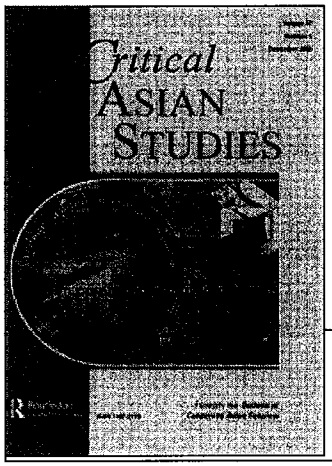

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Sabine Frühstück

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NEW CONVERSATIONS, NEW TRUTHS

Commentary on "Politics and Pitfalls of Japan Ethnography: Reflexivity, Responsibility, and Anthropological Ethics"

Sabine Frühstück

ABSTRACT: The American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics does not sufficiently acknowledge the challenges posed for anthropologists who "study up" and "across" rather than "down" the partly imagined power hierarchy within which the researcher and her host members position themselves. The Code proves inadequate for the ethical dilemmas that emerged from the four projects presented in this volume on the worlds of urban feminists and right-wing conservatives, activists and policy-makers of a local community revitalization project, an indigenous minority in the process of reclaiming its present, and corporate soccer functionaries. Several features distinguish these articles from previous work on the subject of ethics in anthropology: It is no longer necessarily nor exclusively the ethnographer who does the writing. The contested claims to ethnographic authority, access, and representation are closely related to the importance of the production and circulation of texts. The will to be loyal to one's consultants does not in all projects appear as the most ethical manner to pursue fieldwork. The power relations that anthropologists engage mirror the fluidity and flexibility of power relations among their research subjects that appear exacerbated in study-up projects. As anthropology's focus has become increasingly urban, cosmopolitan, and Western, conventional understandings of ethnographic authority, access, and power relations are contested and problematized in new, more complex ways.

Over the years anthropology has engaged in perhaps more methodological reflection than any other discipline, despite the likely possibility that ethical misconduct is much more common in the sciences and often has more far-reaching, dire, and costly consequences in those fields.[1] For anthropologists based in the United States, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) has created a

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Code of Ethics, but this code does not sufficiently acknowledge the challenges posed for anthropologists based in the West who "study up" and "across" rather than "down" the partly imagined power hierarchy within which the researcher and her host members position themselves. The code thus proves inadequate for the ethical dilemmas that emerged from the projects analyzed here.

"Moral questions," wrote Adorno in 1963, "have always arisen when moral norms of behavior have ceased to be self-evident and unquestioned in the life of a community."[2] Adorno did not mourn that loss of moral norms. Being certain that the collective ethos was invariably a conservative one, he proposed that this ethos postulates a false unity, which in turn attempts to suppress the difficulty and discontinuity existing within any contemporary ethos. It is not that there was once a unity that subsequently has come apart, he claimed, only that there was once an idealization that is no longer credible and ought not to be. Similarly, the present authors challenge the conventional notion embraced by the Code that ethical questions necessarily emerge from power relations that tacitly position the anthropologist as more powerful than the subjects of her research. While the Code may have its intrinsic problems even in "study down" situations, Tomomi Yamaguchi, Bridget Love, Elise Edwards, and ann-elise lewallen go beyond the critical examination of conventional configurations of power relations in fieldwork situations. They also problematize the very position and significance of fieldwork within anthropological research.

This is quite a radical step considering that not so long ago, in defense of fieldwork anthropology from the apparent onslaught of literary and cultural studies, Don Handelman had claimed that fieldwork was unlike any of the humanities and other social sciences in that it was not a text-mediated discipline.[3] Consequently, he wrote in *Poetics Today,* it was the sole discipline that struggled with the turning of subjects into objects rather than the turning of objects into subjects. This quality of fieldwork was the experimental strength of anthropology. Handelman conceded that fieldwork anthropologists also engage in projects to create presence from absence, through writing. In this, their work is no less text-mediated than that of other disciplines. The articles in this volume, however, forcefully suggest that the relationship between what is said and what is written — or, the relationship between fieldwork and the production and circulation of texts about the people who are studied in a given project, in these four projects, at least — is more loaded and less stable than Handelman indicates. Collectively, they persuasively argue that as anthropology's focus has become increasingly urban, cosmopolitan, and Western, conventional understandings of ethnographic authority, access, and power relations are contested and problematized in new, more complex ways. A host of differing claims to authority and control over texts as well as the ethics that underlie those claims, have come into play. At the same time, ethnographers increasingly work in ur-

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1. Judson 2004, 4–6.
2. Adorno 2001 (1997), 16 (Eng. trans.), 30 (original).
3. Handelman 1994, 342.

ban, less contained and less containable environments while the effects of globalization further new currents and patterns of migration, adding to the instability of social relations and networks that ethnographers used to rely on.

