have shown, developing partnerships with journalists is a powerful way of making the results of anthropological research known to larger publics, strengthening the likelihood of shaping public policies. There are a number of ways in which anthropologists could build on the Organs Watch example and strengthen collaborations with journalists. For example, we could set up seminars with investigative journalists about ethnographic methods, not to convert them into improvised anthropologists but to inform them about what we do and how we do it. In turn, journalists could teach us about investigative-reporting techniques like approaching powerful sources, following paper trails, and exposing wrongdoing. It is unfortunate that investigative reporting seems to be on the decline, pressed by an economic crisis that also threatens our work (and jobs) as anthropologists. But if public anthropology is to remain relevant, it will need the continuous effort of committed anthropologists working with a number of actors, from social movements to more unexpected ones, as Organs Watch has shown through its collaboration with both law enforcement and a variety of media that has helped cover and amplify the impact of its work.

Working undercover at times—posing as an organ buyer—to track illegal activities, Scheper-Hughes’s ethnographic research has also raised questions about anthropological ethics, our relationship with subjects, and the production of knowledge, pushing disciplinary boundaries while drawing a fair share of criticism. Her work pursuing illegal networks and activities has challenged the conventional working of Institutional Review Boards in particular, with their emphasis on transparency, informed consent, and full disclosure. Undercover anthropology might challenge current ethical assumptions, but it is at times the only way to “study up,” following powerful people and institutions that would not be otherwise accessible. Besides, ethical regulations exist to protect vulnerable research subjects from coercion and harm. No doubt mafioso-like organ brokers, hospitals, and others unsavory characters can protect themselves very well. Although the implications of such research methods demand further discussion and debate, Scheper-Hughes’s work is a timely contribution as the market for human bodies and body parts seems to be thriving more than ever, opening new venues of inquiry and action.

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Roberto Abadie  Health Sciences Doctoral Programs, Graduate Center, City University of New York; rabadie@gc.cuny.edu


Walking the Line between Accommodation and Transformation: Evaluating the Continuing Career of Jim Yong Kim

G. Derrick Hodge

In several early speeches given last year as the new president of Dartmouth College, Jim Kim quoted one of his predecessors, John Dickey: “Make the world’s troubles your troubles.” This, he informed his audiences, is what he has tried to do for much of his career. And it has been a remarkable career, indeed: Kim has not only rhetorically embraced the troubles of the world’s sick and dying poor but also has actual extended and enhanced the lives of millions. What better description of—and prescription for—a practicing and public anthropology than to take on the troubles of the world and try to solve them? What is uncertain is whether Kim’s new role as an Ivy League president will facilitate or stifle this vision of a critically engaged anthropology.

The staggering successes of Kim and his colleagues—for he seldom discusses his own work without giving credit to his colleagues and collaborators—are well-known in a number of fields, not least medicine and anthropology. In 1987, Kim cofounded Partners in Health (PIH) with Ophelia Dahl, Paul Farmer, and others to support the work that Farmer and Dahl had been doing in their clinic in rural Haiti. In the mid-1990s, Kim took the lead on the organization’s work with multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) in Lima. There, he rejected the conventional wisdom of the medical establishment by insisting that slum dwellers with MDR-TB could be successfully treated and would complete prescribed drug regimens. He accomplished this by following the lead of his Peruvian partners in hiring community health workers and by negotiating a 90 percent reduction of the price of MDR-TB drugs. The protocol that Kim and his colleagues developed in Lima is now a standard of care worldwide.

Within six years of having been appointed assistant professor at Harvard Medical School (2000), Kim was a full professor (2006–09); in 2003, he was awarded the MacArthur Foundation’s “Genius” Fellowship; in 2005, he was one of U.S. News and World Report’s 25 “Best Leaders”; and in 2006, he was named one of Time magazine’s 100 most important people in the world. He was chair of three departments at Harvard (simultaneously) and head of its Division of Global Health Inequity.

