Brokers and Breakers of War Stories in Acholiland, Northern Uganda

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SUMMARY This article describes the tension that built up between two European journalists who had teamed up to shoot a documentary on the entanglement of war and humanitarian interventions in Acholiland, northern Uganda, with the fieldworking anthropologist as the local broker of the documentary project. The article also examines a parallel disconnect developing between the journalists and the Ugandans they encountered. From the perspective of the broker/anthropologist, it is argued that research ethics and the methods of data collection interact in ways that have real consequences and that a scrutiny of this interface exposes a paradoxical vulnerability of research as such. [ethnographic methods, Lord’s Resistance Army, research brokerage, research ethics, Uganda]

At the level of journalism, ripped bodies so often hide the truth. Ethnography offers a bridge from journalism to theory to reveal that which has been hidden. It is a method that helps us see our own cultural assumptions and definitions, and that forces us to test our abstractions against the experiential.

—Alisse Waterston, “Introduction: On War and Accountability,” In An Anthropology of War: Views from the Frontline

In this article, I describe the tension that built up between two European journalists who had teamed up to shoot a TV reportage documentary on the entanglement of war and humanitarian aid interventions in northern Uganda. As they prepared to travel to Uganda, they had asked me, the fieldworking anthropologist, to broker the documentary project locally. I agreed to work with them with the help of my Ugandan research associates, mainly Jimmy Otim, with whom I had worked since I first arrived in northern Uganda in 1997.

In addition to the tension between the two journalists, and from my horizon as a broker, I will also examine a parallel disconnect that developed between the journalists and the Ugandans they encountered. This second thread of the article scrutinizes the actual process of data collection for the documentary. In focusing on ethnography as both process and product—and with an
amalgamation of the two parallel threads—I will argue that (research) ethics and the methods of data collection interact in ways that have real consequences and that a scrutiny of this interface exposes a paradoxical vulnerability of research as such (see also Honkasalo 2019; Price 2011:171–192).

Lindquist defines the broker as someone who gains something from a particular exchange or transaction, whereas the patron controls that which is exchanged. The go-between messenger, finally, does not affect any transaction or flow of information. These are three ideal types, difficult to sustain empirically (Lindquist 2015:870). For example, Jimmy and I assisted the journalists with the initial ambition not to affect the stories told by the interviewees, but we also hoped to gain something from the cooperation, namely the dissemination of our research findings to a broader audience.

The two journalists arrived in war-torn AcholiLAND, northern Uganda, in the second half of 2005, at a moment in history when the International Criminal Court had unsealed its arrest warrants for the leadership of the Lord’s Resistance Army rebels. One of the journalists—I will call him Mr. Reel—was looking for a kind of filmic war that he initially could not find in the northern town of Gulu, a booming hub of humanitarianism, leisure, business, and state and military administration. The second journalist, a TV photographer—Mr. Fate—did not need to search for the war. He was increasingly terrified, convinced that the notorious Lord’s Resistance Army rebels would attack us at any moment. It was as if the two journalists had arrived to entirely different places.

I will start my article by charting some interconnected methodological and ethical dimensions in field-based research, with an emphasis on the role of research intermediaries at this interface. I will then proceed with a short sketch of how anthropology has come to understand its objects of research, as either natives or actors. My exposé thereafter continues to present the case of the two journalists and their work in Uganda, with the anthropologist as a go-between mediator. Rather than grounding their work in the complexity of local realities, of which they now were part, I here suggest that the journalists came looking for illustrations to answers they already had, regardless of the questions they asked; which, in philosophical terms, is to be seen as an instrumental amplification of the already present (Malpas 2019; Young 1997:354). Because they had prepared themselves, which meant that one of the journalists, Mr. Reel, had read some of my work, they already knew what to look for before arriving in Uganda. This, I will argue as the article moves on, is part of a torturous legacy that journalism shares with much social science research, anthropology included. As pointed out long ago by Aimé Césaire (1972, originally 1955) and his cohort of pan-Africanist philosophers, the outcome may be a “thingification” and dehumanization of the (African) other. But if the object of knowledge is denied any active, meaning-generating dimension (Haraway 1988:595), the tension that built up as the project unfolded still opened for these objects, or subjects really, to reclaim the initiate as to resist any thingification. I will give examples of how I, the intermediary, came to see the contributions of the informants in a different light, because I did not primarily work as a translator between the journalists and the informants. I instead worked in dialogue with the filmmakers’ interviewees, and in some cases, these were also longtime research interlocutors of mine.
Relational Vulnerability

