

Rick Mitchell
Associate Professor of English
California State University, Northridge

Project: *Anthropology: A Play*

Introduction and Objectives

The project that I will complete as a College of Humanities Research Fellow, *Anthropology*, a full-length play, will be, like my most recent work—*Through the Roof* (2007)—both topical and research-based. My main objective will be to create a sweeping, epic drama that theatrically examines, through the plight of an anthropologist embedded in Iraq, cultural differences and historical conflicts related to the Iraq War and, importantly, the battle over the control of knowledge. Due to the project's topical nature, I would like to complete *Anthropology* (which I have already begun researching) as soon as possible. The development of this sort of play will require a substantial amount of research, as well as a several months of dedicated writing time and “workshopping” with professional actors. Thus, I am requesting a Research Fellowship so that I can dedicate a significant portion of the fall 2008 and spring 2009 semesters to the researching and writing of the play.

While the play itself will be, like most plays, a dramatic story, the play will feature several individual, culturally specific stories offering widely divergent points of view that are representative of stories being told, contested, and collected (by social scientists) within contemporary Iraq (and perhaps Afghanistan). The play will also suggest that the pertinence of such stories to “winning the war” is well understood by the United States military, which attacks not only “enemy combatants” and their supporters, but also—culturally and psychologically—the primary narratives that they tell. As the US Marines'

and Army's December 2006 counterinsurgency manual, *FM 3-24* points out, it is crucial for the US to continue countering the dominant narratives of countries it occupies, so that the majority of local citizens will eventually come to accept and tell narratives that embrace rather than resist the dominant ideologies of the invading force. Reshaping and subverting the occupied territory's dominant narratives is, however, more challenging than physical occupation of that territory, and, according to *FM 3-24*—a text from which the play will quote—just as important.

Complicating the US military's battle over narrative is the fact that narratives of resistance often emanate from non-Western, culturally Other societies whose stories and ideological beliefs, radically different from our own, can create major obstacles to the oft-stated US goal of "winning the hearts and minds of the people." Nonetheless, as the play will indicate, US-backed anthropologists have historically operated in war zones, in places like Japan, Viet Nam, Central America, and, more recently, in Iraq and Afghanistan, in spite of the fact that many anthropologists are strongly against allowing anthropology to support US war efforts. They fear, like the play's embedded anthropologist (at least early in the play), that there is potential for government-funded fieldwork within "theatres of war" to be turned against the very people whom the social scientists are living amongst and studying.

Themes and Methodology

The inherent contradictions of an invading force utilizing a purportedly objective and benevolent social science echo many of the conflicts between science and society that are

increasingly prevalent within modernity. Indeed, since the Enlightenment a key problem in the West has been: How should scientific knowledge (and technology) be utilized, and whom should it benefit (or oppress)? This problem is also relevant to Western portrayals of the current "War on Terror" that pit the consumerist, technologically advanced West, with its high-tech military apparatus, against the "underdeveloped," "primitive" Islamic insurgents of the Middle East, who often rely on low-tech guerrilla warfare and improvised explosive devices. Realizing that the misuse of scientific knowledge was emblematic of the modern era, German dramatist Bertolt Brecht wrote, in the late 1930s, *Galileo*, which has become a major play within the canon of modern drama. After the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Japan, Brecht altered the play a bit in order to make it more relevant to what he saw as the US's horrific misuse of science towards the end of World War II.

As the continued popularity of *Galileo* suggests, the struggle against unethical manipulations of science remains a relevant theme. My play *Anthropology* will update this theme by shifting it to contemporary times and a very different place, the guerrilla battlefields of Iraq, where the control of occupied peoples, their resources, and the stories they tell are presently up for grabs. In addition to being socially relevant, *Anthropology* will be original, since (to my knowledge) there are no published plays that focus on the contemporary US military's utilization of the science of anthropology, a discipline historically referred to as the "handmaiden of colonialism."

Although, at this early stage in the process of developing the play, it is impossible to describe the play's plot in detail, the issues described above will inform the work through

embodied dramatic action. *Anthropology* will also utilize textual quotations, which will be projected onto a screen during particular scenes, while emphasizing theatricality. At times, for example, the play will feature "direct address" in the form of song and storytelling, and the drama—which will include, like most of my work, some comedy—will feature a non-linear structure and divergent points of view that will require the spectator to become, in a "Brechtian" sense, an active participant in interpreting the play's meaning.

I have already begun researching *Anthropology*, focusing, at this time, on anthropology's role in war, but I still have a great deal of reading to do, not only about the "War on Terror" and the Iraq War, but also the various cultures and groups involved in these wars, particularly in Iraq, which will provide the main setting for my play. While teaching, I will continue my research for *Anthropology*. In late May, after the spring 2008 semester concludes, my work will primarily focus on this research, which, in addition to extensive reading of books, articles, and blogs, will include interviews with anthropologists, Iraq War veterans, Iraqis living in the US, and US-supported soldiers-for-hire (from companies such as Blackwater). I plan to finish the bulk of my research for the play by March 2009. I will complete a working draft of the play by May, and then workshop the play with professional actors, presenting the piece as staged readings in front of the general public. I will then revise the play, based—in part—on what I learned from the workshopping.

Unlike most university-based research projects whose audiences are primarily academic, *Anthropology's* critique of the military's use of anthropology in Iraq and the abuse of knowledge will help to advance understanding of these issues to a broad cross

section of the general populace, because the project's form—a play—will enable the project to be disseminated not only within academe (through publication), but also throughout the public sphere.