Kim took two years’ leave from Harvard and PIH (2003–05) to become, initially, advisor to the director general of the World Health Organization (WHO) and then head of HIV/AIDS for WHO. It was in this capacity that he designed and implemented the “3 × 5” program. Under Kim’s leadership, WHO—and its related organization UNAIDS—established a goal of treating three million persons with HIV from poor countries with antiretroviral therapy by the year 2005. This bold move drew widespread skepticism, silenced only by its enormous success (although the goal was not reached until 2007). In this work, Kim was cheerleader, diplomat, fundraiser, physician, anthropologist, humanitarian, and administrator. Importantly, 3 × 5 was not merely a vertical health-emergency intervention but, rather, an opportunity to improve health infrastructure through regulatory and policy development within host countries. Thus, Kim’s time at WHO was not merely about typical public health intervention, consisting of service provision, prevention, and palliative care; it was also an attempt to implement the kind of structural transformation that many anthropologists have as their goal. Yet even Kim’s boldness and innovation at WHO, although it saved many lives, was limited in its ultimate effect in that it did not call into question the legitimacy of the economic structures that impede human well-being.

Kim’s 2002 coedited volume Dying for Growth went further in this direction, attacking the structural roots of global health disparities and positing capitalism—particularly in its neoliberal and developmentalist guises—as the underlying source of poor health outcomes. Although the volume laid bare the ultimate source of death and suffering, Kim’s work at WHO had far more direct impact on human life than his scholarly interventions. Herein lies a tension in anthropology: our analyses make clear that nothing less than dramatic transformation can save the world, but the immediate needs of human life require a direct and pragmatic engagement with existing structures of power. Kim’s career embodies one solution to this dilemma but one that might not be entirely satisfactory to more revolutionary-minded anthropologists.

For instance, Kim has lauded the effectiveness of the radical AIDS activist movement ACT UP, and some activists extol Kim for his visionary leadership at WHO. But it is not at all clear that there will be any lasting institutional improvements as a result of his efforts. The ACT UP activists he praised are those who, in fact, left the radical edge of the movement to pursue conciliatory engagements with the pharmaceutical industry. Indeed, in his 3 × 5 initiative and in his work in Lima, Kim partnered with pharmaceutical companies and several times affirmed the profit motive and market mechanisms as helpful tools in addressing public health emergencies. Although Kim seems to understand that neoliberal capitalism is the source of much death and dying, as a physician and public health administrator he has been adept at making strange bedfellows in the interest of saving human
lives. He has been quite willing to support the profitability of already very wealthy corporations if it means saving a life in the here and now. Yet by not challenging the ways in which profit-motivated economic processes cause the kind of illness that they then claim to cure, this kind of pragmatism risks sacrificing future generations for current exigencies.

Kim’s work reveals another tension in anthropology: the desire of many of us to contribute to dramatic structural transformation versus the paucity of actual change that most of us accomplish. Contrasting medicine to anthropology, Kim told the journalist Bill Moyers in 2009 that “Anthropologists are a little bit different [than physicians]; we don’t often act on what we do.” Unfortunately, that statement may be more accurate than we would like to believe. Most anthropologists are deeply committed to the well-being and liberation of the people with whom we work; yet few of us can claim that our work actually makes a difference in people’s lives. Our books bring us tenure in privileged places, but the changes proposed in ethnographies are almost never realized, even in part. Kim is quite correct that most anthropologists “don’t often act on what [they] do.” If Kim is vulnerable to the critique that he has conceded ground to those who seek profit from sickness, then he is also to be praised for having had profound effect on very many lives—far more than most of us can claim.

Kim’s astonishing successes indicate one way to creatively mediate the tension between ideological rigor and pragmatic accommodation. It is yet unclear whether he will be unable to continue this engagement in his new institutional context. Dartmouth—and most other universities—is deeply embedded in the political economies that produce the suffering that anthropologists denounce. Because Dartmouth now has a claim on Kim’s many talents, it would seem unlikely that he will launch a serious challenge to the same structures that sustain his new institution. He has stated that his goal as president is to train students to “do great things,” but it is not clear whether those “great things” include overturning the structures of material inequality on which the institution depends.

Jim Kim, at age 50, has already given profound legacies to the world: he has saved countless lives and challenged several institutions to consider their responsibilities to the losers in this violent global political economy. Hopefully, in the next phase of his career, Kim will not allow institutional strictures to dull his critical edge. If he is able to avoid the temptations of power and privilege, his new position could allow him to do far more than just mentor students to “do great things”; as president of Dartmouth, he could in fact launch an unflinching critique of dominant structures of knowledge production and the ways in which universities contribute to the reproduction of inequalities. To do this, he would have to upset the apple cart even more than he did at WHO. If he is willing to risk alienating wealthy donors, he might feel morally compelled to use his new pulpit to tell the truth about global capitalism, as he did in Dying for Growth.