As the anthropological legacy of Franz Boas has it, “Our methods produce relational ontologies that draw us into conversations and collaborations, at individual and community levels” (Darnell 2017:7; see also Sanjek 1993:13–14). Such collaborations and conversations are intimately entangled with relations of power that will, for better or worse, shape “the complex mechanisms of knowledge production” (Schiltz and Büscher 2018:141). Yet Ruth Behar, in an acclaimed book called *The Vulnerable Observer*, notes that anthropologists today increasingly take on the role as overseers of teams of assistants on big yet rigorously defined and delimited research projects. In the process, they seem to depersonalize the connection to their research subjects and the field (Behar 1996:25). Besides losing sight of how data are collected, selected, filtered, and how information and knowledge are produced (Bateson 1972:451–453), lost also is the potential of a dialogical research ethics that can acknowledge the role played by local research collaborators in ways that actually disentangles the interplay between power and knowledge production (Schiltz and Büscher 2018:141; see also Mwambari 2019; Price 2011).

We often think of vulnerability in terms of some people as more vulnerable than others; of victims versus perpetrators, poor versus rich, have-nots versus havevs, and researched versus the researchers. One master narrative in anthropology and beyond is that of “the suffering subject who has replaced the savage one as a privileged object of our attention” (Robbins 2013:450). A recent example of this narrative is *Histories of Victimhood*, an ethnographic anthology on political violence with its greater part of case studies (if not all) originating in places other than the West (Jensen and Ronsbo 2014). There is nothing wrong with such a framework. On the contrary, such analyses can be important, to which much of the scholarship that links the war in northern Uganda to the wider world and the country’s troubled colonial past can attest (see, e.g., Allen and Vlassenroot 2010; Atkinson 2010; Behrend 1999; Branch 2011; Dolan 2009; Finnström 2008; Nibbe 2012; Porter 2017). Yet, this focus tends to emphasize injustices and suffering at the cost of other aspects of social life and human interaction.

There is also another kind of power asymmetry that is an inescapable aspect of research based on fieldwork, namely the relationship between researcher and informant. Perhaps more often than not this factor is only superficially addressed as having analytical, even epistemological, bearings. Schiltz and Büscher suggest that the controversy over Victor Turner’s (1967) alleged exploitation of a key informant with whom he shared a passion for interpretation and knowledge “may have spurred researchers to erase brokers from the final products of ethnographic research” (Schiltz and Büscher 2018:129–130). Such an assumption is certainly a simplification of how ethnographers have acknowledged and still acknowledge their fieldwork associates and any relational ontologies (see, e.g., Amony and Baines 2015; Clifford 1988; Finnström 2008; Hoffman and Tarawalley 2014; Holmberg 2014; Sanjek 1993). Still, when research associates as intellectual contributors are erased from the production of ethnography, an epistemological (and ethical) dimension is silenced and hidden away rather than dealt with properly. Indeed, today there is a rehabilitated
interest in the role of research intermediaries, how they influence the flow of information, and thus take part in the production of knowledge, not least in regard to research in volatile places (see, e.g., Eriksson Baaz and Utas 2019). For example, in analyzing the consequences of the enormous researcher influx to postwar northern Uganda, Schiltz and Büscher note that such gatekeepers “may reproduce conceptions of war-affected people as vulnerable and of the war-affected context as problem-fraught and in need of intervention” (2018:124). In my case, as I will show, the researcher himself is the broker, or rather, the journalists’ fixer of “connections, stories and newsgathering” who indeed may play “a crucial role” in the actual “news production” (Schiltz and Büscher 2018:129, 132).

