



WHAT IS A SITUATION?: An Assemblic Ethnography of the Drug War

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What do certain military missions in Afghanistan, police violence in the United States, therapeutic interventions in Russia and Denmark, torture and rape in an Indonesian police station, and stop-and-frisk policing in New York City all have in common? They are just a few of the local manifestations of the situation named the drug war, which is responsible for thousands of deaths a year globally, and the social and political death or exclusion of thousands more. But the drug war has potential effects that go well beyond these numbers. For whether by means of military interventions, policing and incarceration strategies, international and national surveillance, and the overblown budgets to pay for them, or by means of biopolitical therapeutics, national and international legislation, and the normalization of labor regimes and discipline—all of which and more constitute aspects of what I call the nontotalizable assemblage of the drug war—this is a war that potentially affects every human on the planet.

How can the drug war have such widespread effects, and how do we conceptualize it? In this article I hope to begin to offer an answer to this question. I will argue that the drug war should *not* be conceived as something like a singular issue or a totalized strategy, and neither should it be limited, as it often is in public discourse, to its localized manifestation in parts of Colombia, Mexico, or American inner cities. Rather, the drug war is best conceived as what I will call a situation. I hope to show that the concept of situation significantly adds to

anthropological knowledge because it allows us to consider that which is widely diffused across different global scales as a nontotalizable assemblage, yet in its occasional and temporary local manifestation allows us to understand how persons and objects that are geographically, socioeconomically, and culturally distributed get caught up in the shared conditions emerging from the situation. Becoming caught up in the shared conditions of a situation, in turn, significantly affects the possible ways of being-in-the-world of those persons and objects that get caught up. The concept of situation, then, allows us to analytically recognize that in the current global configuration, complexity is at least as knotted nonlocally as it is locally, and thus increasingly—so I contend—local complexity emerges within the shared conditions set by this diffused complexity (see [Bennett 2010](#); [Connolly 2013](#); [Morton 2013](#)).

Although they do not describe it quite like this, this is how the anti-drug war movement, with which I have been doing assemblic ethnography, views the drug war and the movement's own political activity. Anti-drug war politics is a politics of agonistic and creative experimentation in becoming otherwise, and as such it has had to define well what it opposes and what it intends to transgress (cf. [Laclau and Mouffe 2001](#)). Unlike many post-1968 political movements that self-define as addressing issues or identities tending to be conceived as closed and located ([Brown 2001](#); [Connolly 2013](#)), anti-drug war politics has defined its political agonist as a globally diffused phenomenon that locally manifests differentially and temporarily. In this article I explore how what I learned from this movement—in terms of what its participants address, how they address it, and their form of organization—may help anthropologists rethink their own objects of study. In so doing, I hope to go beyond a notion of globalization and the tracing of global connections. Instead, I seek to explore how situations as widely diffused assembled phenomena that are differentially distributed participate in the ontological conditioning of our contemporary world (cf. [Connolly 2013](#)) and yet, as assemblages, always hold potential to become otherwise (e.g., [Povinelli 2011](#); [Allison 2013](#); [Zigon forthcoming](#)). The drug war is one such situation.

WHAT IS A SITUATION?

By situation I mean a nontotalizable assemblage widely diffused across different global scales that allows us to conceptualize how persons and objects that are geographically, socioeconomically, and culturally distributed get caught up in shared conditions that significantly affect their possible ways of being-in-the-world. This becomes clearer if we consider what we normally mean when we

say something like “we found ourselves in this situation,” or ask, “what can I do, this is the situation I’m in?” These are ways we articulate the recognition that to be in a situation is at one and the same time something that falls upon us, or perhaps better put, that we get caught up in, and something that to a great extent provides the conditions for possible ways of being, doing, speaking, and thinking within that situation. Thus, this is recognition that a situation is both a singularity of which one has become a part, and a multiplicity that preexists one’s participation in it and, as already having been, exceeds this localized instance of it. The multiplicity of a situation, however, denotes more than its durative and widely diffused existence. It also indicates its multi-aspectual nature, for a situation is not a closed and totalized occurrence that appears as if from nowhere. Rather, a situation is constituted by diverse phenomena that become intertwined and emerge temporarily as localized manifestations. It is in these ways, then, that a situation can be described as a singular multiplicity that provides widely diffused but shared conditions. In addition to the drug war, I would argue that such phenomena as global warming, trafficking, and even global capitalism are examples of situations.