G. Derrick Hodge  Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Missouri at Kansas City, and the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, New York; gdhodge@mac.com

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Review Essay

The Human Terrain System and Anthropology: A Review of Ongoing Public Debates

Maximilian C. Forte

ABSTRACT The advent of the U.S. Army’s Human Terrain System (HTS) and the recruitment of anthropologists to provide “cultural knowledge” for the purpose of more effective counterinsurgency in Iraq and Afghanistan has created numerous conflicts and debates between HTS advocates and anthropological critics. These debates involve issues of ethical research, the role of anthropological research in war, the consequences of militarization, further harm to the reputation of the discipline, and the possible jeopardizing of anthropological field-workers who could be mistaken as U.S. spies. Those advocating for HTS claim that it is not unethical, that it helps to save lives, is not involved in collecting intelligence or targeting, and is a key way for anthropology to become relevant. This article serves as a primer on these debates and examines why HTS has largely failed to attract anthropological recruits. [ethics, human terrain system, imperialism, militarization, war]
The last few years have seen a transformation in U.S. military doctrine that has been described by some as a “cultural turn” (Gregory 2008). The case for “anthropological engagement” with the military and national security establishments was forcefully laid out in a series of military publications starting in 2005. The question was posed: Why did the military, intelligence services, and diplomats lack knowledge about “adversary culture”? According to anthropologist Montgomery McFate, one of the most prominent actors in this transformation, it was because of “the almost total absence of anthropology within the national-security establishment” (McFate 2005:24). Although anthropology was born as a “war-fighting discipline,” since the Vietnam War it rejected its “status as the handmaiden of colonialism,” retreated into the ivory tower where it performed linguistically obtuse and postmodern self-flagellation and was seemingly determined to be as irrelevant and “isolationist” as possible (McFate 2005:28). “Cultural information will inevitably be used as the basis of military operations and public policy,” McFate argued, “and, if anthropologists refuse to contribute, how reliable will that information be?” (2005:37). However, according to McFate and others, simply providing “cultural awareness” will not be enough: what is needed is “ethnographic intelligence” to penetrate shadowy networks and to carry out “global counterinsurgency” (Renz 2006). One of the best ways of doing so, some proposed, would be for anthropologists to enlist in the Human Terrain System (HTS), a program harkening back to the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program of the Vietnam War (Kipp et al. 2006).

HTS describes itself as a “new proof-of-concept program, run by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC)” that aims to “improve the military’s ability to understand the highly complex local socio-cultural environment in the areas where they are deployed” and to “assist the U.S. government in understanding foreign countries and regions prior to an engagement within that [sic] region” (HTS n.d.). The HTS website says that the program was developed in response to “identified gaps in [military] commanders’ and staffs’ understanding of the local population and culture, and its impact on operational decisions” as well as the inadequate transfer of that knowledge to new units rotated into the war zone (HTS n.d.). HTS claims that it mobilizes “the expertise and experience of social scientists and regional experts” by deploying them in Human Terrain Teams (HTTs) placed within combat brigades in Iraq and Afghanistan to “inform... decision making at the tactical, operational and strategic levels” (HTS n.d.).

HTS initially claimed that “saving lives” was one of the likely benefits of their work. They were reducing the need for “kinetic” (violent) operations that arose from “cultural misunderstandings” on the part of U.S. forces while simultaneously providing aid and services to local communities, helping to win “hearts and minds” and thus again reduce the need for lethal operations. HTS officials repeatedly emphasized that theirs was not an intelligence program and that they did not advise on the use of lethal force. They would achieve their goals by deploying people with expertise in the Middle East and Afghanistan to map tribal networks and social structures and gather data on local customs and histories. They argued that “ignorance” of local cultures would only make things worse for all sides.

HTS officials also claimed that there was no conflict between its methods and the American Anthropological Association’s code of ethics. HTT members would seek informed consent from Iraqis and Afghans, those interviewed would not be coerced, and identities would be kept confidential. At a larger level, McFate, HTS’s senior social scientist, argued that the program was a way for anthropologists to exit the ivory tower, become publicly engaged, inform policymaking, and help “anthropologize the military” (Rohde 2007).

HTS has enjoyed a great deal of positive media coverage, including dozens of articles and television news reports. The Atlantic (2009) named McFate one of its top “brave thinkers,” while Wired listed her as one of ten key people that the new president should listen to (Shachtman 2008). HTS has been the subject of a documentary film (Der Derian et al. 2010), a play (Mitchell 2009), and at least three books (González 2009; Network of Concerned Anthropologists 2009; Stanton 2009), as well as numerous articles in Anthropology Today and Anthropology News.