Brokers, Actors, and Natives

My exposé, as indicated, is about vulnerability in anthropology and beyond: of exposing research objects as well as the exposure of the researcher. Anthropology has a long history of exploring, unpacking, and uncovering the off-stage lives of its informants. More, as anthropologists we like to say that we listen to our informants, to be able to highlight their points of view. Such a goal can only be achieved via a thorough investigation of a particular sociocultural and political context. As Malinowski (1922:25) once declared after carefully outlining in three steps his methods of long-term participant observation, “The final goal . . . is to grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realise his vision of his world.” In a critical appreciation of the Malinowskian legacy, Geertz insists that our aim is to see “things from the actor’s point of view.” Geertz’s focus on actors, rather than on natives in the “cannibal-isle fantasizing” way, was, at the time, a vital widening of the epistemological horizon. Anthropology, Geertz maintains, is “actor-oriented” and about “the enlargement of the universe of human discourse” (1973:14).

In such a scheme, we are all potential actors, with relations with each other rather than only researchers and informant natives, or observers and observed. Geertz (1974:27–28) delves even deeper into the Malinowskian legacy: the question that this raises is epistemological rather than moral or only methodological. Even if we, as writers and academics, in the end are the ones who assert the power to craft and edit data and experience, including the stories of our informants (see Finnström 2015), a focus on actors (and their networks) rather than natives (as a category) is not rhetorical. My aim here may not be self-evident, despite the references to some old-time anthropological giants. But there is something important in the emphasis on anthropology and critical ethnography as the enlargement of the universe of human discourse by way of the other (Schiltz and Büscher 2018:141). Judith Butler suggests that we search for “a more inclusive and egalitarian way of recognizing precariousness” (2009:13). Having in mind not only the Ugandan warscape but also the massive Syrian war tragedy and the migration crisis that has followed, for example, the survival of humanity depends not on the policing of boundaries and borders, physical or intellectual, but on recognizing how we are endlessly bound up with others. Still, as I will show, such a project may easily fail.
**Arriving at Gulu Airport**

Let’s now turn to my work with Mr. Reel and Mr. Fate, the documentary journalists. I had encountered journalists during fieldwork before. I had met journalists with a critical, investigative, and even explorative approaches. I had also met those in search for the sensational scoop on child soldiering in what has been mediatized, over and over again, as some kind of Conradian *Heart of Darkness* thing (e.g., Conrad 1991, originally 1902), including mythologized references to Henry Morton Stanley and other Victorian travelers. I have analyzed the second trend elsewhere (e.g., Finnström 2010; 2012). However, this time, my work became part of the narrative that unfolded. Even if the actual project belonged to the first category of journalism, it soon developed in ways that I, from many years of experience and research engagement with northern Uganda, find overwhelmingly common for any journalist intervention there. Illustrative, my categorization of two types of journalist interventions can only be temporary and heuristic.

I had booked rooms for the journalists at the Hotel Pearl Afrique, in 2005, a brand new hotel in Gulu town, isolated, gated, and as I imagined, safe and secure. My coworker Jimmy had access to a four-wheel drive, and we were now waiting for the journalists at Gulu airport. The flight from Entebbe had just arrived. When they came, Jimmy and I could sense that there was something in the air, a tension between the two men. Referring to the security situation, their embassy in the Ugandan capital Kampala had advised against travelling by road to the north. I, for my part, had told them that I had never traveled by air from Kampala to the north. Indeed, there were several buses a day arriving in Gulu town from the capital, before proceeding further north. While Reel would have liked to travel by road, to get a feel of the region as he said, Fate had insisted that they should travel by air. Reel complied but was irritated. He was an experienced journalist who had been to Africa many times. Fate was a professional TV photographer who had worked with seasoned journalists, but he had never been to Africa before.