Recently some scholars outside anthropology have also recognized the significance of widely diffused phenomena with localized effects and have reconceived analytic and political concepts accordingly (e.g., [Barad 2007](#); [Bennett 2010](#); [Connolly 2013](#); [Morton 2013](#)). Timothy Morton, for example, has thus addressed global warming, which he conceives as a hyperobject. [Morton \(2013, 1\)](#) defines hyperobjects as “things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.” As a result, hyperobjects are nonlocal because any local manifestation of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject itself, or at least not the totality of the object. A hurricane or a tsunami, for example, may be a local manifestation of the hyperobject of global warming, but it is not global warming as such. Similarly, and as I will show below, although the drug war locally emerges differentially in various forms, these forms do not constitute the drug war as such.

Despite this and other similarities, however, real differences remain between hyperobjects and situations as I am trying to articulate them in this article. The most significant difference is that Morton conceives a hyperobject as a real object, or a unit unto itself that withdraws from other objects as well as itself, and thus can never be fully known or touched by another object. This is how the object-oriented ontology to which Morton subscribes defines objects, and within this perspective everything and everybody, including humans, are objects with just

these qualities. But this raises the question: if objects cannot touch or influence each other (e.g., [Morton 2013](#), 149–54), except for perhaps in aesthetic ways, then what are we left to do politically when confronted with a hyperobject such as global warming? Although the notion of a hyperobject as “massively distributed in time and space” is compelling and in some ways similar to a situation, it is difficult to imagine the kind of politics to be done by those who cannot touch and against that which itself cannot be touched. In contrast, because situations can be described as flowing and assembling emergent multiplicities, they can and do slip into one another. This makes situations ripe with sites of potentiality, and thus open for political activity.

A similar concern arises with Alain Badiou’s notion of situation. In the most recent explication of his ontology, [Badiou \(2013\)](#) replaces the concept of situation with world, but for our purposes, we can still think of this as his rendering of situation. For Badiou, a situation/world comes into existence, maintains that existence, and is recognizable as such because it has a particular and unique logic ordering it. If for [Badiou \(2013, 37–38, 101\)](#) “being qua being is thought by mathematics,” then situation/world as “appearing, or being-there-in-a-world, is thought by logic.” Indeed, as he goes on to phrase it, situations/worlds are not simply thought by logic, they *are* logic. And this logic is not a procedure that a human subject utilizes to understand a situation/world, so argues Badiou, but rather this logic that fundamentally *is* situations/worlds “is altogether anterior to every subjective constitution.” A situation/world for [Badiou \(2013, 113, 118–19\)](#), then, is the local emplacement of a logical operation that occurs regardless of human existence. This is clearly *not* what I intend by a situation, and, in fact, it is precisely the kind of metaphysical humanist thinking and politics I am trying to argue against.

If the concern of these and other contemporary ontologists is the explication of a posthumanist politics, it seems odd to do so in logico-mathematical terms or by simply reversing the subject/object distinction, thus perpetuating a metaphysical humanist approach. In contrast, the critical hermeneutic approach begins with Martin Heidegger’s notion of phenomenon (“what shows itself in itself”) and through analysis discloses that humans are always already intertwined in various situations. This intertwining both precedes and exceeds any possible humanist projection onto it. To be in any world at all, and in the situations that emerge within them, is always already to be so intertwined—and as such always becoming that which situations make possible (e.g., [Heidegger 1975](#); [Merleau-Ponty 1997](#)). But this alone does not make a situation a more compelling analytic and political

concept. In the rest of this section, then, I consider further the concept of situation as it “shows itself in itself.” In so doing I delineate the fundamental characteristics of a situation which, in turn, will set the background for the following sections in which I consider some of the political activity of the anti–drug war movement. So as to make this analytically clear, I will delineate the various characteristics of situations in numbered subsections.

1. A Situation Is a Nontotalizable Assemblage

The drug war situation is an assemblage of diverse aspects of other assemblages such as global militarism, state-based surveillance and control, border security, carceral political economics, national and international inequalities, and biopolitical therapeutics. What is called the drug war, then, is no thing in itself, but rather assembled aspects of other assemblages that together create a widely diffused situation that is differentially distributed and has very real effects in worlds. Here we can begin to see how the concept of assemblages can prove helpful for thinking the complexity of situations.

