Engaged Anthropology: The Ethics and Politics of Collaborations in the Field

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“Anthropology’s future is potentially more significant than it’s past.”
Anthropologist Keith Hart.

Project Description
In the United States during the latter half of the 20th century, anthropologists critically dissected Western colonialism and its implications for the discipline’s methods and representations of data. Anthropologists employed or contracted to work with government agencies and NGOs in former colonies became a focus of much of that disciplinary introspection. In particular, applied anthropologists who believed they were using their expertise to solve social problems were criticized for being unaware of their involvement in sustaining neocolonial relations. Many became convinced that while genuine collaboration with interlocutors on an equal footing was critical, the legacies of colonialism made such collaborations next to impossible. Partly in response, during this same period increasing numbers of Western anthropologists relocated their research from its classic Third World locales to the United States and Europe. In parallel, while older forms of “applied” anthropology persisted, fresh approaches proliferated, whose appellations – e.g. “engaged,” “critical,” “participatory action,” “collaborative” – pointed to renegotiated relationships between academically trained experts and the people with and for whom they sought to work.

In 2008, in the inaugural edition of a new journal entitled Collaborative Anthropologies, one author goes so far as to state, “Not only is collaborative research ethical, and thus morally preferable to historical models of research, but it is better research because its methodology emphasizes multiple, polyphonic perspectives, which will leave a richer heritage of ethnography to subsequent generations of ethically conscious readers.” As a researcher engaged in a collaborative project in Ghana, the celebration of collaboration as superior to theory-focused research is something that Carolyn Rouse should welcome. Rouse does not, however, believe that such an easy conclusion is warranted.

Our primary concern is that conversations and methods relating to collaborative research are primarily coming from American and European anthropologists

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conducting fieldwork within the West. What collaboration and ethical engagement means for anthropologists working in formerly colonized or developing countries remains poorly theorized. For the most part, what constitutes ethical engagement has been defined by Western experts (researchers and academics) working with lay people in the Third World rather than their colleagues housed in universities from Cape Town to Bangalore to the Pacific Rim. The effect of these asymmetries is the reassertion of the US and Europe’s monopoly on disciplinary expertise. The goal of this project is to redirect what is meant by engaged anthropology to include the development of mutual awareness and the potential for collaborations between Euro-American anthropologists and those employed outside of Euro-American academic centers.

The first goal of this project is to continue the conversations begun by Gustavo Lins Ribeiro and Arturo Escobar in *World Anthropologies: Disciplinary Transformations with Systems of Power* (2006) and Aleksandar Boskovic in *Other People’s Anthropology: Ethnographic Practice on the Margins* (2008). With CITR funding, we would document the emerging institutionalization of our discipline in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, China, Latin America, India, Eastern Europe, and the Pacific Rim. We want to understand, first, what histories and texts are being used to define the discipline’s objects of study, and what institutional and discursive roadblocks often stand in the way of creating independent anthropology departments. Our second goal is to understand how anthropologists in different parts of the world define ethical fieldwork, and how the definitions respond to local histories and contemporary needs. Finally, we want to identify institutional affiliations that Princeton University anthropology students can turn to for knowledge and support during fieldwork. The idea is that if conversations about what counts as ethical forms of engagement in the field are produced regionally and institutionally, then our students should be informed of these before formulating projects and before entering the field.

Anthropology has, of course, always been international. Anthropology students receive extensive language training and learn about other cultures through immersion in the field. But it is impossible today for anthropology students to simply arrive in a remote location and begin collecting data. Both the U.S. and most receiving countries now require that students obtain approval to conduct research.

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People living in what might seem like “remote” locations have access to the Internet and phone service. Given their increasing knowledge of global wealth, our interlocutors are now demanding significant forms of compensation, in some cases shares in publication royalties, for their participation in data collection. This means that non-collaborative research by U.S. students outside the U.S. is becoming increasingly difficult. Princeton’s anthropology department must adjust to these new conditions and prepare students for the research requirements that will confront them. We believe that by networking with several key programs outside the U.S. we will be better prepared to send students into the field for research. By increasing our responsiveness to disciplinary transformations abroad, our program will begin to set new standards within the discipline.