Jimmy and I welcomed Reel and Fate, and took them to the Pearl Afrique. Over cold drinks, we briefed them about recent developments. Over the last few months, Jimmy and I had followed closely the unfolding of local and national news as the International Criminal Court unsealed its arrest warrants for five top leaders of the Lord’s Resistance Army. For example, Joseph Kony, the rebel leader, was charged with thirty-three crimes based on his individual criminal responsibility: the warrant for arrest listed twelve counts of crimes against humanity (e.g., murder, enslavement, sexual enslavement, and rape), and twenty-one counts of war crimes (e.g., pillaging, intentionally attacking civilians, and forced enlisting of children). When the warrants for arrest were unsealed and became public, rumors started to circulate in Gulu that the rebel leaders were angered and had issued a counter order. Just as the noncombatant population had been targeted for years, humanitarian aid workers and expatriates should leave northern Uganda or they would be killed. The rebel high command seemed to reason that their enemies now included any representative of the international community. As I listened to my Ugandan friends, I concluded that such a rationalization allowed senior rebels to make sense of their
situation of increased stigmatization and marginalization (Finnström 2013). Officially, the Ugandan army denied that anything extraordinary was going on. Indeed, when eventually interviewed by Reel, the division army commander would openly refute Reel’s questions about “the war.” This is no war, because there is no real enemy, he said. For his forces only “a few mopping up operations” against a few terrorist elements and regular bandits remained. It was a locally confined security problem not a war. Still Ugandan media had reported several incidents in which foreign aid workers had been targeted and killed by the rebels (Finnström 2013; Porter 2017:21).

As Jimmy and I briefed the two journalists about the stories that we had collected as well as the reports in Ugandan media, I noticed that this was information for which Reel indeed was looking. We started to plan how to proceed with the documentary project. But I also noticed that Fate became more withdrawn. He soon excused himself from the planning. There was again tension and irritation building up between the two men. Our briefing proved to Fate his presuppositions about the Lord’s Resistance Army, the war in northern Uganda, and that Gulu was a deadly place. By now, they had both found the war they had come to report on, yet Jimmy’s and my intervention was to mark the end of their cooperation. While Reel now wanted to move around to see for himself, and to film, Fate had seen, or heard, enough. As brokers and go-betweens, Jimmy and I were perplexed.

Parallel Realities, Worlds Apart

Because of their diametrically different readings of the Ugandan warscape, two completely different realities arose. These formed a cognitive and emotional dissonance between them and their respective experiences of northern Uganda. With reference to Marriage’s work on humanitarianism, Allen describes the process of cognitive dissonance: “humanitarians can have remarkable levels of cognitive dissonance, whereby they explain their actions and interpret events in ways that may be strangely separated from observed realities” (Allen 2015:97). Often humanitarians even avoid situations that may trouble the narrative with which they came (Marriage 2006:10–11). In other words, people arrive to a place with a narrative of what is going on, and they will be inclined to interpretations and judgements based on this preset narrative that is comforting and in line with their existing interests and prejudices (Malpas 2019:151). The field experience then becomes something like what Max Gluckman and the anthropologists of the Manchester school called “the method of the apt illustration” whereby fieldwork “fragments … will be used in order to illustrate the theoretical presuppositions established prior to coming to the field” (Handelman 2010:220; see also Kapferer 2010:2).

A worldview based only on fragmental illustrations will more often than not therefore confirm what is already known. Such an existential effort of practical control in the face of the unknown, or the unwanted, is exactly what defines magical thinking. Such tendencies are what anthropology historically has associated with the informants, the so-called natives, not with themselves, the self-declared moderns (Whitehead and Finnström 2013).
Still, for Fate, his experience was real. He had seen enough of Gulu, of northern Uganda, even of Africa. He declared that he would not leave the hotel. Instead, he withdrew to his room. Reel was furious yet restrained. For the documentary project to continue after the breakdown between Fate and Reel, Jimmy and I had to find someone else who could operate the enormous TV camera that the two journalists had brought all the way from Europe. Jimmy knew about George Okeny, an experienced photographer from Gulu. I had met George on a few occasions before, so he was a familiar face, but we had not done any work together. He had worked with teams from the BBC and CNN in Uganda as well as in South Sudan and the Congo. When we contacted George, he offered to operate the camera.

