



Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Discussing Empathy and Critique in the Ethnography of Things Military: A Conversation

Journal Item

How to cite:

Mohr, Sebastian; Sørensen, Birgitte Refslund; Weisdorf, Matti; Ben-Ari, Eyal; Hautzinger, Sarah; McSorley, Kevin; Scandlyn, Jean and Wool, Zoë (2021). Discussing Empathy and Critique in the Ethnography of Things Military: A Conversation. *Ethnos*, 86(4) pp. 694–711.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2019 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor Francis Group



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1080/00141844.2019.1687551>

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

Accepted for publication by *Ethnos: Journal of Anthropology*, April 2019.

This is an Authors Accepted Manuscript, not the published article. Please cite the published version which may differ very slightly from this version.

Discussing Empathy and Critique in the Ethnography of Things Military: A Conversation

Convened and edited by Sebastian Mohr, Birgitte Refslund Sørensen, and Matti Weisdorf

Whenever we discuss fieldwork experiences with fellow anthropologists working on 'things military', concerns over ethics, politics, and critique pop up as a matter of course. Though important in any field, these matters seem particularly conspicuous and insistent in the military field. Meanwhile, anthropology of the military is garnering increasing attention in response to a changing global security landscape. This motivated us to organize this special Issue. In addition to collecting a number of original research articles, we thought it inspiring and fruitful to engage some of the leading and widely read ethnographers in this field in a virtual dialogue based on their personal experiences and viewpoints. Rather than aiming at a number of do's and don'ts and normative utterances of what good ethnographic conduct should be, we aimed to elicit an exchange that stimulates an open and nuanced discussion of these most important questions. The five contributors who generously volunteered to share their views are:

Eyal Ben-Ari. Ben-Ari has done ethnographic fieldwork in and on the Israeli army where he also served as an officer, after which he has explored the use of popular culture in the Japanese Self-Defence Forces. Moreover, Ben-Ari has been and is involved in several international research projects, engagements, which have given him detailed insights into the conditions of military anthropology and sociology worldwide.

Zoë Wool. Wool has explored the embodied post-deployment lives of injured American soldiers residing in an army medical center as well as the popular figure of the soldier. In her work, Wool combines medical anthropology, queer theory, and disability studies through her interest in personhood and the body. Her recent research concerns issues of care in relation to war veterans and their families.

Kevin McSorley. McSorley explores war, violence, and militarism by setting the body, embodiment, and sensory experiences center stage in the sociological and ethnographic imaginary of war and militarization. Concerned with how war is (un)done in and through embodiment, his work has contributed to an understanding of war and civil-military relations as embodied realities rather than just another means of politics.

Sarah Hautzinger and Jean Scandlyn. Hautzinger's and Scandlyn's research has zoomed in on the psychological traumas of American soldiers when returning from deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rather than only exploring these as individual medical pathologies, Hautzinger and Scandlyn attend to post-traumatic stress disorder as a cultural phenomenon that is as much a collective social responsibility of warring nations as it is part of personal narratives of war.

The dialogue between Ben-Ari, Wool, McSorley, and Hautzinger and Scandlyn took its point of departure in the following questions: What is critique or critical ethnography when working on things military? What ethnographic moment do you recall from your own fieldwork in which the dynamic between empathy and critique was at stake or seemed emphasized? And what dimensions of empathy and critique are contained in these ethnographic moments and what is captured by them?

Our panelists were invited to respond to one question at a time. The answers of each panelist were circulated for further comments before attending to the next question. The entire dialogue was based on e-mail correspondence moderated by the editors of this special issue. When posing the first question, a set of texts on the broader topics of critique and empathy was circulated as a source of inspiration to roundtable participants as well as the authors of the individual articles in this special issue prior to submission (Bubandt & Willerslev 2015; Butler 2009; Fassin 2017; Foucault 2007; Hemmings 2012; Hollan & Throop 2011; Latour 2004; Schepher-Hughes 1995; Throop 2010). The following conversation is the result of that digitally moderated roundtable and was shortened and edited for readability.

What is critique or critical ethnography when working on things military?

Zoë: In thinking of critique, I find Judith Butler's formulation (after Foucault) of critical politics particularly helpful. As opposed to denunciation, Butler says the aim of critical politics is "to bring into relief the very framework of evaluation itself." (Butler 2002: 214) The nature of the politics of this critical politics is complicated, and sometimes unsatisfying. How can we have a politics that is not evaluative? Not animated by a righteous sense of good and bad? Nancy Scheper Hughes (1995) is probably the best anthropological spokesperson for this position in anthropology, and I am usually glad that such righteous politics is out there (I strategically participate in it myself, though not in my intellectual work). At the same time, I am usually heartbroken by its collateral effects, and the foreclosures it entails (think here of Povinelli's 2002 cunning of recognition). It might be illuminating to know that when I tell the story of my coming into academia and into my first research project with injured soldiers, it is usually the story of a disillusioned anti-war activist.

So, what is critique when working on things military? For me, it is to bring into relief the deep logics according to which the arrangement and practices and imperatives of military life makes sense and hang together. It involves seriously asking 'obvious' questions—in particular about the logics that govern war injury and its aftermath among U.S. soldiers – and then following the proliferating questions down and out until the obvious can be understood as an artifact. It means offering an account of those arrangements, practices, and imperatives that opens up the possibility of things being otherwise, without celebrating alternatives per se, or even any one alternative in particular, as the solution to the problem of military life. In other words, it's about making known so as to make room to maneuver.