Anthropologists are likely most familiar with the notion of assemblage through [Aihwa Ong and Stephen J. Collier’s \(2005\)](#) rendering of it. To the extent that Ong and Collier’s global assemblage articulates the basics of a general theory of assemblages most fully developed, for example, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Bruno Latour, and Manuel De Landa, there are similarities with what I am calling a situation, which is a nontotalized assemblage. I differ significantly from [Ong and Collier \(2005, 11\)](#), however, in that despite claims to the contrary, they seem to conceive global assemblages as supplements to what they variously refer to as “social and cultural situations,” “spheres of life,” “environments,” and “context.” In contrast, I argue that the very notion of nontotalized assemblages entails that they not be thought in terms of a supplement to our worlds. Rather, our worlds are nothing other than densely intertwined knots of several much more widely diffused and nontotalizable assemblages that constantly flow together and slip apart in a potentially infinite number of combinations. This flowing and slippage of the singular multiplicity of situations defies totalized categorization or identification, which is why, as nontotalizable assemblages, situations cannot be thought as supplements.

Thus, for example, the diverse aspects of the drug war situation can easily slip into other nontotalized assemblages and thereby defy easy identification with either. As we will see in the next section, the global militarism aspect of the drug war can be foregrounded and reconceived as the war on terrorism or defense

against communist insurgents, and police militarization and carceral political economics can be repositioned as being tough on crime. As a result, a situation proves quite slippery, since it never can be fully grasped in its entirety: the capacity of its constitutive aspects to be temporarily refigured forms part of its nature. Such refiguration can occur naturally, as it were, since aspects of situations take on different signification when represented, experienced, or considered differently. Or this refiguration can be done intentionally and strategically, as certain persons may wish to emphasize one particular interpretation of an aspect over others; for example, mandatory-minimum prison sentencing as being tough on crime, rather than judicial procedures with clear racial and class prejudices. Indeed, it is just this slipperiness that gives situations their robust complexity, and which an assemblage ethnography seeks to disentangle. I am thus trying to argue that we must begin our anthropological analyses not at so-called global assemblages that supplement a preexisting context, but instead with the situations making evident that we are always already caught up in singular multiples that provide the widely diffused yet shared conditions significantly affecting our possible ways of being-in-the-world.

2. A Situation Is Not Singularly Locatable

Because a situation is never isolable and only exists as a singular multiple, that is, as always intertwined with other assemblages, a situation is never located. Rather, a situation becomes temporarily localized. Thus, for example, the drug war is not simply located in the veins of heroin users crouched under American highway overpasses, in the jungles of South America, the borders between the United States and Mexico, or in the poppy fields of Afghanistan. Nor is the drug war simply located in a substance called heroin that actually represents a range of potentially infinite kinds of beings as opium derivatives get cut with more contaminants with every step it moves through the underground commodity chain. The drug war is equally not simply located in American, Russian, or Thai prisons, or in the infectious disease wards of hospitals around the globe. Rather, the drug war emerges—at times but not always—in all of these locales and beyond. Notice, however, that these locales are not always and only caught up in the drug war situation. For example, there are people in prisons, infectious disease wards, and under bridges who are there for reasons unrelated to the drug war. Thus, only by attending and being attuned to each of these locales and their unique, similar, and shared potentialities and emergent actualities of the drug war

can this situation be effectively politically addressed or anthropologically analyzed. It is precisely this attunement that characterizes an assemblic ethnography.

3. *Sites of Potentiality for Political Activity Arise from the Interstices of Situations*

The conglomeritic and flowing nature of assembled situations leaves them with interstices of noncohesion. These interstitial sites disrupt any possibility for an actually existing totality of a situation, and therefore any possibility for thinking or articulating the totality of a situation. At these interstices, problematics of a situation likely occur and sites of potentiality can be found, from which possibilities for political activity emerge (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 18; Critchley 2007; Povinelli 2011, 109–10). This differs significantly from the “untouchable” hyperobjects of Morton, or even the bounded issues or identities that dominate most contemporary politics. To some extent this rendering of situations as sites of potentiality resembles Max Gluckman’s (1940) classic articulation of situations as moments of paradox, confrontation, conflict, process, and potential change (see also Evens 2005; Kelly 2012). Despite this similarity, however, I entirely reject the Gluckmanian claim that they disclose social structure conceived as a transcendental. Indeed, the argument I am trying to make is that situations allow us to begin to conceive shared conditions that are widely dispersed across various levels, horizontally and vertically, as it were, without the necessity of any transcendental at all, whether this be thought in terms of social structure, culture, Badiou’s logic, or Ong and Collier’s “context.” In the final section I will spend some time showing how the anti–drug war movement is currently addressing such sites of potentiality in its experimental political activity without the need of such bannisters.

