Ethnography as Political Critique

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> **In a splintered world, we must address the splinters.**
> —*Clifford Geertz (2000:221)*

In his essay "The World in Pieces," Clifford Geertz (2000) wrote that a much more pluralistic politics seemed to be emerging in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and through the rise of borderless capitalism, the growth of technology and the mobility of people, and the emergence of new centers of wealth and power. As old certainties and alliances dissolved, he wrote, "we, it seems, are left with the pieces" (2000:220).

The patent heterogeneity of this "world in pieces," Geertz argued, was impossible to cover up with totalizing concepts that once organized ideas about world politics and about similarity and difference between people— concepts such as tradition, religion, ideology, values, nation, culture, society, and state. Beyond the skeptical abandonment of synthesizing notions, Geertz urged the development of "ways of thinking that are responsive to concrete matters and 'deep diversity'" (2000:224), to a plurality of ways of belonging and being. Such thinking serves as an "empirical lantern" (in the words of economist Albert O. Hirschman [1998:88]), charged with illuminating people's sense of connectedness, "neither comprehensive, nor uniform, primal or changeless, but nonetheless real" (Geertz 2000:224). Any kind of unity or identity "is going to have to be negotiated, produced out of difference" (2000:227).

For all Geertz's attention to the world in pieces and the concreteness of difference, he concluded his essay with a return to liberal principles, "still

our best guides to law, government, and public deportment" (2000:246). In the decade since his essay was published, this straightforward faith in the politics of liberal democracy has been hard to maintain, as recent events (from Tunisia to Syria to Wall Street) have shown. Rubrics such as religion, long assumed to be falling away, have reemerged in the public sphere as enduring sites of politics and identity (Asad 2003, Mahmood 2005, Hirschkind 2006, Hammoudi 2006, O'Neill 2009). Neoliberal rearrangements of state and capital have both dismantled and instantiated new regulatory regimes and strengthened older power formations (such as the military). While public infrastructures crumble and rifts deepen, the unexpected amalgamation of social mobilization, technology, human rights, and transcendental values is breaking open new grounds in which politics are waged and ideas over what is socially possible and desirable are refashioned.

Alongside orientations that mourn the absence of new ideas and orientations in anthropology today (Marcus 2008), a wide array of recent ethnographies have creatively mined this tension between fragmentation and connectedness in-the-making (Biehl 2005, Garcia 2010, James 2010, Nelson 2009, Petryna 2002, Oushakine 2009, Roitman 2005, Sanal 2011, Xiang 2006). As the institutional dimensions of existence have been successively unsettled, anthropologists have nonetheless stayed tuned to politics, be it in the field, in their theoretical concerns (for example, with structural violence, social suffering, and biopolitics) or as activists (Comaroff and Comaroff 2011, 2006, 2001; Chatterjee 2004; Das 2007; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Good et al. 2008; Farmer 2011, 2003; Fassin 2007; Ferguson 2006; Graeber 2011; Hansen and Stepputat 2005, 2001; Merry 2006; Goodale and Merry 2007; Piot 2010; Riles 2000; Scheper-Hughes 1992; Spencer 2007; Tate 2007; Ticktin 2011). Most compellingly, anthropologists have examined the politics involved in the formation of what we call "para-infrastructures" such as humanitarian interventions and therapeutic policies. Although precarious, they significantly inform governance and the ways of living that people take up vis-à-vis ailing public institutions (Abélès 2009, Anand 2011, Biehl 2007, Biehl and Locke 2010, Fassin and Pandolfi 2010, Feldman and Ticktin 2010, McKay 2012, Nguyen 2010). Attention to such intermediary power formations presents new ethnographic quandaries as we engage and think through the ambiguous political subjectivities that crystallize amidst the blurring of distinctions between populations, market segments, target audiences, and collective objects of intervention or disregard.

The transformations of politics and markets to which Geertz pointed, and the evacuation of taken-for-granted social formations that has accompanied them, have indeed sparked rich theorizations of lives in the neoliberal or late liberal moment (Povinelli 2011), not just by academics but also by people themselves as they traverse their local worlds, unmade and remade as it were. A plurality of human becomings or ways of connecting—to oneself, to others, to public and private institutions, to the environment, to the past, and to ideas of the future—have thus become rich grounds from which to gauge the extent and impact of economic reason within governance and the civic forms and politics that accompany the simultaneous absolutization and fragility of market principles in social life (Biehl 2011).