But in what ways does the context of things military specify any answer anyone might give? On the one hand, the nature of critique, and of critical ethnography (if we define that as ethnography that performs critique), is not dependent on context. Yet at the same time, there are ways in which the context of things military does specify the significance of critique. Critique of things military necessarily draws you into critical, and thereby destabilizing, conversations about the nature and limits of sovereignty, violence, the distribution of state responsibility and harm. I would also suggest that, when we're talking about critical ethnographies of the people in institutionalized militaries that operate as an organ of a nation state (as opposed to, say, guerilla groups), we are also drawn to critical conversations about the place of a given military in its national imaginary, and questions of militarization more broadly. What this looks like in any given case depends on many details. Are we talking about a country with mandatory military service (and for whom)? A place where the military is allied with particular political parties or ideologies (which ones?), or figured primarily as antipolitical (in what ways?)? Along with many others (notably those working on gender and sexuality), I would note that the ways that the military amplifies many cultural forms are central to normative national projects more generally, such as heteronormativity. In this way, the context of things military might bring these projects into starker relief, or offer a vantage point from which one can see them in some of their most explicitly institutionalized forms. So since things military are contiguous with things that appear elsewhere and otherwise, critique or critical ethnography of things military are then also far more expansive than just the military institution and its various extensions.

Kevin: What might make ethnography of the military critical? Given the fact that wars and resurgent militarisms are defining features of our intensely troubling times, and given, further, the relative paucity of ethnographic work on military-related phenomena, experiences and life-worlds, certainly when compared with the quantity of work undertaken on other major social institutions, I am tempted to say that the critical thing is simply that such work takes place at all.

Firstly, whatever the particular detailed research questions, concerns, and curiosities that underpin any specific study might be, I would suggest that critical ethnographies of things military often trouble core theoretical ideas such as the military, militarism and militarization, treating them as open questions or sensitizing concepts, whose articulation and modification may be sought through empirical encounter, rather than understanding them as fixed categories to be simply identified or as stable containers of inquiry. In part, this is a result of the sites and scale at which ethnographic research typically happens, and how proximity works to trouble abstract understandings and pluralize conceptual vocabularies. Of course, on the one hand, militaries may be defined as abstract black-boxes, thought and known primarily in terms of their officially state-sanctioned outputs, notably war-preparation and the prosecution of bodily violence (although even this neat definition blurs as the remit of contemporary militaries increasingly encompasses diverse operations from peacekeeping to humanitarian relief). Ethnographic inquiry however illuminates the fundamental breadth and complexity of lived experiences that such potentialities depend upon; the internal differentiation, institutional undersides, and lived contradictions that constitute the messy workings, and failures, of the military machine; the wider cultures, socialities, intimacies and structures of feeling which forms of (post-)military being co-exist with and co-constitute. Indeed, at the level of lived experience, it fundamentally highlights the hybridity, entanglement and in-betweenness of lives and worlds that are at once military and civilian. So 'military' then may come less to name an imagined stable and fully knowable entity, and more the qualification of complex practices of worlding, self-government and interaction, a focus of boundary work that is continually performed and negotiated by numerous actors with their own epistemologies and critical capacities, a 'glaringly obvious presence ... [which is] an object of soldiers' own constant commentary and critique' (MacLeish 2015: 16). It is partly the granularity of ethnographic data, 'when we not only abandon the totalities but embrace the splinters' (Biehl and McKay 2012: 1223), that means that such ontological undoing may become apparent in critical ethnographic work. And this troubling of extant conceptual vocabularies is important not just for academic reasons, but also because wider public understandings of the military, war, soldiering and so on are often overdetermined by very specific culturally dominant tropes, including ideas about the fundamental division and incommensurability of civilian and military experience and an implied consequent circumscription of the possibilities of empathy.

Secondly, I would suggest that ethnographic work on the military is fundamentally enhanced by being placed in dialogue with various traditions of critical thinking and praxis – Marxist, feminist, post-colonial, etc. Indeed, I have specifically argued in previous work for an understanding of war and militarism as continuously shape-shifting but fundamentally embodied social institutions, and hence for the importance of engaging with wider critical thought on embodiment and the senses generally in order to try and illuminate an understanding of military experience. It is also important to say that while a desire to undertake various forms of critique – whether ideological revelation or genealogical analysis (Fassin 2017), the exposure of structuring contradictions (Belkin 2012), even a more compositionist and multiplicative critical assembly (Latour 2010) – may inspire ethnographic research on the military, this does not necessarily imply the adoption of any particular sensibility or skeptical

mode of engagement in the heterogeneous situations and encounters of fieldwork. Indeed, embracing fascination and enchantment with things military may at certain times be a highly insightful research strategy, enabling critical reflection upon the structuring of militarist seduction (see McSorley 2016, Rech 2016). Ethnographic research will of course typically involve and invoke multiple and constantly changing feelings and modes of engagement, from curiosity and seduction to empathy and humility. Much of the time this may feel like the pragmatic amateurism of muddling through, particularly as attempts at studying up and researching sites of distinct power such as the military often complicates the undertaking any real participant observation, and rather necessitate a strategy of much more eclectic and opportunistic ‘polymorphous engagement’ (Gusterson 1997).

Sarah and Jean: We’re less certain about what critique is than we are about what our approach to a critical ethnography on things military *cannot* be. It’s of some comfort that the circulated writings about critique often share these dispositions. Latour calls out attention to wars on this and that – culture, science, on terror – and wonders if scholarly critique doesn’t merely pile on (2004: 225). What we know about a critical ethnography about things military – and more broadly, about war – is that it cannot afford to be simply a critique of military-as-always-militarist, or a critique-as-war on warring itself. Ethnography, even critical and oppositional ethnography, takes a different route.

In asking, what is critique, and what is critical ethnography on things military, a moment from before our fieldwork bubbles up. In 2003, a first-grade teacher reacted to news that the US and its allies were invading Iraq by saying the following: “I hope we blast the whole country into oblivion!” The venom and heartlessness in her statement so contrasted her dress, with dancing teddy-bears around the hem. The point it makes, for us, is simple: blasting that which one wishes to critique is too simple, and its reductive bellicosity creates problems and limitations later on. Far more defensible is critique as critical ethnography (Fassin 2017), which engages with complexity, and problematizes with an empathy that feels into the other person (Bubandt and Willerslev 2015:7). Ethnography does this by taking seriously the perspectives, indeed, *taking* the perspectives in order to take them on, of that which one anticipates opposing, invalidating, or deconstructing via critique. We want to suggest, then, sensitive critique requires us, to some extent, to become the object we seek to undo, in order, at least, to first understand it. Beware: contagion lies here.