The work of the ethnographer has changed. A Foucauldian version of a "no pain, no gain" notion of work permeates the present analyses: "That which is susceptible of introducing a significant difference in the field of knowledge," Foucault was convinced, "at the cost of a certain difficulty for the author and the reader, with, however, the eventual recompense of a certain pleasure, that is to say of access to another figure of truth."[4]

Each of the four scholars has worked through a varying set of conflicts that emerge from ethnographic work somewhere along the way between fieldwork and the creation of a thick description of certain social configurations in Japan. These conflicts appear as constantly shifting configurations of ethical and methodological problems, some of which are specific to "studying up" projects. Several qualities, which I will address in the following pages, distinguish this assemblage of articles from previous work on the subject of ethics in anthropology.

These articles on Japan-focused projects are firmly rooted in fieldwork. They also intensively engage texts and images, a quality that only befits Japan, a highly literate society with an enormous output of academic and other publications. And each of them involves a complex set of power relations as they study up, down, and across, contradicting an idealized notion of the researcher–host member relationship that supposedly remains more or less stable once established.

It is no longer necessarily nor exclusively the ethnographer who does the writing in the first place. Hence, the research subjects' voices can no longer be recovered only through the ethnographer's writing. Prior to the present anthropologists' entry into the worlds of urban feminists and right-wing conservatives (Tomomi Yamaguchi), activists and policy-makers of a local community revitalization project (Bridget Love), an indigenous minority in the process of reclaiming its present (ann-elise lewallen), and corporate soccer functionaries (Elise Edwards), their research subjects already had been engaged in writing their own histories, shaping their own identities, and thus providing narratives that compete with the ethnographer's in a multiplicity of texts and images, including newsletters, glossy marketing brochures and public relations materials, annual reports, personal memoirs, legal documents, internet blogs, and websites as well as scholarship. These individuals have, with varying degrees, authenticated and asserted a distinctive place in both their local communities as well as Japanese society at large. As we see here, more educated research subjects bring their own political agendas to the project. They create new methodological, ethical, and representational issues. And some of them have emerged as "indigenous researchers" in their own right.

Closely related to the importance of the production and circulation of texts are the contested claims to ethnographic authority, access, and representation.

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4. Foucault 1994, 367.

This contestation has been and continues to be intimately linked to issues of power. New critiques of ethnographies such as those introduced here aim at positing ethnography as a negotiated endeavor that seeks to empower consultants by deconstructing itself and by surrendering (varying degrees of) control over its final product — the ethnographic text. In this context, sociologists Renée Anspach and Nissim Mizrachi suggest that if ethnographers were fully candid about the purpose of their research, fieldworkers would have to admit that host members would find sociological research irrelevant, arcane, or potentially harmful.[5] Elise Edward's and ann-elise lewallen's experiences certainly support that suspicion. Bridget Love's and Tomomi Yamaguchi's analyses, however, suggest rather contradictory positions, as both of them found that some host members enthusiastically agreed that fieldwork, and more specifically participant observation, is the best way to learn about and fully understand them and actively provided such opportunities.

The will to be loyal to her consultants does not automatically produce the kind of intimacy that ethnographers aim at in lewallen's study, as the historical legacy of anthropological work among the Ainu — grave excavations, bone collecting, and heirloom pilfering, conducted in the name of scientific progress carried out among the Ainu during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries — colors her every field interaction. Few anthropological projects are so thoroughly entrenched in a reciprocal give and take as lewallen's, and her enormous effort to achieve such a balance will certainly bear fruit, producing a better understanding of the sociocultural circumstances of Ainu lives and normalizing research of and with them that does not simply render them a "dying race" while, at the same time, ignoring their present-day living conditions. While the Ainu agenda does not appear at odds with lewallen's political, anthropological, and ethical goals and convictions, she still had to work hard to overcome the defensive wall of prejudice that the Ainu built against researchers due to their long-term exploitation by scientists, local medical personnel, and the colonial authorities.