Jonathan Spencer has written about anthropology's difficulties in "drawing bounds round 'the political'" (2007:29). While classic political anthropology limited politics to formal and functional analyses (a "politics without values"), the anthropology of politics that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s as a necessary and invigorating corrective (as exemplified by Subaltern Studies) "deliberately exclud[ed] the state from the domain of authentic politics" (2007:23). In the intervening decades, the anthropology of politics has moved to include a consideration of the state and development (Ferguson 1994, Gupta 1998, Sharma and Gupta 2006), of transnational politics and neoliberalism (Keck and Sikkink 1998, Ong 2006), and of the affective domains and subjective experiences of political life (Povinelli 2011; Gibson-Graham 1996; Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2005). Nevertheless, the question that Spencer poses, of how ethnographers grapple—methodologically and analytically—with the difficulties of "locating" and "bounding" the political continues to be a fertile location for anthropological reflection.

In this essay, we engage three prize-winning ethnographic monographs concerned with charting the political in the midst of transformation over the last decade and probe their empirical and theoretical moves. Anna Tsing's *Friction* (2005) addresses economic globalization and environmental politics in and across Indonesia. Harri Englund's *Prisoners of Freedom* (2006) explores the transnational circulation of a liberal politics of human rights and forms of non-governmental rule in Malawi. And Sverker Finnström's *Living with Bad Surroundings* (2008) examines ethnic violence, statecraft, and humanitarian politics in Uganda. We ask what these significant ethnographic contributions to discussions of globalization and governmentality might tell us about the art of politics in three moments and places of the recent present. We focus on what we see as distinct

aspects of each of these books—concerned respectively with their takes on ethnographic theory, power/knowledge, and social experience—and explore what each opens up and might exclude or foreclose as a means of asking what comes next in the ethnography of politics.

If, as Geertz suggested, attending to connection in the face of fragmentation is a primary challenge for anthropologists today, we are concerned in this essay with *how* ethnographers get to and chart the raw forms of connectedness and ambiguous political subjectivities that make up contemporary social worlds. How are long-standing theoretical approaches able to illuminate these political/economic/affective realities on the ground? How can the lives of our informants and collaborators, and the conceptual work that they fashion, become alternative figures of thought that might animate political critique and anthropology to come? Ethnography, we argue, does not only hold potential for abstract philosophical critiques of politics, but is a form of political critique itself, both in its evidence-making practices and in its descriptive and analytical elaborations.

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Ethnographic fragments ask us to pay attention to details.
—Anna Tsing (2005:271)

Anna Tsing's inventive book *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2005) crafts, through ethnographic and textual experimentation, a grounded analytics of the global and a voice that is at once anthropological and political.[1] Despite her unique voice, Tsing's reflections are not so far afield from Geertz's rendering of the "world in pieces" or his critique of the temptation of rendering it whole again. Whereas Geertz urged attention to "concrete matters" and, using Charles Taylor's phrase, "deep diversity" (2000:223-224), Tsing speaks of "the sticky materiality of practical encounters" through which universals are enacted (2005:3).

We can hear echoes of Geertz's call in the very problematic with which Tsing begins *Friction*: "How does one do an ethnography of global connections?" (2005:xi). Geertz himself cited Tsing (alongside Fortun 2001 and Petryna 2002) as an example of how ethnography might "take us further…toward whatever understanding and whatever control of the disruptions and disintegrations of modern life are actually available to us" (Geertz 2005). Pushing forward Geertz's culturalist self-critique, Tsing looks neither to fragments' individual explanatory potential nor to the connective

tissue of patterns but rather to the combustibility of friction as an analytic framework that can illuminate the predatory workings of global capitalism on the environment.

Attending to friction foregrounds the translational work of globalization across and through "zones of awkward engagement, where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak…These zones of cultural friction are transient; they arise out of encounters and interactions…" (Tsing 2005:xi). For Tsing, these zones include the Meratus Mountains, where she returns to see people and places first introduced in her earlier ethnography of Indonesia (1993), but they also extend far beyond the mountain roads and quickly burning forests she describes.