For us, this meant something visceral. In our book *Beyond Post-Traumatic Stress: Homefront Struggles with the Wars on Terror* we invoke not only war, but the process of doing ethnography about military communities in wartime, as a stenchful and sticky, terrifying labyrinth that draws one in, as a “situation where there is no clear way out, no sense of determining forward or backward movement, no exit” (Hautzinger & Scandlyn 2014: 32). More recently and more personally, Sarah presented “fuckedness” as an appropriately tragic-comic, autoethnographic effect from the dozens of contexts of our five years of fieldwork (Hautzinger 2015). Because it is our story, the fuckedness of the ethnographer-critic came in ways Sarah understood as feminized. On the one hand, in the ethnographic forays into military communities, she felt cast into, and expected to play, roles – the cheerleader, the listening ear of the caregiver-girlfriend nurse. On the other hand, having crossed so deeply into hostile terrain, having collaborated and entered into reciprocity with military partners, she clearly disappointed folks in the peace activist community. She felt accused of playing hostess, with symbolic overtones of promiscuity, to the enemy.

Fieldworkers face these moments as we traverse territorialized lines, and at times, not surprisingly, we become tangled up in them. For Sarah, the lines drawn closest to home hurt the most. When a lefty colleague showed that he effectively equated working on the military with working with the military, and that any support for a scholarship of things military was already a sign of cooptation, it felt like a slap in the face. When she helped a veteran secure college venue for Veterans Day story-telling circles, films, and panels, her peace-activist friends signaled dismay. One intimated that our project was itself not only militarized, but militarizing, participating in “war glorification.” In a significant way, we had inadvertently become aligned, in some community lenses, with our own critical object. Sensible of this, we made adjustments such as explicitly stating the events were neither about military bolstering nor about protesting the wars. For example, we shared two minutes of silence “for all those touched by war” as the centerpiece of the event. These two minutes, held at 11 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month (and it was 2011 as well), invoked the ceasefire commemorated as Armistice Day, as Veterans Day was called until 1954, originally marking the end of WWI.

However, once again such attempts at creating relatively neutral middle grounds, or safe spaces for collective community accounting for wars we fund, may indeed ring naïve and futile for those who have learned that it is a question of choosing a side, and being acutely aware of who controlled the territory where one treaded. In certain moments, critique and empathy are not compatible. Our biographies-in-the-making reflect the dissatisfaction with which we are left. To do constructivist critique, we now seek not only subjects, but also agendas, for which we can feel passion and commitment.

Eyal: Ethnographic research on the military for me has always involved finding a thoughtful reflective stance towards the objects and subjects of my study. The mixture of empathy – or my ability to experientially understand another person's perspective – and critique – the move to uncover the dimensions of power, violence and domination involved in the actions of armed forces – necessitates an ongoing process of reflection. While true of any research, this reflective process is of special importance in regard to the study of the military since the armed forces are the organization charged with the use of legitimate (if sometimes contested) state violence. And violence in the societies to which we belong (and within the disciplines within which we are embedded) evokes the strongest emotions, moral sentiments and, deeply held assumptions.

Being an Israeli man of my generation (I was conscripted in 1972 and participated in the war of 1973 in the Egyptian front) I found that my first foray into military studies was especially difficult. Indeed, of all my studies, by far the most difficult has been my work on the Israeli military and specifically about the unit to which I belonged. As I wrote in the ethnography that came out of my study, my research involved negotiating the “right” distance from my own society in order to be able to study it. In this sense, I had a need to devise techniques, not so much for getting into a new culture, as for getting out of all too familiar surroundings. And these techniques seem to be especially important for the study of matters that touch upon some very basic (and emotionally loaded) issues such as military and masculine identities, assumptions about military service and armed conflict, and images of soldiering and enemies. I used a variety of methods and procedures to strive towards this critical distancing. One approach involved the study of language. Another included deliberate attempts at defamiliarizing my material by relating it to a variety of theoretical formulations elicited in non-military and/or non-Israeli contexts.

Yet with the benefit of three decades of studying the armed forces and four decades of travelling the routes of anthropology, the invitation to participate in this discussion also aroused reflections on much of what is going on in contemporary US-based anthropology and especially my observation that current-day US-based anthropologists feel somehow compelled to see "the ethical" and "ethics" in any research project or indeed critical reflection. In other words, exploring links between empathy and critical reflection has become much more than an intellectual issue. It entails more than the emphasis on individual and (especially in the American case) legal responsibility during and after fieldwork. Similarly, it entails much more than the process of finding a fruitful move between empathy and critique. Rather, it has also come to entail deeply political matters such as positioning oneself in the field and within the discipline, contentions about the worthiness of collective action and the transformational capacities of anthropologists, and ways of belonging to different political and ideological camps.

Engaging with questions of critique concerning the armed forces is especially difficult because so much of the current debate about the anthropology of the military within the United States is colored by deep-rooted assumptions about the political past of anthropology (almost always insidious). For generations of US-based anthropologists, any study of the military is colored by the experience of Vietnam and intensified by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the continued power of the "American Empire". The combination of America's puritan streak and the intense polarization of political discourse serve to intensify this development.

Thus, as I see it, the problem at base of this debate is the premise that anthropologists study, and are committed to, subordinate groups who are "most worthy" of empathy rather than the dominant, the powerful who are "most worthy" of critique. This is so because underlying the genuine commitment to "do no harm" and even "do good" to the people anthropologists study, there is a political agenda broadly termed post-colonial: to "just-ing," to redeeming the past of anthropology. The question that follows then is: can anthropologists be truly empathic as a basis for critiquing the professional perpetrators of violence? Since empathy is culturally constructed and since anthropologists belong to the culture of academic anthropology, do they not operate with implicit hierarchies of "who is worthy of empathy" and "who is worthy of critique"?