My role as a team member also took on a new dimension. I was no longer only negotiating between the two journalists and the local population in the effort to assist the filming. When communication between Reel and Fate broke down, I became a go-between and counselor. I bought chocolate and imported Granny Smith apples for Fate who remained in the hotel. I spent time with him on the hotel veranda, talking about innocent things to ease his mind. I managed, the final evening, to bring him and the rest of the film team to an outdoor restaurant, so that he could experience the cooling effect of the setting sun. For Fate, it was revelatory. I guess the cold beers were of some help too. Out of pure emotional relief, I suppose, he started to make promises to the Ugandans at the table. He promised George, the film photographer who had joined the project when Fate withdrew from it, to illicitly copy and send him some extremely expensive film editing software. The promise would never be fulfilled. I suppose that George and the other Ugandans realized that Fate’s promise was mostly about himself. For them, it was a familiar yet sad situation. Fate opened up and shared filming experiences with George and the other Ugandans. They talked about camera equipment and technical know-how, not about the war or the suffering caused to so many people. For a brief moment in time, the Europeans and the Ugandans shared the same world and experiences as professional filmmakers. But as so many times before, George found himself in a situation in which he was expected to listen passively to the visiting European, who was lecturing him about how to do things as a filmmaker. George fell silent.

This final evening was the only time that Fate left the hotel. It was also the only time he met with George, who had replaced him as the team’s cameraman. So, when Fate refused, one of George’s assignments was to film some soldiers, something Reel said was necessary for the film to be authentic. I recalled a recent NGO-led “workshop” that I had attended in my capacity as visiting researcher and lecturer at Gulu University, where I had met some Ugandan army officers. One of them had approached me in an effort to extract information about my research agenda. Rather than in army uniform, and in emphasizing his humanitarian image, he had always been dressed in civilian clothes and a reporter vest with the logo of Save the Children, a token from one of many previous workshops he had attended. As the workshop wrapped up, we had exchanged phone numbers, and when I called, he put me in contact with the division army commander, who in turn ordered Major Tom, the public relations officer, to assist us. Major Tom saved the day. Tom ordered a patrol unit to report to the barracks on a Sunday, the soldiers’ day off.
The film shoot was strange to watch. Tom and I were following the unfolding of it from a distance, as the patrol commander was ordering the soldiers up and down the road. “Mr. Reel, what is he doing? Why does he want this?” Tom asked me. “I really don’t know,” I said. In retrospect, I am reminded of Geertz’s classic advice to the participant observer but now from the perspective of the intermediating informant: “The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to” (1974:29).

Increasingly excited by the situation, Reel ordered George left and right. George did his best with the camera, but a discussion soon erupted regarding the camera settings. Reel was now not only directing the film, he was also ordering George to adjust the camera settings. George resisted, arguing that he knew what he was doing and that the faces of the dark Ugandan soldiers under the blazing sun would become even darker if he changed the settings. Eventually he gave up and did what Reel told him to do. When I asked him why afterwards he would tell me “It is always like this. These foreign journalists seldom acknowledge my professional skills.” Evidently, his hard-earned experience counted for less than nothing. “It must be tough,” I commented. He replied, “Well, I try, but often I just do what they tell me to do. They pay. I would do it differently, but it’s their thing.”

Back at the film location, Tom came up with an idea as to add some action to the footage. He ordered the patrol unit to a nearby small valley. The soldiers were instructed to act as if they were to secure and cross a creek in rebel held territory. Out of excitement, Reel now took the camera from George, leaving him and the tripod behind. Reel got his footage of the war but had to edit out, eventually, the puzzled local people who continued to do their laundry in the same creek. The everyday domestic stuff going on in the background of the film shoot defused the whole war set up. Perhaps only Tom and I took notice of this larger scheme of things, taking place just outside the cyclopean sight of the camera.

**The Prison, Right?**

Leaving Tom with his soldiers, we then proceeded to a camp for internally displaced people, and Reel asked a man if life in the camps was like living in a prison. I had argued something like this in my analysis of the massive internment in war-torn Uganda, but Reel’s instrumental question puzzled both the informant in the camp and me. The man did not say much but agreed. Again, I have to admit that Reel’s report of the camp situation was in line with my own conclusions. Still I was disturbed by the fact that Reel was using only “fragments... in order to illustrate the theoretical presuppositions established prior to coming to the field” (Handelman 2010:220).