Lewallen quite successfully juggles her contributions to the Ainu community's identity-building project as well as her academic work of researching and writing a dissertation. The friendly researcher-consultant relationship that might emerge from a reciprocal relationship, however, can become particularly problematic for the individual anthropologist in case of consultants' unethical or criminal activities. Elise Edwards speaks most clearly about the complications associated with integrating descriptions of ethically questionable, improper, or illegal behavior of her research subjects of which she has been cognizant during her fieldwork. These complications break down into issues of sheer illegality to which she felt she became party if she suppressed it and issues of loyalty to and intimacy with her soccer functionary consultants whom she felt she would be betraying twice: The first time, when she manipulated her relationship with them to generate data and then again when she sat down at her desk

5. Anspach and Mizrachi 2006, 717.

to transform experience into text. Unethical or illegal actions often are part of an organization's social life that good ethnographers are obliged to report. Researchers who reveal such issues in publications, however, may find their field notes subpoenaed, their research subjects sued, prosecuted, or harmed by negative publicity, and their access to future research settings compromised.[6]

Not crime but the sense of impending failure is at the heart of Love's critical engagement with her consultants vis-à-vis whom she takes a position of ironic reserve. In her examination of the conundrums of encounter and interpretation, Love examines a regional revitalization effort that eventually fails because of, as she writes, "dire local logistics marked at the outset by the national demographic patterns of urbanization, aging, and a low child rate." Kingdom of Mountain Bounty, the company behind that effort, provided a dense body of images and texts to illustrate their vision of the town's revitalization. But the effort proved increasingly difficult and thus Love found herself in a politically loaded environment in which her research subjects felt that there was a lot at risk.

Love secretly shares with her host members a deep-seated doubt about the utility and potential for success of the revitalizing project but cautiously holds back. Love finds for herself a different place within a complicated network of power and other social relations that allows some to speak and ensure that others remain silent, that allow for the public establishment of some issues and prevent the surfacing and constitution of others. She highlights the problem of the conditions that allow some research subjects to voice concern about failure or doubt about the activities they engage in and which she is particularly interested in examining. Perhaps, parallel to Bourdieu's notion of the "anthropological field,"[7] we need to envision a field whose conditions, texture, and boundaries emerge from the fieldwork encounters themselves, as the host members whose concerns most resonate with the ethnographer's research concern do not always end up being central to the project. Hers is a story of certain failure and thus a particularly difficult task in ways different from those of the other articles in this volume. Love also brings out a condition of fieldwork that is often taken for granted: the ethnographer needs to understand and possibly identify with the research subject to understand what s/he does and how s/he does it, even if, in the end, the ethnographer disagrees. In a way, this is somewhat similar to a police officer who needs to understand the mind of a criminal in order to catch him or her.

In other communities, host members such as those interviewed by Yamaguchi do not only find fieldwork per se useful but also manipulate and distort it for their own political purposes. The selective appropriation and distortion of Yamaguchi's work as a device to affirm collective identity and to validate reactionary conservatives' strategic goals, prompts her efforts to set things right in cyberspace for an audience much more diverse, confused, and aggressive than a

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6. Ibid., 724.
7. Bourdieu 2003, 283; see also the discussion by Anspach and Mizrachi 2006, 713–14.

typical academic audience usually turns out to be. The main complication here from the perspective of the researcher is of course the reorganization of power relations that completely slip out of the control of the researcher herself, only to be renegotiated in cyberspace. Yamaguchi describes the worldwide net as a new communicative space that facilitates anthropological work, on the one hand, and impedes and complicates it, on the other. The access and use of the internet is far more democratic than academic fora tend to be. The internet allows public interaction in real time. There is less necessity to conform to codes of formality than would apply to a conventional letter or a face-to-face conversation. All of these characteristics of the internet probably come closer than most other media to the explicit desideratum of the American Anthropological Association, namely, the equal exchange of information between researcher and research subjects. But the internet also provides the possibility to distort, misuse, and exploit information that can include, as in Yamaguchi's case, information about the researcher and her work. Hence it not only potentially shakes the conventional power configuration of researcher and consultants, but also allows for a very different kind of engagement of one another. The potentiality of exploitation (of host members) that the Code aims to prevent has come full circle.