Now an anthropologist returning to the field, now a nature lover hiking with fellow enthusiasts, now a scholar at an academic conference, and throughout, a critical and passionate interlocutor among Indonesian activists and students across the global south, Tsing's reflexive method takes up and makes explicit the disparate relationships through which anthropological knowledges are brought into being. This approach highlights globalization's scale-making projects as an object of analysis and develops a mode of ethnographic writing through attention to the diverse sites through which neoliberal politics are enacted.

Focused on the productive friction that emerges as each partial perspective rubs up against others, Tsing's book gives expression to the materiality and destructiveness of the global as it is instantiated in Indonesia's forests. Attending to the fragments and actors through which such projects are realized—investors, speculators, state politics, activist aspirations, local ambitions—is important, Tsing argues, because they "interrupt stories of a unified and successful regime of global self-management" (2005:271). Fragmentation and points of friction illuminate the situatedness of macro processes, but are also entry points for a distinct (post) humanism and politics vis-à-vis the Forest.

How does ethnography on and of a global scale locate politics in the present-day, both as a vector of neoliberal principles and as a site of contestation and resistance? What forms of engagement does it enable or exclude?

Articulating twin processes of splintering and connecting, *Friction* is profoundly shaped by the ethnographer's voice and vision, which themselves become significant sites of connection between the myriad global-local phenomena she engages. The many worlds of the Meratus Mountains are

brought together with other, partially connected people and experiences through global processes and ethnographic rendering, but are made visible particularly through the figure of the ethnographer herself, her long connection with the Meratus Mountains and the varied, rich, and disparate vantage points she is able to inhabit. "The result of such research," Tsing writes of her friction-filled and multi-perspective methodology, "may not be a classical ethnography, but it can be deeply ethnographic in the sense of drawing from the learning experiences of the ethnographer" (2005:xi). One response to the world in pieces, then, is to make visible both the splinters and their connections through ethnographic writing. Splinters or fragments in friction become figures of thought: the learning experiences of the ethnographer give shape to the book and, perhaps, shape an anthropological voice for the public sphere.

Other anthropologists have similarly deployed a powerful anthropological sensibility and ethical presence to give rise to new understandings of precarity and world-making. Kathleen Stewart (2007, 2011), for instance, has argued for the plurality of ways in which ethnographic rendering can open up new attention to people's arts of existence and the political stakes that make up the ordinary. The slow, fragmented excavations that ethnography renders visible, Stewart has suggested, also highlight how affects, fragmentary concepts, and mundane details make up the friction-filled, para-infrastructures of everyday living through which worlds are made and inhabited. Creative approaches to fragments and worldliness like Stewart's and Tsing's beg for a discussion of the politics of the descriptions through which ethnography is crafted (Nader 2011). Is this politics of anthropological voice the making of an alternative world view? And if so, what is at stake? What other modes of connection, forms of collective engagement, formations of subjects and power, and categories of analysis become visible or remain unspoken from this vantage point?

In what follows, we are particularly concerned with the difference that philosophical schemes make to ethnographic openings and with the conceptual force of ethnography. How is ethnography taken up by, or resistant to, explanatory abstractions and critical politics? Rather than moving too quickly from ethnographic fragment to abstraction, Tsing first assembles fragments and then harnesses the frictional relation between them in the development of a broader explanatory paradigm. This broader analytic of globalization thus emerges not "from concept to world" (in Kathleen Stewart's words, 2011) but the other way around. Yet if politics here is

located in the anthropological voice and conceptual worlding that ethnographic fragments make possible, how do ambiguous or precarious subjects and politics become public beyond the anthropologist's text?

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> **[A] critique of actually existing liberal democracies does not necessarily constitute a wholesale rejection of political liberalism.**
> —*Harri Englund (2006:11)*

Harri Englund's book *Prisoners of Freedom: Human Rights and the African Poor* (2006) puts Tsing's analytic to work.[2] Englund is concerned with how western liberal universals "emerge through friction" in the African continent (2006:26) and he too pays close attention to the stakes of translation. By charting globally circulating and locally situated discourses on democracy and human rights, Englund exposes the transformations and disempowering effects of an ostensibly liberatory and empowering "global freedom agenda" in millennial Malawi.

"Sensitivity to context should no longer be mistaken for particularism, whether as a simple opposite of universalism or as an espousal of a particular civilization," Englund writes (2006:26). "Engaged universals never actually take over the world; their universalism is situational" (2006:26). To make visible the situated universalisms of liberal democracy in post dictatorship Malawi, the ethnographer inquires into the ways terms like "human rights" are translated ("birth freedoms" in Chichewa), taught in NGO-led workshops and campaigns, implemented in legal aid clinics, and contested in popular discourse and morally-charged rumor and street-talk.