Kevin: I would like to pick up on two points from the conversation so far. The first is inspired by Eyal's provocation that anthropology's recent encounters with things military may partially be read in terms of a reckoning with its own troubled political past, implicitly shaping contemporary disciplinary norms of critique, its valences and hierarchies. My own particular disciplinary home is sociology, where considerations of war and the military have historically not been central disciplinary concerns. Rather the historical constitution of the sociological imagination and its disciplinary gaze has predominantly taken place by looking inwards at stratifications and inequalities within assumed pacific societies. As such, and resonating here with Sarah's and Jean's reflections upon how their ethnographic concerns with things military have on occasion been viewed in terms of naïve alignment or even militarized co-optation, I have also encountered disciplinary suspicion when doing and presenting ethnographic work on things military, particularly work exploring the contours of military pleasure, as have colleagues working on similar concerns. Such marginalization, whilst experienced individually, functions structurally to buttress a particular historical self-understanding of the center and purity of a 'critical' discipline, one that has historically been contingent upon being relatively untroubled by the potential

affective contagion of any sustained analytic engagement with things military. Put differently, sociological traditions of analysis and norms of critique may be more entangled with the exclusion, rather than the redemption, of academic work on things military, work that nonetheless may similarly be felt to be dirty by default.

The second point is to concur with my fellow discussants in endorsing a form of critique or critical ethnography that tries to go beyond any reductive denunciation of things military, beyond ‘critique-as-war’ in Sarah’s and Jean’s memorable formulation. Critique understood as attempts to engage with complexity, to enable teeming and messy lived experience to speak back to theory, and to acknowledge and bring to light the forms of criticality and ambiguities that exist within militaries and militarized spaces themselves, to ‘make known so as to make room to maneuver’ in Zoe’s terms. This type of critical scrutiny and endeavor is less transcendent and assured, more discomforting and open-ended, more prepared to view critique as an ongoing mundane joint accomplishment, and more willing to embrace and continuously think through and negotiate the risks and tensions of ‘strategic complicity’ (Jauregui 2013) rather than seek the moral certainties of detachment.

Sarah and Jean: This set of ruminations raises a number of issues. First, on a meta-level, we found notable that as a group attentive to epistemology, we instinctively tweaked the question, approaching what constitutes critical ethnography via the ethnographer her- or himself. Three of us focused at least in part on how the person, already positioned in specific contexts involving “things military” in order to do ethnography, repositions him- or herself via fieldwork, not only distancing oneself from a previous, focalized identity, but specifically gaining intimacy with positions that might contrast this standpoint. Our personal trajectories, whether as an Israeli officer (in Eyal’s case) or as peace activists in Zoë’s and our own cases, involved passages that encompassed increasingly pluralized standpoints. At times we came to embody the same multivocal, often internally contradictory positions, what Kevin refers to as hybridity, that our ethnographies sought to capture and represent.

Second, we seem to share a concern with critical ethnography of “things military,” terrain that is intrinsically political, that in one way or another tips over into being overly politicized, or mere politics. Cautions about the impulse to reach for a “righteous” ethical unitary reflect this. Ethnographic representations can recreate the very disjunctures and clashing viewpoints that underlie conflicts with military components (and here we appreciate Zoë’s stipulations about how contexts vary). These would, naturally, tend to embody the very contradictions they represent, and not be neatly sewn-up arguments. Alternatively, one can chose a side, and ethnographically pronounce the “primacy of the [aka one, singular] ethical” along lines both Eyal and Zoë tie to Nancy Scheper-Hughes and others. We are tempted to infer that in order to be the boundary crossers we may need to be to produce complex, empathetic work on things military, we feel the need to construct a different kind of boundary that we don’t willingly cross. On the other side of this line, ethnography becomes purely denunciatory, self-righteous, and most of all, politically prescriptive.

Eyal concludes by asking: Can anthropologists be truly empathic as a basis for critiquing the professional perpetrators of violence? Who’s worthy of empathy, who of critique? In studying across battle-lines, even as restaged in domestic settings, if one both empathizes and critiques multiple “sides,” this evenhandedness tempers critique-as-denunciatory, yet stops short of a neutralizing relativism. Finding the “right” distance that Ben-Ari refers to, albeit risking the intimations of

empathetic “promiscuity” to which we allude, may be the challenge of creating representations, and reframing deep logics of “arrangements and practice and imperatives of military life” to again invoke Zoë. This may mean leaving the ultimate political critiques to the consumers of ethnography.

Zoë: One of the things these responses reveal is that, for a general anthropological public, the military seems to exist as a taken for granted and bounded entity in ways that other social institutions and assemblages of power do not, so that, as Kevin says, one thing that is critical (in the sense of urgent) about the ethnography of things military is that it takes place at all. This may lead to its "ontological undoing" which is critical in the other, generative sense. Eyal highlights the ways this has not been the case in the past, or all the time in the present. Certainly, much of the reaction against the HTS program in US anthropology could fairly be characterized in the way he does. But, as Kevin, Sarah and Jean, and I all show (as will, I imagine, many of the articles in this volume), the nature of critical ethnography of things military is hardly reducible to that.

Eyal's comments evoke the distinction between culture and politics – and the critical revision of dehistoricized and antipolitical deployments of the culture concept – that so animated the field in the 1980s and 1990s. I would refuse that distinction, as well as the idea that there is something problematic about the attention to ethics that, he suggests, characterizes much contemporary US anthropology. Anthropology of condemnation – or critique-as-war – is certainly not my project. I do not think that we need a militant army of barefoot anthropologists. I do, however, think (along with feminists of all stripes) that there is never an innocent position from which to know, no amount of critical distance that produces a god's eye view, and that, as anthropologists, we must find ways of being responsive to the often awkward and contradictory obligations produced by the positions we occupy in the many worlds we inhabit (see Abu-Lughod 2002). Sometimes this responsiveness is stickier than others, as perhaps for Sarah when in the grips of a moment of "fuckedness." But one cannot retreat from it.