The Situationists similarly conceived of situations as nontranscendentally structured sites of politics, at which experiment and play could be done in the attempt to bring about the otherwise (e.g., Vaneigem 2001). But if Situationists saw the first political task as the construction of situations from which political experiment and play could begin (e.g., Debord 2006), then the anti–drug war movement begins by disclosing *already existing* situations that must be permanently transformed so as to build new worlds in which drug users can dwell. The conceptual, analytic, and methodological problem that the complexity of situations presents, then, is how precisely to trace and articulate the movement, force, and limits of the intertwining so as to initiate this transformation. Similarly, I submit that these problems are central to anthropology and the other human and social

sciences today, as they struggle to address the increasingly complex contemporary global configuration of things. I am therefore attempting to delineate the concept of situation and the method of assemblic ethnography as possible ways of addressing this complexity.

WIDELY DIFFUSED COMPLEXITY

In October 2013 while doing research with anti-drug war agonists in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, I attended a public anti-drug war event.¹ Such events quite commonly occur in the Downtown Eastside, as it has become the location of the most intense anti-drug war activity in the world. The successes of the politics of world-building (Zigon 2014, *forthcoming*) that have been achieved there are known around the globe and have become a model for the global anti-drug war movement. Every year participants in this movement flock to the few square blocks of the Downtown Eastside to meet with local agonists, do internships and trainings at the various services, social enterprise businesses, and housing complexes, or just to attend events like this one. This evening's event, in fact, had several participants and audience members from other countries, and was to be followed the next day by a film on safe injection sites in Copenhagen, Denmark. This event, then, was an indication of the widely diffused nature of the drug war and the global political movement that has arisen to address the dehumanizing shared conditions this situation disperses.

As I sat there that evening I could not help but notice an absence in the otherwise-overcrowded hall. About four years earlier, my assemblic ethnography had taken me to New York City, where I eventually started doing fieldwork with the users union there. I had come to know one of the union's leaders, Terrance, quite well, and one evening about five months prior to the Vancouver event, we were having dinner together when he told me that the union was planning to send him to Vancouver for an internship and training. As it turned out, however, international travel restrictions imposed on him because of a prior incarceration on drug-related charges kept Terrance from going to Vancouver. That is, as a consequence of having been caught up in a drug war situation, Terrance is not allowed to travel internationally.

Although I missed Terrance as a friend, his absence from Vancouver, and particularly at this event, did open the possibility for assemblic analysis. It occurred when Bud Osborn, the Vancouver-area user-agonist-poet and one of the founding members of that city's users union, opened the event with a short poem depicting an encounter he once had with police while hitchhiking in California.²

The poem describes Bud being stopped alongside a California highway by police, threatened at gunpoint as he empties his bag, told that they could take him into the desert and kill him without anyone ever knowing, informed that the police could plant drugs on him if they wanted, shoved into the police car, where they jammed a flashlight into his ass under the pretense of searching for drugs, then leaving him on the side of the road with his pants still down, his belongings blowing in the wind trail of the departing police car, and passersby slowing down to rubberneck. The final lines of the poem make the point clearly: “Threatened with execution, raped, reduced to nothingness. The drug war.” Whether or not Bud’s poem depicted an actual experience matters little, for what it disclosed was a shared condition recognizable to everyone who attended the event, and, I suspect, any other person who has ever been caught up in a drug war situation. It certainly would have been recognizable to Terrance, for it was having been caught up in just this situation that ultimately resulted in his inability to come to Vancouver.

Listening to Bud’s poem in a room full of people who may never have found themselves in that kind of singular situation but who nevertheless recognized it as part of the multiplicity that constituted their shared condition of being-in-the-world, I could not help but hear the poem as a deconstructive political activity that disclosed the complex and widely diffused nature of the drug war. As Bud’s poem and Terrance’s absence both revealed that evening, this is a complexity that goes well beyond a closed issue defined by policy and legislation, or that is located in some fixed place like supposedly isolated drug wars in Mexico and Colombia or isolated drug addicts in U.S. inner cities. Rather, Bud and Terrance each in their own way that evening disclosed that the drug war is an assembled situation constituted by aspects of other assemblages such as global militarism, state-based surveillance and control, border security, carceral political economics, biopolitical therapeutics, and international and national inequalities.