Since its inception, HTS has grown to include more than 500 employees (Shay 2009), fielding more than two dozen HTTs in Iraq and Afghanistan and receiving annual funding that (until recent months) reached as much as $250 million (Stockman 2009). On the battlefield, HTT members could initially earn up to $300,000 annually. In late 2008, however, the program ceased to be run by private military contractors, forcing salaries down to the low $200,000s. One would think this would make a great selling point given that, as McFate noted, the “majority of newly minted anthropologists brutally compete for a limited number of underpaid university faculty appointments” (2005:28). By the middle of 2009, however, only six HTS employees possessed a Ph.D. in anthropology, and four held M.A.s in anthropology, while most of the HTS staff had degrees in fields like political science and international relations (CEAUSSIC 2009:13, 63).

For most of its history, HTS has been mired in controversy. The program has sprung dozens of leaks, attracting considerable criticism to the program. HTTs have suffered three fatalities, each case causing a spike in public attention. One HTT member was tried and convicted for the murder of a detainee (Shachtman 2009). A wide range of allegations have been made against the program, from waste and fraud to sexual harassment and gunrunning. HTS is currently under review by the House Armed Services Committee (HASC), which limited its funding until an “independent assessment” by the Center for Naval Analyses was submitted (HASC 2010:25). To date, the contents of that review have not been released.

The program has come under particularly heavy criticism from many anthropologists. In October of 2007, the
Executive Board of the AAA issued a statement “express[ing] its disapproval of the HTS program” as an “unacceptable application of anthropological expertise.” The board described having “grave concerns about the involvement of anthropological knowledge and skill in the HTS project.” Specifically, the board criticized HTS for “placing anthropologists in positions in which their work will be in violation of the AAA Code of Ethics” and threatening the well-being of “both other anthropologists and persons other anthropologists study” (American Anthropological Association Executive Board 2007).

Following a careful and much-lengthier investigation of HTS, the AAA’s Commission on the Engagement of Anthropology with the U.S. Security and Intelligence Communities (CEAUSSIC) broadly condemned the program: “When ethnographic investigation is determined by military missions, not subject to external review,” the commission wrote, “where data collection occurs in the context of war, integrated into the goals of counterinsurgency, and in a potentially coercive environment—all characteristic factors of the HTS concept and its application—it can no longer be considered a legitimate professional exercise of anthropology” (CEAUSSIC 2009:4). At least two new anthropological organizations were created in large part to oppose such programs.3

Criticisms among individual anthropologists have been numerous and diverse. David H. Price queried the evidentiary basis of claims that one HTT helped reduce violence by 60 percent in of Afghanistan, discovering that there was no such evidence (Price 2009a). Other HTS claims to have reduced violence have been questioned by journalists and were again found wanting (Weinberger 2008:584). Many have also observed that HTS is generally not deploying people with prior experience in or knowledge about Iraq and Afghanistan, and most personnel lack any ability to speak local languages. Several have challenged some of HTS’s basic assumptions, arguing, for example, that counterinsurgency can never be humanitarian and that it has almost never succeeded (Price 2009b).

The bulk of the criticism from anthropologists, however, has been directed at the program’s perceived failure to abide by even the most basic principles of ethical research. That HTS avoids harming other human beings is difficult to argue when it militates for one party in an armed conflict. Others have questioned whether informed consent is truly sought and obtained, especially when HTT members travel with armed soldiers and are often themselves armed. Among those HTS members who have sworn that they obtained consent, they have said that consent was in written form and that copies were deposited in digital format with HTS. This procedure would create a paper trail with replicable copies leading to identifiable informants and thus violating informants’ confidentiality and possible safety.

Others have questioned the claim that HTS is not involved in intelligence gathering: the July 2010 Wikileaks release of Afghan war records showed cooperation with intelligence branches of the military to be a regular occurrence, with spying occurring within the program itself through the acquisition of information from the private field notes of civilian members of HTTs.4 Further compromising the confidentiality and safety of informants is the practice of the various U.S. armed services and NATO’s International Security Assistance Force posting photographs of HTS employees interviewing locals on various publicly accessible Flickr photostreams. Many have repeatedly criticized HTS for harming the reputation of anthropology and potentially endangering the research prospects or even the lives of anthropologists abroad who may be suspected of being spies.