These dynamics operate across all fields, but it is hardly surprising that they would themselves be stickier in the context of war and when considering the signal institution of modern sovereignty in which violence remains firmly embedded with liberal democratic governmentality. This is a context that condenses and amplifies the forms and logics that shape a broader social imaginary.

Finally, Sarah and Jean float that paradigmatic question I'm sure we've all been asked: What is to be done? They point to what I tend to think of as the broader ecology of knowledge projects and actions of which our scholarship is part. As anthropologists engaged in critique (as distinguished from, say, citizens, or even public intellectuals), I think it is essential to refuse the policy imperative that bears down on our work and seeks to value only scholarship that can be translated into recommendations that can be implemented. The Antipolitics Machine (Ferguson 1990) taught us that lesson decades ago. And for those who still cling to prescriptions as a metric of the worth of critical work, I'd say take a dose of *The Undercommons* (Harney and Moten 2013) and call me when a new day is dawning.

Eyal: Throughout the years, I found myself in situations in which fellow anthropologists asked me about the ethics of my fieldwork when what they really meant was my political stance. I was irritated and puzzled by these kinds of questions that seemed to be asked in regard not to my work on militarism

and militarization, but on the much more local use of organized state violence in concrete circumstances. I sensed that given my focus on the actions of the professional perpetrators of violence (and not perpetrator-victims like injured soldiers), that some scholars wanted me to show some kind of allegiance to the "right" political camp of our discipline and to somehow be apologetic for studying the military and especially the actions of Israeli soldiers. In other words, demands for explicit declarations of allegiance were sounded, especially concerning research where the problems of empathy - and the perceived dangers of "over" identification with troops - emerge.

How could I possibly answer the (always polite and often sincere) queries of "critical" scholars in a way that would not burn bridges or evolve into a dialogue of the deaf? Moreover, the emotional intensity of such questions posed to an Israeli anthropologist studying the use of organized state violence has increased significantly in the wake of the recent commotions in the American Anthropological Association with moves by self-styled concerned anthropologists to boycott Israeli institutions.

Let me try anyway. Over the years I have experimented with various ideas for creating fruitful exchanges with "critical" scholars by carefully explicating the links between my data and theories. I have used a variety of sociological and anthropological theories to make sense of my work on the military so that the use of (to follow Kevin) multiple vocabularies shed light on diverse dimensions of what is to be explicated, to make clear that data could be understood via a variety of views (not only those that are supposed to be "critical"). In addition, I found myself writing in terms of what is deemed "worthy of study" within anthropology: at the interactional level where face-to-face violence takes place I situated my analyses not so much in terms of military organization but in terms of the use of violence. In fact, I found myself framing my writing in different ways for scholars of the military (mainly sociologists, psychologists and political scientists) and for scholars of violence (overwhelmingly anthropologists).

For all this, what I still find troubling is the continued demand of many anthropologists that I clearly declare my political views and allegiances or unmistakably allude to them through the very vocabulary I used in my writing. What is it about contemporary anthropology that makes it necessary to constantly declare allegiances? What kind of social role do these pronouncements fulfil? And most important for this discussion, what kind of questions do such statements preclude? To be sure, declarative criticism is often a precondition for academic promotion (who in their right mind would go against the current in the early stages of their careers?), and outrage (or indignation, anger, and moral certitude) are important motivational bases for much of our work. Zoë puts it wonderfully in terms of the seductive potential of the good/ bad anthropology epitomized by the work of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (Scheper-Hughes 1995). But Zoë and Sarah and Jean attest to the personal difficulties such moves entail (much like the ones I encountered since the end of the 1980s when I began studying the Israeli army). As I understand it, Zoë and Sarah and Jean found solutions to working on the military in bracketing their political and ethical views while doing research (like the older work of scholars of religion who bracketed their beliefs while doing research). That is putting aside their own views during the period of fieldwork and subsequent publication.

But may I cautiously suggest that we go one step further, towards what can be called a "non-declarative critique" that can potentially allow us to ask questions that are sometimes evaded by anthropologists? For example, if we understand that violence is interactive, can we then focus our critical gaze not only on the perpetrators but on the active role of their (to use an old fashioned word) role complements as well - various locals, representatives of international organizations or NGOs in

sites of armed conflicts (Abufarha 2009). Such non-declarative critique could take us even further. It would ask us to be truly suspicious not only of state institutions like the armed forces but of our own disciplinary institutions and the very theories created by them (us, that is).

What ethnographic moment do you recall from your own fieldwork in which the dynamic between empathy and critique was at stake or seemed emphasized?

Sarah and Jean: The moment remains unforgettable to us both: we had been summoned to meet with the brigade's commander and his public affairs officer. The lower-ranked commander of the battalion, with whom we'd crafted our original memo of understanding and agreement, sat back in silence against the wall, duly admonished and chastened. What had happened was the following: some six months earlier, we had been invited to interview soldiers from a battalion at Fort Carson, just back from a second hard tour in Iraq. Specifically, we sought to explore how stigma tied to unseen wounds like PTSD might prevent soldiers from seeking help. Our invitation came through the wife of a Non-Commissioned Officer, who also worked with the Family Readiness Groups on post. She was alarmed at seeing things like wives who sought prescriptions from mental health professionals that were really for their husbands. She understood the husbands' wariness at seeking help themselves as a cultural problem, and called in the anthropologists. Immediately after we concluded three days of intensive interviewing, however, commanders higher up the food chain communicated that they "might need to get" all our material back.

We were baffled. We reminded them of our signed agreement to share any useful information, but that we had both agreed to protect soldier confidentiality, and so couldn't just hand the material over. What commanders already knew, but we at the time still did not, was that a disproportionate number of soldiers from the same unit were becoming implicated in a cluster of 14 local murders between 2006 and 2008. Soon, the national spotlight would turn to the unit. Soldiers' post-deployment behavior, so frequently linked to PTSD, would whip up a legal and media storm that would rage for the next couple of years.