Is there anything to be done about this dilemma? At a time prior to the widespread use of the internet, Foucault wrote against adopting a protectionist attitude, to stop "bad" information from invading and stifling the "good." He argued for increasing the possibilities for movement backwards and forwards. This movement would lead to the simultaneous existence and differentiation of various information networks. The problem is to know how to exploit the differences, whether we ought to set up a reserve, a "cultural park," for delicate species of scholars threatened by the rapacious inroads of mass information, while the rest of the space would be a huge market for shoddy products. Needless to say, Foucault did not think such a division was realistic or desirable.[8] Given the aggressive response to her work, Yamaguchi's persistence in moving back and forth between academic and journalistic, scholarly and activist work is commendable. It takes a lot of courage and a thick skin to study people whose political goals are antithetical to one's own ideals. Yamaguchi reminds us of the common presupposition that people whom anthropologists study have been deprived of their human rights and/or are fighting for them. So often a basic part of the goals of anthropologists and their consultants are shared. Yamaguchi, however, finds herself wondering how ethically to approach people in the context of fieldwork when these people pursue the abolition of gender equality practices, discriminatory treatment of minority populations, and the rearming of a former colonizer.

Rather than turning away and embracing more familiar and welcoming research subjects who perhaps also would be more comfortably situated beneath herself in the network of power relations, engaging with those Yamaguchi calls her "political enemies" is essential to our collective project as anthropologists.

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8. Foucault 1997, 326.

Such a project underscores the ethical (and political) legitimacy of anthropology in different ways than the study of social underdogs does. It is rarely fun. It is occasionally humiliating. It usually remains unsatisfactory because one can never know how much or how little one has actually learned. To know the limits of acknowledgment, Judith Butler suggests, is to know even this fact in a limited way; as a result, it is to experience the very limits of knowing that can constitute a disposition of humility and generosity alike: "I will need to be forgiven for what I cannot have fully known, and I will be under a similar obligation to offer forgiveness to others, who are also constituted in partial opacity to themselves."[9] And, perhaps most importantly, there is no way to feel good about it while doing it.

One can almost hear another point ring in Yamaguchi's ears as she aims at "ethical" — that is, true to her political ideals, to the requirements of anthropology, and to ethical standards of carrying out fieldwork, not necessarily in this order — ways to pursue her taxing project. The Code demands that when potential conflicts arise between the interests of ethnographers and their consultants, those of the consultants should prevail. Yamaguchi finds that a much more subtle meandering is the only way to proceed when conflicting interests among consultants have serious political and professional implications for the entire group. She outlines a lesson for us that Butler has spelled out as follows: "If we forget that we are related to those we condemn, even those we must condemn, then we lose the chance to be ethically educated or 'addressed' by a consideration of who they are and what their personhood says about the range of human possibility that exists, even to prepare ourselves for or against such possibilities."[10] Hence, the multilayered attempts at establishing rapport and building friendly relations with research subjects that appear as model ethical practice in ann-elise lewallen's historiography of the Ainu's present and Bridget Love's study of a rural revitalization effort easily could be labeled corrupt in the cases of Yamaguchi's right-wingers as well as Edward's soccer functionaries.

Yamaguchi, Love, Edwards, and lewallen have revealed and problematized much about the multiple and shifting ways in which they presented themselves, appeared to, and were conscious of appearing to the various people among whom they have lived and worked for various periods of time. They have struggled with and pursued tough questions in order to avoid the impulse to self-censor early in the research process and thereby to foreclose subsequent interpretive possibilities for the sake of field access, academic career, or simple avoidance of unpleasant conflict and rejection. It is important to point out that in the case of projects among highly literate people in modern, urban settings, we can no longer assume that the relationship between "anthropologists" and "natives" is necessarily defined by an unequal power configuration that places the anthropologist at the top. Rather, the power relations that the anthropologist engages mirror the fluidity and flexibility of power relations among her re-

9. Butler 2005, 42.
10. Ibid., 45.

search subjects that appear exacerbated in study-up projects in which the anthropologist is aware of having less control over the fieldwork than she might have assumed in other projects.

These four articles do not offer facile solutions to this dilemma. Rather, they strongly suggest that one way to achieve a more nuanced understanding of the complex realities informing contemporary ethnography is to focus on the politics of the fieldwork process and to explore the new methodologies needed to undertake it. This focus has particular salience as anthropologists increasingly do fieldwork on the phone, via email, in cyberspace, and through a multitude of texts. It is important to maintain an ongoing dialogue and exchange with our consultants. Such exchanges undoubtedly will continue to challenge ethnographic authority and to transform our understandings of what constitutes ethnographic research. But they also offer the opportunity to create new conversations about the production and reproduction processes of domination, power, and knowledge, conversations that are likely to bring forth new "figures of truth" with validity in Japan and elsewhere.

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