Approaching Perpetrators: An Introduction

The rationale for this special issue of *Conflict and Society* lies in anthropology's relatively recent and steadily growing application to the study of political violence in its various manifestations, from everyday instances of subtle structural violence to more overt cases of war and mass atrocities. In the late 1990s, Carolyn Nordstrom's (1997) work among soldiers and ordinary civilians whose lives had been intimately affected by Mozambique's civil war and Antonius Robben's (1996) work among survivors and perpetrators of Argentina's Dirty War enabled an important shift among ethnographers. Whereas in the past ethnographers typically focused on violence and warfare in sub-state and pre-state societies, Nordstrom and Robben emphasized the foundations of political violence in complex state societies. Their work led to the emergence of a small cohort of ethnographers – among them Philippe Bourgois (2003), Nancy Scheper-Hughes (2002; 1997) and Neil Whitehead (2004; 2002) – specialized in what was soon termed "the ethnography of political violence."

Taken together, these early ethnographers of political violence paved the way for ethnographic investigation of political violence that brought the more commonly studied narratives of victims, survivors, and others who bear witness to violence into conversation with the equally important but lesser-heard narratives of bystanders and perpetrators. For many, this is part of a larger effort to reduce what Kimberly Theidon (2007) argues is an ethically and methodologically problematic narrative burden commonly placed upon survivors to break the silence in the aftermath of violence. However, while many valuable articles and edited volumes on political violence have emerged from their efforts, none of these publications have explicitly addressed the theoretical and methodological value and challenges of working with perpetrators of political violence.

George Aditjondro first identified this oversight in 2000 when he noted that "[i]n their earnest attempts to defend the victims of blatant as well as structural oppression… anthropologists have rarely taken it as their duty to understand the perpetrators of human rights violations, which is more commonly seen as the duty of political scientists and human rights lawyers" (2000, 159). In subsequent years, several ethnographers addressed his challenge by bringing the narratives of perpetrators into conversation with the recollections of survivors and other parties to the conflict (Bourgois 2003; Hinton 2004; Robben 2005; Maček 2009). Yet to date there have been few attempts made to bring together this community of ethnographers specialized in working with perpetrators. The one notable exception to this statement is Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois' edited volume on *Violence in War and Peace* (2004a), which includes three excerpts addressing how people became perpetrators of violence in different contexts (Milgram 2004; Rosaldo 2004; Hinton 2004).

As a result, in collaboration with Tal Nitsán, I planned two initiatives aimed at addressing this oversight in the literature on the ethnography by bringing together established and emerging ethnographers and related practitioners who have conducted ethnographic studies of perpetrators, broadly defined, in a range of settings. We began by organizing a three-part panel on "Approaching Perpetrators" for the 2013 American Anthropological Association (AAA) annual meeting. The call for papers generated substantial interest from an impressive range of anthropologists and related

practitioners, demonstrating widespread academic and public interest in the theme. As a follow-up, Nitsán and I organized a three-day workshop at the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia in May 2015 to further facilitate conversation among participants. This workshop was generously funded by The Wenner-Gren Foundation and The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The presentations roughly were divided into three categories, including: civilian perpetrators who were drawn into violence at the local level; combatants and state-level actors who were trained to commit violence; and individuals who occupied a "grey zone" between perpetrator and hero or victim (Levi 2004, 83). The presentations from the workshop are available via the workshop website.

This special issue of *Conflict and Society* is the outcome of these initiatives and the rich conversations they enabled. It includes papers by Kathleen Blee, Anna Hedlund, Beatrice Jauregui, Antonius Robben, Amy Rothschild, Victoria Sanford, Jeffrey Sluka, and myself. Blee's contribution interrogates some of the interpretive and ethical frameworks that surround academic efforts to study perpetrators of mass violence against civilians, drawing upon over three decades of fieldwork among white supremacists in the United States. She offers important critiques of agency as it relates to the study of white supremacists and other perpetrators, as well as the presumption of net benefit, by which she means scholars' tendencies to assume that research among perpetrators is ethical "as the risks to those studied are assumed to be either trivial and/or socially beneficial (e.g, exposure to arrest) and the positive benefits of accruing knowledge about the dangers of perpetration to be self-evidently positive" (Blee 2015, 9). She concludes with some important recommendations for moving beyond these shortcomings in fieldwork among perpetrators, advocating for in particular an active feminist ethics of care that considers the needs of perpetrators' immediate social networks.

Hedlund's paper then analyzes how the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is portrayed in the narratives of Hutu refugees and combatants affiliated with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR), who now live in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Following extensive ethnographic fieldwork in a FDLR military camp, she provides examples of political demonstrations, military performances, and everyday life to reveal how the 1994 Rwandan genocide is contested by the rebels in favor of asserting their own claims to victimization and persecution by Rwanda's current, predominantly Tutsi, government. Such denial often existed alongside songs and military chants that acknowledged anti-Tutsi sentiments and the complicity of first-generation FDLR in the 1994 genocide of Rwanda's minority Tutsi population, presenting a complex picture of Hutu Power ideology in the camp.

Next, Jauregui examines the routinization of police vigilantism in India, specifically a phenomenon known as "encounter killings, whereby police officers orchestrate operations in which they publicly execute suspected criminals. She argues that police vigilantism emerges directly from the overall conditions of insecurity, corruption and the lack of state accountability, as well as Hindu philosophy and myths, and as such can be framed as a moral and spiritual war through which individual officers are ritually cleansed, often with significant public support. As such, the police vigilante represents "a bundle of contradictions… between ideal typical spheres of the 'rule of law' and the 'fog of war'" (Jauregui 2015, 14).