The scene had again been staged. Jimmy’s and my role as fixers and brokers was an important factor in all this, a shortcut as to avoid anything that might upset the presuppositions. Fate’s refusal to join us was the consequence of his illusions of the war that became very real for him. He was truly terrified. But more, it was Reel in particular with whom Fate refused to work, and I increasingly came to understand why Fate had arrived at such a conclusion. Even if I shared with Reel worldview more than I did with Fate, I grew increasingly
uncomfortable with the ways in which Reel worked, doing anything to get the story he was looking for, giving up on anyone that stood in the way, including his coworkers. While trying to save the film project as well as the cooperation in a situation of amassed tensions, Reel jeopardized not only his professional relationship with Fate and George but also with the people he was to portray in the documentary who were stripped of any nuance, depth, complexity, and their humanity.

The film project continued. Next stop was a NGO called Gulu Human Rights Focus and its outspoken executive director, Ladit James Otto, who worked tirelessly to expose human rights abuses until his retirement in 2010. I deeply respect Ladit Otto and the organization that he co-founded in 1994 for their risky work of exposing rebel atrocities but also, when few on the local scene dared to, in exposing government abuses and atrocities. He died in 2016 at the age of 71. Again, for the 2005 documentary, I was the go-between. Reel asked Otto for someone to interview. More specifically, Reel wanted a woman with visible scars on her body, who could speak English, in front of the TV camera. Reel wanted her to be a victim of army abuses, not rebel violence. He needed the woman to be a victim of government violence, because he was not doing the usual story on the notorious and bizarre Lord’s Resistance Army. His story was to be different. From reading my work, Reel knew that both sides were committing atrocities. Ladit Otto, on his side, had read my PhD dissertation (Finnström 2003) with great interest. After all, ever since my first arrival to northern Uganda in 1997, Ladit Otto had been an important informant and a keen follower of my work. Still, it was quite a list of criteria that Reel put forward.

But like George, Otto also was experienced and had been in similar situations many times before. He explained calmly, that such a woman would be difficult to locate. Reel had arrived with the Entebbe flight on a Friday, and he was to fly back to Entebbe and Kampala on Sunday, the same weekend. Over the weekends, Otto said, most people go back to their villages or visit friends and relatives. There was not enough time for us to find the informant for whom Reel was looking. Instead, Otto proposed, Reel could interview him.

"On sheer empirical grounds," writes Trouillot (1991:19) in his anthropological and historical assessment of radical otherness and the so-called savage slot, “the differences between Western and non-western societies are blurrier than ever before.” Indeed, building on my work as well as that of others, Reel’s ambition was to portray wartime suffering as to disclose a link between the war in northern Uganda and the political realities and agendas back in Europe (and the U.S.) that somehow fueled this war. Yet his specific request for the English-speaking woman with a very specific war experience was a search for a stereotypical version of something already known. In this, there was no blurring of boundaries. The savage slot of radical otherness (Trouillot 1991) remained the antithesis to the West, but here, following Robbins’s (2013) elaboration of Trouillot’s argument, with the suffering subject occupying the slot of (radical) otherness.

If anthropology of the old days, of Margaret Mead and others, was based “on the promise that the discovery of other ways of living might teach us the limits of our own” (Robbins 2013:455), the more contemporary focus on shared humanity linked by suffering risks reducing the informant subject to an object.
This indeed happened at Reel’s documentary shoot. One reason for this, is exactly because of Reel’s search for illustrations to answers he knew already before he came to record any stories, again, not “as to offer lessons in how life are lived differently elsewhere” but as to offer stories of the rawness of war, violence and trauma that “make us … feel in our bones the vulnerability we as human beings all share” (Robbins 2013:455).

As Robbins points out, such a project is not necessarily an essentially bad thing. However, when the project becomes “infotainment” whereby suffering is commodified and commercialized, and then integrated into processes of global marketing, it dehumanizes the informant other (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997:1; see also Kleinman, et al. 1997). Lost is any expression of a shared humanity of suffering or of anything shared.