In contrast to Tsing's *Friction* (where a Foucauldian frame may inform analysis but is not directly engaged), Englund explicitly brings the philosophical into his engagement with universals by deploying a theoretical apparatus that foregrounds neoliberal strategies of governance. There are myriad ways in which anthropologists engage philosophy. To be sure, anthropologists have been attracted to philosophy's concepts and their power of "reflecting on" and thinking anew (Rabinow 2011), but we too often forget how much philosophical concept-work has been stimulated by ethnographers. Who remembers that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) owe their notion of "plateau" to Gregory Bateson's ethnography of Bali, and the notions of the "war-machine" and the "encoding of fluxes" to Pierre Clastres' work with the Guayaki in Paraguay (Deleuze and Guattari

1977)? In this vein, we are concerned with how the ethnographic can become more than a simple illustration of the philosophical. Which challenges does ethnography pose to concept-work and how can it subvert or exceed philosophical schemes?

For Englund, the relation between philosophy and ethnography, it seems, is partly methodological. By deploying a Foucauldian analytic of governmentality, Englund is concerned with "a kind of rationality…intrinsic to the art of government" (Foucault 1991:89) and with "thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who can govern; what governing is; what or who is governed)" (Gordon 1991:3). Thus, in *Prisoners of Freedom*, Englund "examine[s] how people, including those with no formal involvement in the political system, participate in governing both themselves and others" (2006:37). In contrast to Geertz, for whom liberal democracy was still the best game in town, Englund's approach adds a materiality to the debate, showing how liberalism is always lived and enacted in specific ways and must be grappled with in all its practical contradictions. He is compelled to denounce the perverse effects of transnational governmentality as older solidarities, like labor and class solidarity, are undermined and as ostensible freedoms entrap people further in the workings of neoliberal power.

At the same time, the Foucauldian analytic also seems to circumscribe Englund's object of investigation as his descriptions of institutions emphasize the determining and normalizing force of new knowledge-power arrangements rather than the individual trajectories that exceed them. Yet as shown by the book's final chapter on moral panics, rumor, and suspicion (and by Englund's more recent work on Chichewa-language media [2011]), social fields ceaselessly leak and transform (power and knowledge notwithstanding), and people's everyday arts of living amid broken institutions and infrastructures in-the-making always overflow norms and control as they are imagined and enacted. Attention to this social flux is thus a challenge for the critical anthropological eye.

In the essay "What is Critique?", Foucault offers a history now familiar to scholars of governmentality, arguing that proliferation of governmental practice "cannot be dissociated from the question 'how not to be governed?'" (2007:44). It is in this question, he asserts, that the critical attitude is located. Critique is thus not only subordinate in relation to what philosophy, science, politics, ethics, law, literature, and other disciplines positively constitute, but also an instrument of imagination, a

means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be. And it brings its own pleasure and virtue: "Whatever the pleasures or compensations accompanying this curious activity of critique, it seems that it rather regularly, almost always, brings not only some stiff bit of utility it claims to have, but also that it is supported by some kind of general imperative—more general than that of eradicating errors. *There is something in critique which is akin to virtue*" (43).

This critical virtue finds expression in *Friction* when Tsing, for instance, notes that though "Others have, and will tell of the pleasures of resource booms…I will tell stories of destruction" (2005:26); and in Englund's discussion of objectivity and activism in his research: "Expectations of democracy aside, it is obvious that a study like this is at least partly inspired by an interest in scholarship as a form of political action" (2006:24).

Yet even as governmentality has proven a significant analytic (implicit and explicit) for Tsing and Englund, they have also been wary that it may become a "totalizing explanatory framework" (Englund 2006:38, Tsing 2005:214). These observations urge us to distinguish the precise and historically-specific relevancies of governmentality in non-Western and contemporary contexts (see also Moore 2005, Li 2007, Stoler 1995, Ferguson and Gupta 2002). At once informed by *and* skeptical of the critical perspectives that the analytics of governmentality makes possible, anthropologists struggle to balance the theory and politics of disassembly (as old forests, solidarities, and ways of being are eroded) with the ambivalent forms of political belonging their informants articulate as they care for themselves and others. And the value of this ethnographic attention to the relation between social life, the arts of government, and the politics of disassembly appears to be circulating even beyond the narrow confines of academia. A recent *New York Times Book Review* essay entitled "Afghanistan: What the Anthropologists Say," for example, reported anthropological skepticism of humanitarian ventures, military occupation, and ambitious "modernizers," asserting the importance of ethnography in illustrating how politics are "created with the resources at hand, not from on high or far away" (Star 2011, Coburn 2011).