My paper considers the paradoxes that emerge from the narratives of women perpetrators of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, also known as *génocidaires*. The female *génocidaires* whom I interviewed largely portrayed themselves as victims, despite the fact that they had all been convicted of having participated in the massacre of members of Rwanda's minority Tutsi population during the 1994 genocide. However, their narratives of victimization differed in significant ways. Poor, rural female *génocidaires* attributed the disproportionately harsh sentences they received to the gender-based discrimination directed against them by Rwandan society for having transgressed Rwandan gender norms that prior to the 1994 genocide made it taboo for women to participate in physical violence. Conversely, female elite *génocidaires* situated their claims to victimization in terms that were very similar to those of the male *génocidaires* I interviewed – as the outcome of political and social forms of discrimination devised by the current, predominantly Tutsi, government to intimidate and shame their Hutu citizenry.

Robben then articulates the importance of "switchboard operators," a term he uses to encapsulate intermediaries who, due to their perceived neutral, disinterested, and trustworthy status, are able to communicate informally between otherwise hostile factions during periods of conflict. He argues that switchboard operators can help ethnographers gain access to the multiple, competing perspectives of different factions involved in a given a conflict, diminishing the chance that their research will end up mired in the biases of a particular faction and resulting a more informed understandings of key events and actors more broadly. Drawing upon his personal experience working with switchboard operators involved with Argentina's military dictatorship during his fieldwork in 1989, Robben offers several valuable methodological insights for how to search out, identify, and make the most of contact with these valuable informants.

Next, Rothschild's paper analyses the impact of international human rights and transitional justice discourses on memories of resistance to Indonesian occupation in Timor-Leste. She compares memories of an armed uprising in Karas – a small Timorese village – in 1983 with a peaceful demonstration that occurred in Dili, the nation's capital, in 1991. Both episodes were met by the Indonesians with violence: several hundred civilians were massacred by Indonesian troops following the Karas uprising, while as many as two hundred civilians were killed in response to the demonstration in Dili. Nonetheless, it is only the victims of the Dili massacre who are nationally recognized as heroes. While there are several reasons for this, Rothschild argues that one of the main factors is that the people who orchestrated the Karas uprising are simultaneously regarded as perpetrators and victims. This perspective is largely shaped by international human rights and transitional justice discourses that became prevalent in Timor-Leste in the nation's post-independence period, and which hold non-violent resistance as morally superior to violent resistance without regard for the ways in which this positioning might lead to "an unfair disadvantaging of [rural] people already disadvantaged and damaged by structural violence and war" (Rothschild 2015, 11).

Finally, Sluka's paper summarizes best practices for researchers to manage physical danger in face-to-face fieldwork with "rank and file" perpetrators of political violence and state terror. He begins by providing a detailed overview of the literature, emerging since the late 1980s, on managing risk in anthropological fieldwork amid

political violence, before addressing the risks inherent in fieldwork among perpetrators, more specifically. To this end, he offers several valuable recommendations for approaching perpetrators as research participants, such as maintaining a persona of neutrality and objectivity, avoiding complacency when faced with real or rumored threats, and engaging in a continuous process of risk assessment and danger management surrounding fieldwork.

The special issue is then concluded by Erin Baines, who brings together key themes and insights that run throughout the articles…

Taken together, these papers offer a nuanced look at the personal, social, cultural, economic, political and historical processes through which civilians, combatants, and elites become perpetrators, and the politics of memory and history that then influence the myriad ways that perpetrators, their societies and the international community more generally, make sense of their criminal actions, including the academics who study them. They benefited greatly from the feedback offered by anonymous peer-reviewers, as well as a handful of invited experts who attended the "Approaching Perpetrators" workshop. In particular, special thanks are due to Kjell Anderson, Erin Baines, Yolande Bouka, Carole Blackburn, Ricardo Chaparro-Pacheco, Marc Ellison, Patricia Foxen, Larry Grant, Alexander Hinton, Juliane Okot-Bitek, Tal Nitsán, Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, John Roosa, Ronald Stade, Beth Stewart, and Rima Wilkes for their willingness to engage in extensive conversations surrounding the 2014 "Approaching Perpetrators" workshop.

Overall, this special issue represents a crucial first step toward resolving the relative gap in anthropological knowledge surrounding the particular ethical and methodological challenges and theoretical insights inherent in adapting ethnographic methods to the study of perpetrators. That said, several of the articles offer contributions to social scientific studies of perpetrators, more generally. They have the potential to enhance existing political science, sociology, criminology and legal theory discourses on perpetrators, bringing the narratives of low- and mid-level perpetrators with whom ethnographers are often uniquely situated to engage into conversation with these disciplines' more standard focus on high-level perpetrators, such as government officials, intellectual elites, and the military. The fact remains that perpetuating a narrow interest on the lived experiences and narratives of victims and survivors, or conversely, high-level perpetrators, as is commonly the case, researchers are neglecting important aspects of the "continuum of violence," namely, the lived experiences of those individuals who are responsible for inciting and enacting political violence on the ground (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004, 1). As such, this special issue of *Conflict and Society* represents an important contribution to anthropological knowledge, and the interdisciplinary study of perpetrators, more generally.

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