Welcome to Negativeland: On Identifying the Empty Spaces Marking What Isn’t Being Said.

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I appreciate the restraints anthropologists working for the military face, I suppose we all face some sort of restrictions, but there is a point where these restrictions not only overly-constrict transparency, but they limit the public analysis and conversations that can publicly be had with the external world. When these narratives are shared with us on the outside, there are patterns to the silences and unaddressed elements that are informative, even if their presence is mostly marked as empty or “negative spaces”—that is: things not said whose absence defines everything surrounding them. This session is marked by such absences to a degree that these silences have their own message.

In trying to decipher what’s going on with these militarized uses of anthropology I sometimes think I’ve wandered into Negativeland: not the band, but a place where lots of things cannot be directly said, and the negative space of things not-said takes on its own importance and is used to not say what one doesn’t mean. If I am to synthetically describe the big-picture that emerges from this session and its issues, I see a picture with some objects placed in the foreground, but vast empty spaces dominate the canvas.

This session is filled with empty space. There is the empty space created by only a single participant submitting a written paper, and another providing a good detailed outline to the discussants (perhaps this is a measure of different academic cultures). An empty space formed by two participants canceling. An empty space sustained by papers compartmentalizing the specifics of anthropological articulations with the military as if they were separate from larger neo-imperial missions of invasion and occupation.
Some of this empty space marks different-academic (not necessarily un- or anti-academic) practices prevailing in these environments. While I understand that such disclaimers that individual papers do not represent institutional policies are common, but just as non-attribution or non-disclosure policies detract from academic accountability these disclaimers add more empty space in our picture of what goes on in these military worlds. When Montgomery McFate and Steve Fondacaro do Human Terrain recruiting tours on university campuses they routinely tell those in attendance that their remarks are “off the record.” It must be convenient to not have a record that one can be off of.

Let me make some comments on individual papers before addressing larger disciplinary concerns.

Roberto Gonzalez

There is no surprise that my views most closely align with those of Roberto Gonzalez. Roberto’s analysis of the Orwellian elements of the term “human terrain” and how Human Terrain Teams work to fill-in empty spaces in the military’s knowledge with simplified iconic labels shows one use for portions of anthropological knowledge. Human Terrain Teams may have friendly faces, or (as we saw two weeks ago) they may unleash deadly force, but Roberto shows: they are certainly about control.

Lieutenant Colonel Gentile’s statement shows how indentifying “friends” in the context of military occupations creates negative space of enemies. As Human Terrain Personnel collect information reporting identities of cooperative and compliant individuals or groups as “not” Taliban or “not” sympathetic to al-Quaidia, those occupying the negative space of these composite pictures risk becoming targets. As Gonzalez points out, the lines designating what is and isn’t intelligence are easily blurred.
There remains empty space in answers to Roberto’s question: “Are the humanitarian goals articulated by some HTT members being realized?” Human Terrain supporters have remained silent on fundamental questions of: when does the use of soft-power become soft-structural-violence and systemic coercion in environments of military occupation and full spectrum dominance?

It seems to me that Roberto is asking the sort of holistic anthropological questions that our discipline has traditionally asked when studying “others” and their systems of power—it would be un-anthropological to not ask these same questions of ourselves.

**Montgomery McFate**

Montgomery McFate has failed to submit a paper, and her absence leaves us with more empty space and unanswered questions: her attempt to send a replacement was curious and it suggests she conceives of academic conferences as some sort of “briefing” or a Human Terrain Infomercial where tag-team rules rather than basic scholarly standards apply.

I remain disappointed by McFate’s inability to engage with anthropologists outsider her isolated sphere, and her work is now decreasingly anthropological in any meaningful sense of the word. Her refusal to answer questions and criticisms works well in the political space of Washington, D.C., but academia requires accountability and answers, not avoidance and spin. I’m not referring to her absence today (I accept that she has duties elsewhere, but that does not excuse her from her obligation to submit a paper), I’m talking about her un-academic refusal to answer anthropologists’ questions about her work. These unanswered questions are stacking up—yet if you look at her abstract for this session she claims that: anthropology is trying to silence a debate about these issues.
This is an absurd trope, if McFate wanted to debate she’d have at least written a paper, or she would start answering her critics’ questions: questions about the unattributed writings of other anthropologists appearing in the new Counterinsurgency Field Manual; questions about her reported involvement in the surveillance of an American gun control group. Questions about why, rather than acknowledging that Human Terrain Teams raise complex ethical issues to be negotiated, she has instead moved forward without even trying to identify or address these issues.

While the media is easily stonewalled by silence, scholars need to keep track of questions that are never answered. We need to keep asking, and we deserve answers. Instead of answers we get more empty space.

Beyond McFate’s refusal to engage in academic debate, she remains silent about whether her military engagement changes the military’s fundamental mission, or if her hawking of anthropologist as tool only increases the efficiency of corrupt missions.

**Brian Selmeski**

Like McFate, Brian Selmeski did not produce a paper or anything beyond his abstract, so my prepared remarks are built around this empty space.