**Significance**

In 2010, a leader of the Navajo Nation told a Princeton undergraduate that the idea that Navajo are somehow more in touch with nature was made up by anthropologists. In 2003, a Yemeni anthropology professor told a Princeton graduate student that the way to defeat Iraq was to send in a team of anthropologists to conquer hearts and minds. Over the last 100 years, anthropology and anthropologists have developed a deeply troubling reputation. Some insiders and outsiders to the discipline hold it responsible for colonialism, neocolonialism, genocide, and/or participating in unethical experimentation.  

At the same time, anthropology is considered by many to be the disciplinary approach to building cultural bridges and for the successful implementation of international development projects. In 2006, for example, George Packer wrote a piece in *The New Yorker* entitled “Knowing the enemy: Can social scientists redefine the ‘war on terror’?” In the piece, Packer highlights the United States Department of Defense’s collaboration with anthropologists Kilcullen and McFate in a program with the Orwellian name the Human Terrain System (HTS). The job of HTS is to collect cultural information for military intelligence in Afghanistan in order to, if not change hearts and minds, at least understand them. Unlike Packer, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) reacted quite negatively to anthropologists partnering with the United States military.

Acting swiftly and decisively, the Executive Board of the AAA responded by issuing a statement regarding the US military’s Human Terrain System. After listing the ethical conflicts, the AAA statement concludes:

> In light of these points, the Executive Board of the American Anthropological

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9 [http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/18/061218fa_fact2](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/12/18/061218fa_fact2)
Association concludes (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.

In addition to putting researchers and their interlocutors in jeopardy, anthropology’s association with HTS seemed to feed directly into old stereotypes about anthropology’s hidden agenda.

Denouncing the Human Terrain System made sense for many in the discipline who rejected the notion that anthropological knowledge should be used instrumentally. HTS requires that one take sides, and if an anthropologist takes sides he or she necessarily shapes his or her research to suit a particular aim. In the case of HTS, the anthropologists worked to protect the interests of the US military. Others argued that if anthropology is a social science, then the validity of one’s conclusions should be able to be put to the test whether in the service of combat, improving health care, establishing a NGO, or informing culturally sensitive business practices.

So the discipline struggles between the more theory oriented folks who rarely if ever attempt to instrumentalize their ideas; the applied folks who employ anthropological knowledge to build better social systems and institutions; and the archaeologists, primatologists, linguistics, and biological anthropologists whose work is often treated as scientific, meaning it has the potential to be applicable for, among other things, medical science, museum exhibits, and subject-matter textbooks. Generally, members of each subfield talk among themselves, and most do not concern themselves with the conversations in other sub-disciplines. But recently when the American Anthropological Association rewrote its mission statement, a well-publicized argument erupted within the discipline about how central science was to our discipline.10

Moving beyond the vitriol spewed forth in the press by anthropologists embarrassed by their more humanistic colleagues,11 the controversy speaks to the very Americaness of American anthropology.12 In West Africa and China, for

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http://chronicle.com/article/Anthropologists-Debate-Whether/125571/ ;
11 "Not all cultural anthropologists are fluff-heads, of course. You can usually tell the ones who are fluff-heads by their constant need to look like superheroes for oppressed peoples, and you can tell the non-fluff-heads by their attention to data. But the non-fluff-head cultural anthropologists are feeling utterly beleaguered in this environment that actively denigrates science and consistently promotes activism over data collection and scientific theorizing." Alice Dreger, http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/fetishes-i-dont-get/201011/no-science-please-were-anthropologists
example, the use of anthropologists by the military would have garnered very
different reactions by social scientists. In sub-Saharan Africa, many intellectuals still
link anthropology to colonialism and therefore such an association with the military
might be expected. In China, anthropology has been defined by ethnology or the
comparative study of China’s ethnic minority populations. The instrumental use of
anthropology by academics in China only strengthened its value within higher
education.13

These differences matter for a number of critical reasons related to fieldwork entrée
and increasing state oversight of research. Internationalizing anthropology will
require sustained conversations between experts from different institutions around
the world in order to clearly articulate what constitutes ethical research.
Specifically, the conversational goals for our CITR network are to better understand
1) what research questions are appropriate and relevant in different parts of the
world, 2) what methods are possible, and 3) what representational approaches are
acceptable given particular local histories. The outcome of our discussions include
a better understanding of the borders of our discipline, knowledge of local research
protocols (both formal and informal), and the potential for more theoretically
sophisticated discussions about engaged anthropology given that outside the United
States and Europe anthropologists have regularly used their research for
instrumental purposes.