Some have also raised questions about the role and credibility of HTS’s leading anthropological proponent, McFate. In 2008, Mother Jones revealed that, prior to joining HTS, McFate worked for years as a corporate spy and penetrated the antigun lobby and environmental and animal rights activist groups (Ridgeway et al. 2008). A year earlier, McFate was found to have helped author plagiarized passages in the Army’s new Counterinsurgency Field Manual (Price 2007). Price also has shown how McFate’s doctoral thesis may have made her Irish Republican Army informants vulnerable to cooption and defeat. The thesis includes statements such as “knowledge of the enemy leads to a refinement in knowledge of how best to kill the enemy” (Price 2009b).

As a result of the public debates with anthropologists and other critics, HTS has revised some of its key claims. Officials are now careful to state that deployed HTTs do not provide “direct support” to combat troops and do not “proactively” collect intelligence. In spite of the fact that most HTT members wear U.S. military uniforms and carry firearms, HTS claims that in environments “where most of the population is armed, an assumption that the presence of weapons automatically carries with it the threat of coercive force is simply incorrect.” Locals, HTS officials say, “are smart enough to differentiate between combat forces and personnel who conduct non-combat functions.” HTS has also claimed that the need to conform to standard codes of ethical research with human subjects in place for all federal agencies has been waived by the U.S. Army. In fact, officers have said that “the goal of HTS is the same as that of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) code of ethics: “do no harm”—while they add the qualification “or at least help the military to do less harm.”5

As the program seeks to expand into other areas, including the recently created U.S. Army Africa Command (AFRICOM), it also suffers from competition within the military. Existing Army intelligence units have begun using “human terrain analysis” without conducting ethnographic research or recruiting civilian social scientists, while new units are competing for funding, such as the Socio-Cultural Research and Advisory Teams (SCRATs) to be employed by AFRICOM under different leadership and distinct guidelines for research and engagement.6

The military’s cultural turn clashed head on with anthropology’s political turn. When McFate and others decided
they would “make anthropology useful to the military” (Stannard 2007) and “anthropologize the military,” they overlooked at least four key forces that would undermine their project. One was the strong opposition of the membership of the American Anthropological Association, which was concerned about the militarization of their discipline by the Pentagon and private military contractors. The second was the formation of the Network of Concerned Anthropologists (NCA), whose advocacy rallied attention and support for anthropological opposition to participation in counterinsurgency. A third was the growing tide of public antiwar sentiment, with majorities across Western nations generally opposing both the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, making deeper involvement in such interventions unpopular. And the fourth was rising discontent within the ranks of HTS itself, finding expression in some of the leaks previously noted.

Neither the Pentagon, nor HTS, nor their contractors seemed to anticipate or be prepared for the nature and extent of the anthropological insurrection they faced. Several individuals with ties to HTS have admitted that the combined efforts of the AAA, NCA, and media have had an impact on severely limiting the number of anthropologists willing to join HTS, forcing the program to look elsewhere for recruits.7 Although the program officially asserts that “HTS is not an applied military anthropology program” and that it is “fundamentally multidisciplinary in nature,” current media coverage in Europe, with direct HTS participation and permission, continues to sell the program as an anthropological one.8 The title of a profile in a prominent Italian daily reads, “American Anthropologist Montgomery McFate Speaks: I’ll Show You the Real Avatars” (Oriani 2010; see also Callahan and di Lauro 2009; Langenbach 2010; Manea 2010). Somehow, it would seem, the message of the antiwar blockbuster—in which anthropologists—avatars working for resource-hungry imperialists come to side with the colonized—has been lost on McFate.

NOTES
2. An abundance of such leaks has been published in roughly three dozen articles by the independent journalist John Stanton. For a complete list to date, see John Stanton’s profile: http://zeroanthropology.net/about-the-bloggers/john-stanton/.
3. Full disclosure: I helped found one (Anthropologists for Justice and Peace in Canada) and one of the coeditors of this section, David S. Vine, helped found the other (The Network of Concerned Anthropologists in the United States).
5. The direct quotes in this paragraph all come from the FAQs of the HTS http://humanterrainsystem.army.mil/faqs.html.
6. For examples and details, see http://zeroanthropology.net/2010/05/29/the-u-s-army%e2%80%99s%e2%80%99human-terrain-system and http://zeroanthropology.net/2010/05/30/scrats-africom-after-the-human-terrain-system.
7. Personal communications via e-mail from three former HTS employees have testified to this internal complaint.

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