The individual and often ephemeral forms of claims-making and political personhood that human rights talk and liberal democratic politics make possible—as Malawian laborers take up new legal forms to press for individualized forms of redress in Englund's account (2006:148-169), or as residents in Afghan villages both facilitate and constrain the politics

of their US-recognized "leaders" as shown by Noah Coburn in *Bazaar Politics* (2011)—both illustrate and trouble the ways in which neoliberal governmentality accounts for (but only partially) how politics matters to people. The need for close attention to the everyday realities that individuals and collectives craft from global interventions as they coalesce with local forms of exchange and politics poses new ethnographic challenges to social theory. How do experiences with NGOs, legal aid societies, and state-building projects, idiosyncratic as they might be, also give rise to new truths and ways of living that appear, if only fleetingly, in the margins of political and economic rationality and established theory?

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To find common ground is a principal concern in cultural life everywhere in the world.

—*Sverker Finnström (2008:7)*

Akin to *Prisoners of Freedom* (Englund 2006), Sverker Finnström's book *Living with Bad Surroundings* is also concerned with the articulation of "local social worlds and larger-scale political processes," but from a different philosophical vantage point (2008:117).[3] As Finnström strives to make sense of the Ugandan postcolonial conflict, which has directly affected northern Acholiland since 1986 through both conventional and "dirty" war, he draws from Englund's concern with how liberalism "celebrates individualism and freedom at the cost of social, national, transnational, and global relations" (2008:117). Yet in distinction from Englund's concern with the governmental, the Swedish ethnographer provocatively approaches global forces through a phenomenological concern with the everyday travails and meaning-making practices of people caught into conflict.

Witnessing brutal fighting between the Ugandan Army and the rebels of the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement (LRA/M), the Acholi people have also been subject to assault both by the rebels (who have used tactics such as child abduction and attacks on religious and spiritual sites and practices in the name of promoting a "new moral order") and by bandits, often supported by the Ugandan army itself. Through and beyond threats to physical well-being, "people in the war-torn region experience a lessened control over ontological security in everyday life" (Finnström 2008:5). The Acholi people's own expression *piny marac*, bad surroundings, challenges Finnström to explore not just the "ethnographical, sociopolitical

and historical" context in which people live but also how these conditions shape the ontological and agentive possibilities available to residents of Acholiland as they try to "keep the relationship with the spiritual and greater world active" (2008:6). Throughout, the anthropologist is drawn to the "ways Acholi people…struggle to establish control and balance in their daily lives in the midst of civil war and how they construct meaning and understand the war as they live their humanity—always, however, in intersection with the wider global community" (2008:4).

Finnström's ethnography also wants to contest mainstream accounts that explain the war through assertions of ethnic mistrust between the Acholi and other groups and that ignore how governmental and international interventions (including humanitarian aid and US policies) have contributed to the war's unfolding. A conflict which is indeed "beyond immediate control" also creates particular political subjectivities (2008:14). Specifically, Finnström shows how humanitarian organizations aiming to alleviate distress through the creation of camps for the displaced have eroded agency among Acholi people, particularly young people, even as they have ironically ended up "implementing the Ugandan government's policy of forced encampment" (2008:141).

In line with other anthropological accounts of ethnicity and conflict in Africa (Farmer 2005, Mamdani 2001), Finnström argues that colonial discourses laid the groundwork for contemporary misreadings of the northern Ugandan conflict as rooted in local, ethnic attitudes and politics. To understand how the Lord's Resistance Army/Movement—and, by extension, the war—is represented in official discourse, he engages the media and reports by the Ugandan government and other transnational actors as well as LRA/M manifestos, while interspersing informants' comments into these political discourses and counterdiscourses. Acholi youth, in particular, seek and fashion "alternative interpretations" of their surroundings/conditions (2008:116).