That anthropologists working within military educational systems face many of the same issues anthropologists working in universities makes sense (especially given the increasingly corporatization and militarization of universities), yet these similarities do not account for what were once fundamental differences in missions: wherein one claimed to seek knowledge for victory, security and defense, and the other claimed knowledge for knowledge sake.
It isn’t that we can’t try to push back and reshape something as powerful as the military from within, but I worry that if we don’t recognize the historical and contemporary likely futility and the likelihood that much of what we do will be co-opted and used in ways we do not intend, then the naivety of such enterprises will lead to what have historically been the taking of anthropological knowledge for conquest and manipulation. In these contexts, intentions matter little beyond functioning as the gateway drug for military advancements over the top of well-meaning intentions.

The empty space dominating Brian’s landscape are unanswered political questions about what ends anthropological knowledge is being put to.

**Kerry Fosher**

While Kerry Fosher and I remain at odds on several key points concerning anthropological engagements with military and intelligence agencies; we share some important common ground regarding the need to address key ethical issues that limit or shape one’s engagements, and I have a lot of respect for her awareness of the risks facing anthropologists and others who do not have the independence to walk away at anytime from a system that can (and does at times) make requests that press beyond the limits of ethical propriety.

That Kerry walks this line with trepidation, sensitivity, and a well-marked-escape-route is a credit to her character; but the unusualness of these precautions is a monument to the dangers facing other anthropologists (who have not, or are not able to) constructed such elaborate means of avoiding ethical compromises.

While I don’t disagree with Kerry’s point that “we must consider not only the consequences of action, but also the consequences of inaction”—this does not settle what
our action should be. Likewise, when Kerry asks, “should we talk with policy-makers if we know there is a risk of them misunderstanding or misusing our assistance?”—the larger empty space surrounding this question includes a landscape where military personnel in Iraq are engaged in a mission of occupation where even if anthropological knowledge is “understood” (as opposed to “misunderstood”) the mission’s limited parameters and outcomes may arguably necessitate the misuse of anthropology.

Even with whatever my criticisms of Kerry’s points might be, I praise her for trying to carefully negotiate the ethics of working for and studying the military. Kerry takes ethical issues seriously, and while many of us make different political decisions to not work to support these current wars of the Bush administration, she does not ignore the professional ethical issues of she finds in her workplace.

The specifics of Kerry’s work and her efforts to at least acknowledge and try and address these problems signifies that some anthropologists working in military settings are striving to identify and work within appropriate ethical boundaries, boundaries that appear to have been overrun by Team McFate, Kerry acknowledges and tries to address these boundaries—as most of us do when we confront complications in the field.

While I have fundamental political disagreements with Kerry about what anthropological work for the military is contributing to in this particular neo-colonial campaign, Kerry does not shirk or dismiss ethical concerns and her work openly worries about how she does her work and what others might do with it.

Conclusions

Finally, beyond the scope of these individual papers, a force contributing to anthropologists’ difficulties in confronting the militarized consumption of
anthropological knowledge are problems with how a discipline so attached to forms of postmodern discourse devoted to rejecting metanarratives can come to grips with what appears to me to be the most significant of empty spaces filling anthropology’s canvas today: An embedded political economy that will determine how military and intelligence agencies will use our work despite any of our best intentions or efforts to steer these organizations as we wish. I cannot see us grappling with these recurrent problems if we cannot find patterns stretching beyond the ideographic.

In my own work I document how American anthropology has deep and often troubling ties to military and intelligence agencies. While postmodern trends favor less the sort of meta-narratives of power that I find bridging our discipline’s historical interactions with powerful military forces over generations, the possibility of such interactions presents grave risks—and the rapid transition from a system of social science funding relatively independent of the needs of state to one increasingly tied to direct military needs (through PRISP, NSEP, Minerva, and increasing anthropological employment with military agencies) leaves anthropology in a vulnerable position.

The failure of anthropology to generate critiques of these growing uses of anthropology with larger historical trends is not surprising given disciplinary trends of the past two decades away from what are now derided as deterministic or totalizing analysis. Today our dominant critiques of power are removed from more traditionally Marx-based economic models: but without notions of power that link larger economic contingencies governing growing a political economy of student debt ratios, and the decline of traditional research funding with the systemic growth in militarized institutional uses of anthropological knowledge, I fear anthropology will be ripe for sweet-talk insisting that
individual agency and good intentions can overcome deep structural relationships and larger economic forces.

The work of McFate, Fosher, Selmeski, and others working for the military is thematically united by non-totalizing postmodern themes that are familiar to us all: they believe that their own agency can break through historical forces that they admit have abused anthropology in past conflicts. But it is also united by what is hard for me to not see as a form of unjustified innocence, or if you prefer overly optimistic naivety.

My own vulgar materialist tendencies see the structures of power operating in a far more deterministic manner than most mainstream postmodern theorists rejecting such metanarratives allow. I worry that if we have no overarching theoretical approach to critically account for how knowledge is produced and used, then we lose a critical analytical lens through which we can see inherent problematic relationships in melding anthropology with militarized ends; and we misjudge the likelihood that Fosher, Selmeski and others declaring good intentions can exert their individual agency and alter what becomes of anthropology in such institutions.