Sometimes the line separating any “finely tuned aesthetic of misery” (Csordas, quoted by Robbins 2013:455) and brute infotainment evaporates. Reel, on his side, did nothing to free himself from the infotainment logic. Instead, in searching for pre-decided illustrations he subsumed to this very logic. Otto’s offer to take on the role of the suffering narrator was his effort to reestablish this fine but important line of separation and to reaffirm the humanity of the informant. Otto too knew the potency in the marketing of victimhood and suffering, and he knew very well the structural position of suffering and victimhood in the global order of things. He knew all this as a person who had lived through this war for many years. His experience and his knowledge about the international media apparatus allowed him to see, in this specific case, how global processes of dehumanization work. His response to Reel’s questions situated and historicized the stories of war. In this sense, Otto tried to push for representations similar to what Judith and David MacDougall once did with their ethnographic films on the hardships of life in Australia. “The achievement of the MacDougalls … is to have created representations of Aboriginal lives that speak to the current political situation threatening them,” writes Myers, “but to have done so in a way that does not deflect from the deep humanity that makes them worth understanding in the first place” (1988:217).

**A Torturous Legacy**

Any recognition of the other is never innocent. Whitehead (2013) has argued, by way of Pierre Clastres’s political anthropology, that anthropology has a colonial and invasive legacy. From the experience of doing fieldwork among the Guayaki in Paraguay, Clastres (1989; 1998) argued that people would not need to talk to outside researchers if they were not obliged to as “informants.” If people were healthy and the situation peaceful, they would not need to share their lives with outsiders in ways defined by these very same outsiders. Whitehead (2013) suggests that the persistent colonial role of anthropology is through its unsilencing of others, of disclosing secrets (see also Finnström 2015:S225). Some anthropologists working in politically volatile settings have noted a “troubling similarity between interrogation and interview” that dehumanizes the informants (Robben 1995:87). Others have noted the resemblance between the ethnographic fieldworker and the medieval inquisitor (Rosaldo 1986); indeed, a
legacy of interrogation accentuated by the colonial context in which anthropology came of age (Edwards 2017:22; Leiris 2017).

Some fellow anthropologists, as the Wikipedia page on Clastres is quick to point out, have criticized him for being a naïve romantic. Robbins’s (2013) call for an anthropology beyond the suffering subject indicates that there is still a relevance to Clastres’s argument. Long before Clastres, the pan-Africanist philosophers saw most social sciences as the manifestation of a colonial epistemology. Aimé Césaire, in his Discourse on Colonialism, writes about the “thingification” of the other. In our effort to know the other, we turn “the indigenous man into an instrument of production” and an interpreter “necessary for the smooth operation of business” (Césaire 1972:21; see also Walker 2020). Such a thingification overruns the relational ontology for which the colonial-era Boasian anthropology laid the foundation. Judith Butler, to return to our contemporary times and the search for more inclusive ways of recognizing the relatedness and precariousness of humanity, shows how research on war continues to dehumanize the other into someone who is not grievable and therefore ultimately not human. There are thousands and thousands of nameless war casualties who are not mourned, actual people who, like everyone else, have “names and faces, personal histories, family, favorite hobbies, slogans by which they live” (Butler 2004:32). Yet, we continue to reference them only as illustrations to our theses. For Butler this is not only a matter of discourse but rather of the establishment of the limits of human intelligibility, what she calls “the unmarkable” (2004:35).

In his final shoot, Reel widened the film’s original focus on war casualties, precariousness, human suffering, and the grievable in a way that troubled Jimmy. As we were driving through Gulu town on our way back to the Pearl Afrique, Reel suddenly asked Jimmy to stop the car. Reel wanted to have footage of some roadside cows as well. Jimmy questioned the whole thing: these were not even cows customary to northern Uganda. These were a few surviving animals from a restocking project, longhorn cows imported from the president’s region in southern Uganda. A few of the president’s cows on the loose in town, feeding from the garbage pits, what has that to do with the war and the documentary, Jimmy asked. Reel’s only explanation was that they were beautiful because of their long horns.