In turning to the meaning-making practices that demystify larger political forces and speak of a micro-politics of existence, Finnström's work is situated within an anthropological line of thought distinct from the Foucauldian preoccupations with governance that orient Englund's book and underpin Tsing's ethnographic approach. Rather, he draws from a theoretical lineage from Merleau-Ponty to Michael D. Jackson to show how meanings "emerge in sociocultural and political processes of interpretation and counter-interpretation that include not only influential agents, like

the rebel leader or the Western diplomat, but also the active participation of ordinary people with personal experience of the war" (2008:27). Interestingly, as in Tsing's *Friction*, the phenomenological approach taken here is also concerned with tracking universals down, yet what emerges is quite distinct: not the interspecies Forest but lived Humanity.

This humanistic project asserts the travails and understandings of people facing war and displacement—uprooted splinters that, many times, no one even cares to govern—as foundational to political thought. The displaced and the social worlds they forcefully compose and navigate are more complicated and unfinished than philosophical schemes tend to account for. And following Michael D. Jackson (1998), Finnström is concerned with the conceptual fecundity of people's practical knowledge. The trust is that sustained engagement "in the lifeworld of others" (Jackson 2009:241) can help anthropology not to abstract, but to delineate the actual and general frameworks through which everyday life continues against all odds. The "enlarged understanding" that emerges from this engagement is shot through with fragmentation, yet it remains "reconciled to the truth that the human world constitutes our common ground, our shared heritage, not a place of comfortably consistent unity but as a site of contingency, difference and struggle" (Jackson 2009:239).

How does Finnström then locate the political? And how do the political sensibilities and moral values of the ethnographer himself shape the scale at which politics emerge in writing?

Most immediately, his ethnography reveals difficult methodological and analytical challenges to actual engagements with the politics and the social conditions of everyday life in zones of conflict. For instance, Finnström relies heavily on secondary sources (such as media accounts) to convey both state and LRA/M political rationality. This reliance exposes the actual difficulty of producing a phenomenology of the state or of rebels forces in a context of instability, mistrust, and violence where concern for his informants and perhaps himself constrain and shape fieldwork trajectories. Finnström also acknowledges that, as a white, northern European anthropology student, his possibilities for mobility and thresholds for risk were notably different than those of his informants and collaborators, who would have to live and reckon with the conflict long after the dissertation and book were complete. His concern with protecting people, however, means that Finnström "frequently refer[s] to statements of rather anonymous 'informants'" (2008:9).

A paradox crystalizes. While Finnström is committed to interexperiential engagements and is adamant that his relationships with local research assistants are particularly enriching, the experiential details are hard to discern. Around the edges of the strategically anonymizing ethnographic presentation seep a more complex set of relations. From the moments when "Ugandan friends read some of my texts…[and] soon located their stories" (2008:10) to the abstractions of ethnographic collaboration, the reader catches sight of a host of other unnamed, adjacent, even peripheral actors (the local leaders, ex-combatants, aid workers, and government officers) who nevertheless contribute to the political conditions of *bad surroundings*. How can we fully assess the information and counter-information they might bring to the everyday of the camp and its anthropological rendering? Beyond the friction-filled potential of fragments, what material and concrete ethnographic engagements are possible with things we do not or cannot chart or map but to which people return, whether in politics or everyday life, when the interview is over?

Recent ethnographies such as Angela Garcia's The *Pastoral Clinic: Addiction and Dispossession along the Rio Grande* (2010) have also tackled this question. Exploring how ethnographic characters engage intersubjective experience illuminates the dynamics of kin and care alongside the histories and institutions through which life is governed and disregarded. This approach also makes evident the power of writing in conveying ethnographic encounters and those relations, spaces, and experiences that are in flux and that are, by and large, publicly unavailable yet are significant for analysis and intervention.

Considering the dilemmas faced by interexperiential research approaches to war and humanitarian interventions is not to suggest that the subjective conditions that accompany political violence should not be explored. Rather, it is to ask how intersubjectivity is constituted at the convergence of political economy and individual singularity and how ethnographic theory and description can render visible the ambiguous subjects that result. Through a more explicit engagement with the ambiguities and unfinishedness of lived experience, ethnographies like Finnström's *Bad Surroundings* may thus offer more than philosophy alone in making sense of governmentalization and subjectification as they unfold through individual, collective, and political life.

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My fieldwork was scrappy and disconnected […] my own theoretical approaches proved too vague to be of any use in the field […] The writing of this book has been an experiment, or rather a series of experiments, in methods of thinking about anthropological material.