This seismic shift meant that our relationship with the battalion commander, a lieutenant colonel, was fundamentally altered. Our collaboration was borne of a shared concern about post-deployment soldier welfare, and he was willing to risk some exposure in order to gain useful information that might strengthen the case for more responsiveness and resources for soldier behavioral and mental health. Now this shared, tacitly critical stance had landed him in trouble. Where before we'd shared with him ostensible empathy for the effects combat stress and trauma inflicted on soldiers, those very effects – and especially violent and murderous ones – had gotten ahead of all of us. For which group or individual was our empathy and allegiance most important: the commanders held responsible, the soldiers acting out after being subject to trauma, the family and community members subject to resultant risks and dangers?

During the period of our extended fieldwork (2008-2013), the AAA Statement of Ethics changed. Both the 2009 and the 2012 statements emphasized doing "no harm", which in itself proved too facile in working with a military community riven with opposing factions and conflicts of interest. The 2012 ethical guide, however, now included the imperative to "weigh competing ethical obligations due

collaborators and affected parties,” which was somewhat more helpful. Avoiding harm to “vulnerable populations” was most important of all, even when doing so might hazard harm to those in less vulnerable positions.

Our pathways forward reflected this orientation, to protect those most vulnerable first. We did not hand over our materials (protecting individual soldier’s confidentiality). Neither did we “out” the various commanders who had given us support in writing, when doing so would have upheld our own reputations and professionalism. The colonel never questioned that our signed agreements to uphold soldier confidentiality obligated us not to surrender the data. He did request that we submit a new proposal directly to him, requesting his authorization for “the research,” but now with a focus on possibilities for future collaboration—and leaving in no-man’s-land that research, which had already occurred, had been officially authorized. He also asked us to put in writing some of the assurances we offered about not publishing soon. Though the unit would deploy again without ever signing onto the new proposal, the series of conversations that ensued over the months and years to come would lay the foundation for a complex, sometimes uneasy but also productive, continuing relationship between this fieldwork and Fort Carson officialdom. In return for refraining from publishing until command changed, we would later be permitted unparalleled access to shadow soldiers before and after deployments to Afghanistan.

This instance was but the most dramatic place where the relationship between empathy and critique became fraught in our fieldwork. Other examples abound. In all cases, navigating the tensions required an assessment of discrepant positions of power and responsibility, and a willingness to compromise in ways that would enable us to ultimately represent the voices and experiences of those most vulnerable: enlisted soldiers, their families and broader community members – and in absentia, the lives affected in Iraq, Afghanistan and beyond. This entailed a mixture of both pushing back, and in turn compromising, with commanders, along with recognizing their own, lesser vulnerability.

Kevin: Thinking about the question of ethnographic moments, we need to remember that war is an acute site for moral production, with its associated forms of military labour variously considered by different constituencies as exceptionally principled and selfless activity, morally ambivalent dirty work, or fundamentally reprehensible and inexcusable behavior. Furthermore, the expectation of being subject to intense ethical judgment can itself structure fieldwork encounters involving the military in particular ways. For example, while conducting ethnographic research on military procurement and arms fairs, the belief of many of my interlocutors was that the outcome of my research would ultimately and inevitably be a form of one-sided moral critique of their particular professional lives. This expectation that they would be on the end of some form of simple critical denunciation made the conduct of such fieldwork and the development of any empathic rapport tricky, with fieldwork interactions becoming structured by subtle relations of mutual suspicion and discomfort. This is not to suggest that a prerequisite for ethnographic knowledge production with the military must be, or indeed always follows on from, the establishment of particular forms of close understanding and empathy. Indeed, there is often a very explicit value to initial naiveté, to clearly not understanding, in that this can, in certain circumstances, lead to epistemic apprenticeship and the attempted explication of what may otherwise remain implicit and unremarked upon. Relatedly, the affordances of expressions of dissensus in fieldwork encounters with the military may at times likewise be the fraught but productive clarification of the tacit assumptions that underpin divergent moral and political

opinions, including of course further interrogation of the assumptions that may inform our own situated positions and analytic agendas. Alongside empathic relations then, the very awkwardness and discomfort of fieldwork experiences with the military may also ultimately bridge gaps in critical understanding in complex and unanticipated ways.

Eyal: I am thinking back thirty years to the time I served as an officer in a battalion of Israeli infantry reserves. I have written about this experience in *Cultural Anthropology*, so let me freely quote from that piece and then go on to offer some reflections. From mid-April to mid-May of 1988, I served a month-long stint with this reserve unit in the Hebron area of the West Bank. During this period my battalion performed all of the “usual” activities IDF (Israel Defence Forces) units are entrusted with: setting up roadblocks, maintaining patrols, and carrying out arrests. A few weeks after this period of duty I helped organize a party in a Jerusalem night club. This gathering was a farewell party to two officers who were leaving the battalion. Having come back deeply troubled by what I saw and felt in Hebron, I think that I expected the party to provide an opportunity for us to discuss, to raise questions, or at the very least to hint at what this particular period of duty (our first during the first Palestinian Intifada) had “done” or meant to us as soldiers, as human beings. In short, I expected the party to provide an occasion for reflection. As it turned out, hints, questions, let alone full-blown discussions that I had half-hoped would be heard, were not raised at all.

The curious combination of a troubled citizen and anthropologist that marked me during and after this stint in the Occupied Territories questioned why this was so. Part of the answer lies, I soon realized, in the character of such periodic parties as opportunities for celebrating the solidarity and essential unity of a combat unit. This was not a suitable occasion for raising potentially divisive issues or openly acknowledging the personal and political difficulties many of us had endured during the time spent in the territories occupied by Israel.

Beyond such answers, however, I continued to be troubled, to be disturbed by wider issues: how do army reservists interrelate, reconcile their experiences of serving in the territories during the Intifada with those of living their “normal” everyday Israeli lives? To be sure, Israeli forces have carried out similar “missions” associated with the occupation of the the West Bank and Gaza long before this First Uprising. But as it sometimes happens when one is thrust into an extreme situation, one can begin to examine and illuminate many features that are ordinarily rendered invisible by the “normality” of this same situation. So it was with the Intifada. It raised the following question: how do people perform — within the context of their army service — acts that are totally different from, if not in direct contradiction to, the way in which they behave while they are civilians? What are the mechanisms or techniques by which people who see themselves as members of a “normal” democratic society, cope with their participation in policing activities within another society that is governed by different rules and expectations?