Jimmy and I were watching as Reel put up the tripod for his camera. We had just filmed the situation of the internally displaced persons, uprooted and scattered families, herded into camps like cattle to the kraals. In my work, I had criticized the way in which the internally displaced people were reduced to numbers and dehumanized into an administrative and anonymous acronym, the “IDPs,” a legacy of the marriage between war and humanitarian intervention (Finnström 2008, chap. 4). As longtime coworkers in research, Jimmy and I had this legacy in mind as we watched the cows and Reel with his camera. Jimmy dryly suggested a new acronym for the humanitarian organizations to take up: the “IDCs” – the internally displaced cows in Gulu town, the result of a few ill-planned restocking schemes; cows lingering around, eating from the garbage pits. Again, as so many times before, it would be the president’s folks (and cows) rather than the local people who would benefit. That is how the war industry works and Reel’s documentary would do little to change this. It was just to be yet one more illustration of “distortion,” and “in instrumental terms” the reinforcement of “the already present” (Malpas 2019:151).
Phantom Africa, Again?

Early on in this article, I reference two types of journalism and mediatized reports on the war in northern Uganda. The first type is investigative, even explorative, while the second type searches for the sensational scoop on child soldiers framed in a Darkest Africa narrative à la Joseph Conrad or even Henry Morton Stanley and other Victorian explorers. To complicate things including this neat division, I then sketched an ethnography of mediations, brokerage, and breakage, but I also revisited the foundation of our anthropological methods as to present an ethnography of cognitive dissonance and emotional stress.

Reel’s ways of working, stopping at nothing, made me uncomfortable. He focused on the kind of vulnerability well known in anthropology—of perpetrators and victims, of winners and losers, of danger and the suffering slot. But also, Reel’s fixation with the vulnerability of the suffering slot had consequences, unveiled by the tentious relation between the filmmaker and the filmed, between the powerful subject and the powerless object. If vulnerability is about dependency on others, the porousness of boundaries, and the openness toward the world (Honkasalo 2019), in a set of relations that entail demands, then Reel’s project did nothing to nurture any explorative openness, nor did it accept any active, meaning-generating dimension on behalf of the interviewees that might have demanded that Reel adjusted his project. In other words, vulnerability is embedded in webs of political relations (Honkasalo 2019:6) and so was Reel with his film project. It is paradoxical that his project design could not acknowledge any such embeddedness.

In terms of these methodological and ethical constraints, Reel’s project finds a parallel in another project, that of the famous colonial-era French ethnographer Marcel Griaule, as disclosed by Griaule’s assistant, Michel Leiris. Leiris was a surrealist writer and an ethnographer-to-be in search for the pureness of primitive expressions, or the savage slot, so common in those days. Between 1931 and 1933, Leiris travelled from Dakar to Djibouti as the secretary-archivist on one of Griaule’s ethnographic expeditions. After returning to France, he published *L’Afrique fantôme*. This massive text—in Leiris’s own words, “a personal chronicle, an intimate journal” and a “travel narrative” (2017:320,323)—combined sketchy ethnography with highly private minutes. He disclosed how the expedition members were stealing anything that they could get hold of, and they were irritated with each other and with the “poor fellows” that they encountered (e.g., Leiris 2017:272). “Leiris revealed the strained relationship between the European members of the research team and the unethical museum-collecting procedures of the expedition. These revelations were to be the cause of his eventual permanent break with his colleague Marcel Griaule” (Tedlock 1991:73; see also Clifford 1988; Edwards 2017; Leiris 2017).

In concluding my article by way of suggesting a parallel between Griaule and Reel, my objective is not to assess Griaule’s scientific reports and anthropological writings, or to assess the storyline as it eventually turned out in Reel’s documentary. Rather, I acknowledge that some of Reel’s reports were in line with my own conclusions. But my point is that Reel’s and Griaule’s projects share the same colonial legacy in how data were collected, selected, even filtered, and how knowledge was produced (see also Mwambari 2019:8–9).
tension between Reel and Fate and how Reel approached his interviewees—the cultural and suffering other—resulted in an unfolding documentary project that came to violate the very humanity that these journalists actually wanted to understand. Now as then, this was research as interrogation and a thingification of the other, and ultimately, of Africa as a phantom.

Jimmy agreed but was somehow more forgiving, as he was about to embark on a PhD project of his own after many years in the business of research brokerage. “Perhaps,” he writes in a comment to the draft article, “we can forgive the journalists. Their mission was to find a story to ‘sell’ and Reel was not ready to go back with nothing particularly with all the flight costs from [Europe] to Gulu. It should be a great read for aspiring researchers.”

Notes

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