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Book Review: Virtual War and Magical Death: Technologies and Imaginaries for Terror and Killing

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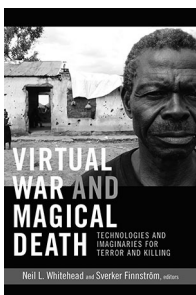
Second, the authors in several places outline areas of strength and opportunity for the military's incorporation of embedded social science capabilities. Turnley, for instance, mentions how one perspective on social network analysis popular in military circles undermines rather than supports an understanding of organizational effectiveness, and then refers the reader to more promising alternatives. Fosher discusses the shortcomings of approaches to training that treat culture as rules of etiquette over processes for making sense of the world. She goes on to outline how her work with the Marines led to improvements on the ground (Chapter 5). Additionally, anyone seeking a glimpse of what right looks like in terms of leveraging applied social science research towards mission success would do well to review Chapter 6. There, Varhola—himself a military officer and anthropologist—describes the nexus of maximum synthesis between military operations and field ethnography. In this respect, *Practicing Military Anthropology* represents a wealth of opportunity for mutually beneficial cooperation between academe and the military.

Rubinstein closes with what may be one of the most astute and succinct analyses of the ongoing conflict between those who support a formal military-social science relationship and those who do not (Chapter 7). He points to traditions in anthropology privileging diversity of opinion and encouraging the exploration of key social institutions, among which the military counts. Though brief, the reader, whether an inquisitive social scientist or a senior leader, can expect *Practicing Military Anthropology's* stories, suggestions, and raw information to provide a return on the investment of time and interest.

Virtual War and Magical Death: Technologies and Imaginaries for Terror and Killing

Edited by Neil L. Whitehead and Sverker Finnström

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\$24.95

Army readers will find that the late Neil L. Whitehead and Sverker Finnström, anthropologists from the University of Wisconsin and Uppsala University respectively, have edited an intriguing—yet at times vexing—book on virtual war. The work offers a masterful ethnographic perspective on virtual war, stemming from a synthesis of the “techno-modern” with the “magico-primitive,” while providing a critical analysis of the Army’s Human Terrain System (HTS). To be fair, the work draws upon scholarly arguments derived from lessons learned from anthropology’s colonial and neo-colonial legacies and is not meant to be overbearingly antagonistic in its approach. Still, for at least some of the chapter contributors, it is readily apparent that the HTS is indeed viewed as the equivalent of a present-day “military invasion of anthropology.” Additionally, the angst generated within that academic discipline concerning what is legitimate and ethical scholarship permeates the work, especially in regard to some perspectives taken on embedded HTS anthropologists, and high profile scholars, such as former program spokesperson Dr. Montgomery McFate.

The origins of the work can be traced back to a panel of the American Anthropological Association meeting in Philadelphia in 2009 on “Virtual War and Magical Death” and took three years to complete as a document. While the work is written primarily for other academics, specifically anthropologists, it may provide far more utility for defense and security analysts and senior military officers than the contributing scholars intended.

The book is organized into eleven chapters with acknowledgments and an introduction in the front section and ample references, a listing of contributors, and an index in the back section. Along with the two editors, who have also written chapters, nine contributing authors exist. These authors all appear to hold Ph.D.'s in anthropology or closely allied fields, except for one doctoral candidate, and while mostly representative of United States scholarship, also hail from universities in Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. The various chapters in the work focus on topics related to ethical issues surrounding the use of ethnography in support of the state (Neil Whitehead); the Human Terrain System and its interrelationship to remote and drone warfare (David Price); human social cultural behavioral modeling (Roberto González); the military invasion of anthropology (R. Brian Ferguson); the Lord's Resistance Army and witchcraft (Sverker Finnström); night vision technology as a hostile perceptual filter—much like a dark magical artifact—that allows US soldiers to dominate in nocturnal combat (Antonius Robben); the use of cognitive laborers as virtual soldiers/mercenaries (Robertson Allen); virtual counterinsurgency (e.g., drone strikes) in the tribal zones of the Af-Pak theater (Jeffery Sluka); impunity as the generator of an alternative dimension in which chaos and death are the norm in Guatemala (Victoria Sanford); the shamanic-like use of music in war (Matthew Sumera); and a conclusion that argues the global political-economic order is a “carrion system” dependent on the growth of profit (Koen Stroeken).

The central theme of the work is an initially difficult construct to absorb. It appears to be a juxtaposition of magical-primitivism—drawing upon concepts of “assault sorcery,” which is injurious magic leading to physical harm and even death—with virtual-visual killing, night vision dominance, and electronic intelligence dominance representative of components of techno-modernism. The premodern and the postmodern elements of conflict are in essence viewed as being closer to each other than conventional elements of warfare. As a result, violent nonstate actors and special operations forces, both practitioners of virtual warfare in highly unpredictable operational environments, are theoretically integrated into this ethnography. This synthesis thus promotes a form of symmetrical anthropology that is said to better describe premodern and postmodern conflict than the military doctrine of “asymmetric warfare.” This reviewer sees quite a bit of merit in this approach and the need for the cross-pollination of military science by other disciplines such as anthropology; in fact, this is one of the underpinnings of the HTS.

With this in mind, the critical theme underlying the work, while very much dominated by academic misgivings and feelings of betrayal concerning anthropologists working for the US government, should not be considered solely in the polemic. Better understanding these

criticisms should be of some interest to Army audiences for the insights they provide into the academic mind—one which at times is in great variance with military thinking. Some components of this critical theme are as follows. First, the use of anthropologists as a component of the HTS is ethically questioned from a humanistic approach. Ethnocentric values and “weaponized culture”—hence, *de facto* “weaponized anthropology”—to support US military counterinsurgency programs are highlighted. Second, the issue of “traditional harmful practices” in need of eradication is touched upon. Such culturally specific practices, such as honor killings, are viewed in variance with liberal democratic values. This returns us to the old “civilizing the savages via their children” controversies tied into foreign aid and development programs. Third, a concern over the question of endless post-9/11 cycles of violence (e.g., the global war on terror) is raised. Rather than being viewed as an anomaly, the editors now suggest such cycles have become “. . . a fundamental aspect of liberal Western democracy itself, and as such it is an inbuilt tool in the development of the world, . . .” (page 23), that is, a fundamental component of our economic system.

Still, Army readers will mostly benefit from the work’s major theme which seeks to blend the techno-modern with the magico-primitive in a new ethnographic perspective on virtual war and killing (spectacide). Such a techno-magico synthesis is inherently strategic in nature, provides an emerging appreciation for the importance of virtuality and dimensionality in conflict, and ultimately may offer us new perspectives on cyberspace that will someday be of tangible benefit to the Army’s strategic leadership.