When another colleague and friend read an early version of the published article, he observed that permeating my whole analysis is a deep sense of guilt. Yet guilt can be a “positive” motivating force. Telling that tale — or, more precisely, relating my personal story to the more distanced analysis — provided me with a means for confronting the experience of Hebron as well as for facing some of the deeper implications of my actions and those of my friends and comrades. This, of course, was far from easy. I state this in no way in order to minimize the sufferings of the Palestinians or to overstress the

“psychology” of the rulers at the expense of the oppressed. Rather, I believed (and still do) that in order to understand the complexity of the situation one must take into account both the patterns of thought of those Israelis who are charged with managing the occupation of the territories, and the process through which someone, such as I, begins to tell you such a tale.

Although I was rarely in direct contact with Palestinians while in Hebron, I found myself in a state of turmoil for weeks after my return: I did not sleep well, could not concentrate on my teaching and research, and was short with my children. Above all, I was very defensive about any criticism of the army and of the actions of soldiers in the territories. As I then only vaguely sensed and now more explicitly realize I took such criticism personally: that is, as attacks against my identity as an army officer and, through that, as an Israeli, and as assaults upon my commitment to the army and by extension to my own society.

It was against this backdrop that about six months after our deployment in June I was asked to give a short presentation about the Intifada at a roundtable organized at my department at the Hebrew University. This discussion grew out of the feeling some of us held that we could and should react to the uprising as anthropologists and sociologists. I sensed very quickly, however, that I needed to present something that grew out of my own turmoil and as yet only vaguely defined questions. My short ten-minute talk was based on some very rough notes, and it was trying. It was my first public attempt to divulge a deeply personal story and to analyze some of its implications, to own up to my experience and yet to subject it to the anthropological scrutiny that I apply as a matter of course to my normal subjects of research.

Looking back at my experience, it seems that the most difficult problem for me was that I empathized too much with my fellow soldiers. I was part of a rather cohesive group of officers, and by writing and being critical I felt I was somehow betraying them and the trust we had developed. It was like going around their back and saying bad things. But this was doubly difficult since it felt like alienating part of myself - a coming to terms with the boundaries of my own sense of belonging and political views. Yet empathy also helped me not only to understand the meaning of military service for many Jewish men of my generation but the emotional commitment, unsaid and unarticulated, to this army way of life

Zoë: The question about ethnographic moments is certainly one that I have been asked before, and one that sometimes seems implicit in others. For example, that question seems to lurk within the request to explain (or sometimes justify) my choice and the choice of others working on issues of post-9/11 US soldier and veteran life to not write about the experience of Iraqis and Afghans. The question is important, and one to which I have given many answers: that I wanted to focus on one world, rather than offer a project that theorized the relation between multiple ones; that I could not meaningfully cultivate the expertise needed to do justice to both worlds; that some projects — like Lesley Gill’s *School of the America’s* (2004) — do try to do that; that an earlier multisited version of my project that would have included Afghan refugees was too unwieldy for a dissertation; that I offer this account as one that I hope will be read alongside others that are about the experiences of Iraqis or Afghans, like Hayder Al-Mohammad’s (2012), as well as the experience of other kinds of soldiers from other kinds of places in other kinds of wars and other people with injuries, illnesses, or impairments or with other relationships to state violence.

This couched question, which is about the way my own antiwar politics might inform or be contradicted by my ethnographic work, is also implicit in the sense that others sometimes claim that my ethnographic research should have an instrumentally anti-war aim. I remember a beloved and enthusiastic professor of mine remarking that by doing fieldwork with US soldiers I would be venturing into “the belly of the beast” and would therefore have special insider knowledge I could exploit for the common anti-war, and anti-imperialist cause. This may be true, but it is also not one of the reasons that I have chosen to work on things military.

So, I suppose that instead of offering an ethnographic moment in which the dynamic between empathy and critique was emphasized, I have given us slightly autoethnographic reflections triggered by a paranoid feeling that empathy and critique are formed as opposites in the context of things military. But of course, just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean that the overburdened ethical morass of working on things military isn’t out to get you.

Reading Eyal’s reflections, in particular that a critical perspective somehow felt like ‘going around the backs’ of his fellow soldiers and ‘saying bad things,’ I was reminded of one definition of anthropology that I sometimes like to share with my students: anthropology is the science of gossip. This astute observation comes from one of the Brazilian women with whom Alex Edmonds conducted fieldwork on the politics of plastic surgery in Brazil. If we credit our interlocutors’ accounts of their worlds, we ought also to credit their accounts of our interventions into them.

In at least some ways then, it seems the dilemmas of working on ‘things military’ are no different than those of anthropology of any other thing. The dilemmas of objectification, translation, and mediation that are inherent parts of the practice of ethnographic writing and knowledge making are the same. So is the irreducibly extractive nature of the enterprise, in which we as academics generate value in a sphere to which our interlocutors generally have no access, and for which they have little use. And this contributes to the awkwardness of the relationships we have with our informants, even when they are cut of the same racial, ethnic, social, gendered, and classed cloth as we are.

But what of the differences that war makes? What of the ways that the particularities of a situation surface in these encounters? A situation in which the object of ethnographic analysis is bound to state sanctioned violence and characterized by the profoundly illiberal reconfigurations of sovereignty that are the (not so) secret guarantors of liberal democracy (something Ken MacLeish’s work shows so well in the US case)? These must also shape the contours, considerations, and consequences of both fieldwork and the knowledge we make of it. We might read this difference in Eyal’s sense that a distanced and abstracted presentation of his fieldwork findings just wouldn’t do. War, and military institutions, are exceptional by definition. So, while all the dilemmas of the inequalities inherent to the science of gossip still certainly apply, the exceptional nature of things military, and in particular, their necessary connection to sovereign violence, also need to be acknowledged.