Activities
In 2005, the “World Anthropologies Network” was formed online
(http://www.ram-wan.net/). The intent of the website was to take advantage of the
momentum created by the conferences and meetings that led to the publication of
World Anthropologies (2006). If one enters the site, one can see that the momentum
has dissipated. We argue that this is largely due to the fact that a website cannot
substitute for face-to-face engagements. We hope to refuel these discussions by
hosting three major meetings in Princeton, Abu Dhabi, and Cape Town.

We will hold our first workshop at NYU Abu Dhabi. In March of this year we were
sent a memoranda of understanding by the institution in anticipation of our
working together. From the beginning, NYU Abu Dhabi has been extremely
interested in hosting the workshop because they are trying to develop similar
conversations about anthropology in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. They
would like to use this conversation to help them better understand how to be
sensitive to the historical and social scientific discourses that matter to scholars and
policy makers in the region. In other words, our interest in world anthropologies

aligns with their interest in setting the stage for dialogue about ethics and social science in Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Our second workshop will be held in Cape Town at the University of Cape Town. This conference venue was chosen because so many Princeton University undergraduates are traveling to South Africa to conduct independent research. There are a number of research ethics issues related to student research that we would like to discuss at this workshop. Are there taboo topics of study? What sorts of research framings or inquiries are considered offensive or “missing the point?” Is the research our students engage in considered poverty or slum tourism that only benefits the student? There is also tension around well-resourced foreign researchers coming to Sub-Saharan Africa and not developing collaborations with local scholars. The history of the institutionalization of the discipline of anthropology and the training of scholars is also important. One of our core participants, for example, has written about anthropology in Southern Africa, and the continuing relevance of race, resources, and professionalization. At this workshop, we will be gathering a group of scholars from Sub-Saharan Africa to better understand how local anthropologists and applied social scientists are inserting themselves into these conversations.

Our final workshop/conference will take place at Princeton University. There are many reasons to end at our institution. The most obvious is that this workshop is in part designed to introduce world anthropologies to Princeton. This final event will include both a workshop and conference that will be open to the public. In addition, there are many American-based scholars we want to invite who work on world anthropologies who are not part of the other conferences. Each workshop will be held over three days.

**Organization of Groups**

**Core Participants**
Core participants include eight scholars who will attend each of the three workshops. The core group includes members of our department as well as scholars who have published articles that describe the racial, ethical, historical, and material issues related to research in Southern African, Brazil, India, and Japan. This core group includes:

- **David Bogopa**, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (Southern Africa)
- **John Borneman**, Department of Anthropology, Princeton University
- **Carol Greenhouse**, Department of Anthropology, Princeton University
- **Rena Lederman**, Department of Anthropology, Princeton University
- **Alcida Rita Ramos**, Department of Anthropology, University of Brasilia (Brazil)
- **Carolyn Rouse**, Department of Anthropology, Princeton University
Sundar Sarukkai, Center for Philosophy, National Institute of Advanced Studies (Bangalore, India)
Kaori Suigshita, Department of Global Studies, Tama University (Japan)

Graduate Student Participants
Each of the four non-Princeton University core participants will invite one graduate student to attend each of the three workshops. Princeton faculty will invite a total of six. The goal is to train ten up-and-coming scholars in new approaches to research, theory, and fieldsite given our emergent appreciation for disciplinary pluralism.

Regional Experts
At each workshop we will invite five experts who will help us better understand the research concerns of the various the regions. The regions we will focus on at NYU Abu Dhabi include the Middle East, Near East, the Horn of Africa, and Southern Asia. At the workshop in Cape Town we will invite experts who work on Sub-Saharan Africa. At the conference in Princeton we will include scholars who work on Latin America, the Pacific Rim, China, Russia, and the United States.