—*Gregory Bateson (1958:257)*

The three works by Tsing, Englund, and Finnström reviewed in this essay illustrate the diversity of ways that anthropologists engage and reflect on place, history, experience, knowledge, and governance as they "address the splinters" (Geertz 2000:221). They also deal with the question of conceptual innovation *via writing*, a move similarly urged by Geertz. To connect local landscapes to intricate topographies, Geertz stated, "demands an alteration of not only the way we conceive of identity, but of the way we write about it, the vocabulary we use to render it visible and measure its force" (2000:227). Yet for these contemporary ethnographers, addressing the splinters results not in the congealing of fixed identities, however intricately described. Instead, it suggests ethnographic subjects more dynamic, fragmented, ambiguous, and open-ended.

These dynamic subjects challenge the theoretical frames anthropologists bring to their work and speak to the political stakes of ethnography. If theory is one way that ethnographers establish the connectedness of the things they describe, theory also circumscribes the ethnographic view. At times, this circumscription importantly allows for the analytical pauses that make alternative knowledge viable; at others, it risks reifying ethnographic moments, sacrificing the sense of the unfinishedness of everyday life that makes ethnography so exciting to begin with, open at once to repetition and to the unexpectedly surprising and the politically possible. Geertz himself suggested that theoretical subtraction is necessary to make room for the new forms of raw connectedness emerging. In the wake of the culture concept, for instance, new problematizations of global truth claims and theorizations of social life in the present became possible. How can we as ethnographers make theoretical room for the social relations, connections, human becomings, and flux encountered in the field? To which (other/alternative/minor) lineages and (other/

alternative/minor) canons might we look as we engage the raw connections of ethnography and social theory today?

In Tsing, Englund, and Finnström we see ethnography's potential when we not only abandon totalities but embrace the splinters. Their critical ethnographic work illustrates the limits of present-day state-market arrangements and suggests new ways of thinking through the fragmentary nature of the subjects encountered in the field, from the forest to the refugee camp, the NGO to the clinic. It points to the fragile and fragmented experiences through which lives are fashioned, not only in the confines of governmental projects and state histories but also alongside and outside them. These experiences, we suggest, are also political, as salient as the arts of government in the lives of people today. The ambiguous political subjectivities they produce—nature lovers, legal aid petitioners, investors and speculators, state officials, and ex-combatants—are also material through which anthropological critique will continue to renew its vitality. They reveal not only new singular and collective identities, produced out of and across fragmentation, but also speak to the precarious and temporary institutions of government today. These, and the subjects and politics through which they are engaged, are grounds for powerful ethnographic critiques to come.

As anthropologists, we can strive to do more than simply mobilize real-world messiness to expose predatory practices and complicate ordered philosophy and statistical-centered and cost-effectiveness-minded policy approaches. Both the evidentiary force and theoretical contribution of anthropology might be intimately linked to giving creative form to people's art of living. As we speak to the translocal processes that so urgently demand attention, we are called to critically assess the significance of long-standing and new theoretical frames and to advance people-centered analytics (Biehl and Petryna 2013). What is the relation between the theoretical framings that allow us to speak to large questions and the granularity of ethnographic data, which often exceeds these frames, revealing subjects that are sometimes more ambiguous but no less politically significant than theoretical predictions would suggest? This question is itself political and it has to be teased out methodologically and analytically as well as in the always agonistic search to make ethnography publicly relevant. Rather than illustrating a world irrevocably splintered by globalization and ever more resistant to theoretical engagement, we learn

from the books reviewed here that, by repopulating public imagination with people and their precarious yet creative world-making, ethnography makes politics matter differently. ∎

Endnotes:

[1]Anna L. Tsing is Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Cruz. *Friction* won the 2005 American Ethnological Association's Senior Book Prize.

[2]Harri Englund is Reader in Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. *Prisoners of Freedom* won the 2006 Amaury Talbot Prize of the Royal Anthropological Institute.

[3]Sverker Finnström is Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the Hugo Valentin Research Center at Uppsala University and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at Uppsala University. *Living With Bad Surroundings* won the 2009 Margaret Mead Award from the American Anthropological Association and the Society for Applied Anthropology.

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Foreign language translations:

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Этнография как политическая критика

Etnografia como Crítica Política

علم الأعراق كنقد سياسي