During preliminary fieldwork at the US Army’s Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in southern Germany in 2006, I was introduced to an Army officer while getting a tour of the hospital shortly after my arrival. In my own explanation to her of what anthropology was (not as succinct as ‘the science of gossip’), I emphasized that we try to learn through practices, rather than just questions. She then suggested very seriously that I should enlist. Eyal is of course not the only anthropologist who has written about a military from their experience as a member, and at that point, I had read the work of a few, including John P Hawkins who had written about the very military community I was then in the midst of. I found

much of that work to be frustratingly anti-political, focusing on questions of 'military culture' divorced from the broader social and political formations of which they were part. On the one hand, as I've said before, I didn't conceptualize my project as a venture into 'the belly of the beast' out of which I would craft a text patterned on the political arguments of the anti-war left (to which I certainly belonged). On the other, I was interested in understanding how political formations seemed to appear and disappear across different scales or from one vantage to another. The suggestion that I should join the military seemed antithetical to this project. Perhaps most immediately, there was my unwillingness to sign whatever bodily sovereignty I had over to the state or to so directly support the military efforts to which I was morally and politically opposed (it is important to note that I could enact these commitments because of the race and class privilege that offered me a set of appealing life options without such a contract). But beyond that, it seemed like joining the military was likely to force my perspective into a single scale, to wed me to the questions of 'military culture' that seemed to suck the politics out of so many of the texts I'd read by anthropologists and sociologists who had been members of those militaries themselves. The reasons for that are complex, and I would not want to subsume them under the banner of 'empathy,' in part because they are deeply political and operate on many scales, not only that of the individuated feeling conjured by that term. Though, while we tend to forget it, feelings are deeply political, including ones like empathy and pain which are so often rendered as uniquely contained within one individual's experience. Perhaps then we might revisit the question of empathy in terms of its politics and question the conditions under which empathy between an anthropologist and an interlocutor, or between two members of the same military, can be granted, expected, protected, made antithetical to critique, or used to evacuate politics from a space--the military--which is fundamental to its very operation.

References

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. *American Anthropologist*, 104(3): 783–790.
- Abufarha, Nasser. 2009. *The making of a human bomb, an ethnography of Palestinian resistance*, Durham, N.C: Duke University Press.
- Al-Mohammad, Hayder. 2012. A kidnapping in Basra: The Struggles and Precariousness of Life in Postinvasion Iraq. *Cultural Anthropology*, 27(4): 597–614.
- Belkin, Aaron. 2012. *Bring Me Men: Military Masculinity and the Benign Façade of American Empire 1989–2001*. London: Hurst and Company.
- Biehl, João & McKay, Ramah. 2012. Ethnography as Political Critique. *Anthropological Quarterly*, 85(4): 1209–1227.
- Bubandt, Niels & Willerslev, Rane. 2015. The Dark Side of Empathy: Mimesis, Deception, and the Magic of Alterity. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57(1): 5–34.
- Butler, Judith. 2009. Critique, Dissent, Disciplinarity. *Critical Inquiry*, 35(4): 773-795.
- Butler, Judith. 2002. What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue. In Ingham, D. (Ed.) *The Political*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers. 212-226.
- Fassin, Didier. 2017. The endurance of critique. *Anthropological Theory*, 17(1): 4–29.
- Ferguson, James. 1990. *The anti-politics machine, "development", depoliticization, and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 2007. What is critique? In Foucault, Michel, *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). 41-81.
- Gill, Lesley. 2004. *The school of the Americas, military training and political violence in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Gusterson, Hugh. 1997. Studying Up Revisited. *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, 20(1):114–119.
- Harney, Stefano & Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black study*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- Hautzinger, Sarah. 2015. Fieldworking across Territorialized Terrain: From Naïve to (Pretty Much) Fucked. For the panel, *Naiveté, Hope, Skepticism: Encounters with Diplomatic, Military, and Intelligence Agencies*. American Anthropological Association Meetings, Denver CO.
- Hautzinger, Sarah & Scandlyn, Jean. 2014. *Beyond post-traumatic stress, homefront struggles with the wars on terror*, Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.
- Hemmings, Clare. 2012. Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation. *Feminist Theory*, 13(2): 147-161.
- Hollan, Douglas W. & Throop, C. Jason 2011. The Anthropology of Empathy: Introduction. In Hollan, D. W. & Throop, C. J. (Eds.) *The Anthropology of Empathy: Experiencing the Lives of Others in Pacific Societies*. New York: Berghahn Books. 1-21.

- Jauregui, Beatrice. 2013. Dirty Anthropology: Epistemologies of Violence and Ethical Entanglements in Police Ethnography. In Garriot, W. (Ed.) *Policing and Contemporary Governance : The Anthropology of Police in Practice*. New York: Palgrave. 125-153.
- Latour, Bruno. 2004. Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. *Critical Inquiry*, 30(2):225–248.
- 2010. An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto". *New Literary History*, 41(3): 471–490
- Macleish, Kenneth. 2015. The ethnography of good machines. *Critical Military Studies*, 1(1):11–22.
- Mcsorley, Kevin. 2016. Doing military fitness: physical culture, civilian leisure, and militarism. *Critical Military Studies*, 2(1-2): 1–17.
- Povinelli, Elixabeth. 2002. *The cunning of recognition, indigenous alterities and the making of Australian multiculturalism*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Rech, Matthew. 2016. Researching at Military Airshows. In Williams, A. et al. (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Military Research Methods*, London: Routledge
- Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 1995. The Primacy of the Ethical: Propositions for a Militant Anthropology. *Current Anthropology*, 36(3):409–440.
- Throop, C. Jason. 2010. Latitudes of loss: On the vicissitudes of empathy. *American Ethnologist*, 37(4): 771-782.
- Wool, Zoë. 2013. On Movement: The Matter of US Soldiers' Being After Combat. *Ethnos*, 78(3): 403–433.
- 2015. *After war, the weight of life at Walter Reed*, Durham: Duke University Press.