This disclosure also reveals how the concept of situation as I am delineating it in this article opens up analytic possibilities that allow us to move between located manifestations and the assemblic relations of widely diffused phenomena that provide the conditions for this emergence. In other words, Bud’s poem and Terrance’s absence can both only be understood in terms of the shared conditions set by a widely diffused assemblage potentially distributed differentially anywhere. In the rest of this section I trace some of the various assemblic relations of the drug war as they revealed themselves in the convergence of Bud’s poem and Terrance’s absence. Although assemblic ethnography makes the larger claim that

a tracing of these assemblic relations potentially leads us to any place on the globe, due to space limitations I focus particularly on how these assemblic relations become manifest in and contribute to the contemporary conditions (Connolly 2013) of the United States, especially New York City. Thus, I focus on the shared conditions differentially distributed in the United States that allowed both for the singular situation Bud describes and for Terrance's absence. Despite this focus, I hope it becomes clear that these local emergences—or what some might call the drug war situation's reterritorialization—can never be preknown in terms of location, form, affect, or temporality. Nevertheless, they provide a range of possibilities for a globally diffused shared condition that becomes differentially distributed.

Recall that Bud ends his poem with these words: "Threatened with execution, raped, reduced to nothingness. The drug war." Reduced to nothingness indeed. But, in fact, Bud and the many drug users I have come to know have already been reduced to nothingness prior to such encounters. As I have been told in the various places my assemblic ethnography has taken me, drug users around the globe are considered as, for example, "rubbish," "waste," and "shit." In the drug war situation, drug users do not count as a recognizable part of whatever it is one feels a part of—society, culture, nation, family, or whatever. Drug user agonists and social scientists generally refer to this exclusion as stigma. But it is more than stigma; it is exactly what Bud calls it: a reduction to nothingness. It is this nothingness, this nonbeing, that opens up the possibility not only for the police violence Bud experienced but also for the lack of awareness, care, or general interest by those who stare at Bud as they pass him standing pantless on the side of the highway.

Although spectacularly disturbing, rape, torture, and other such forms of police violence may not be the most insidious manifestation of the drug war revealed in Bud's poem. For the intertwining of the carceral political-economic and the surveillance and control aspects of the drug war situation are most clearly disclosed in the very fact that the police stopped Bud in the first place. It describes a variant of what has come to be called stop-and-frisk, which essentially means that police officers with so-called reasonable suspicion can stop any individual to question and frisk him or her. The very fact of Bud being stopped by police also allows an assemblic ethnographer to trace the assemblic relations of the intertwining of the carceral political-economic and surveillance and control aspects

and find that stop-and-frisk, which was initially aimed at getting weapons off the streets, has morphed into a means of controlling and watching populations and has now become one of the drug war's primary police tactics. Indeed, these assemblage relations that emerge as stop-and-frisk have contributed considerably to the shared conditions of a substantial number of Americans. This holds especially true in New York City, where the drug war situation has affected peoples' life trajectories in deleterious ways, particularly those of African American and Latin American persons, who are systematically watched by this and similar forms of surveillance (Alexander 2012, 63–71).

This is precisely how it came about that Terrance was absent the evening of Bud's reading, and missed out on the internship opportunity in Vancouver. For it was through such forms of surveillance that Terrance, a fifty-year-old African American man from the Bronx, came to be incarcerated, as a result having his life trajectory negatively affected and his life possibilities significantly reduced. Just one of the effects Terrance has experienced is the inability to dwell in his world. For example, he once told me that stop-and-frisk tactics make him feel as if "I'm trespassing in my own neighborhood." He continued with the following description of his experience:

I'm coming out of my building, like I been many times, and stopped and frisked because I'm a person of color and I don't have my sneakers tied or I'm wearing, you know, or I have clothes on that are related to gangsters or whatever, which are the clothings that a lot of people in the neighborhood wear, you know, and I'm going to work and I'm still being stopped. And I got my bag and everything, my ID is out, you know, come on. You're not giving me no freedom to walk in my own neighborhood.

Such experiences are pervasive in certain New York City neighborhoods. In 2012, for example, more than 500,000 individuals were stopped and frisked in the city alone, 87 percent of whom were either African American or Latino. Perhaps most disturbing about this form of surveillance is that 89 percent of these interventions turned up nothing. Yet the highest number of those arrested (more than 5,000) held possession of personal-use quantities of marijuana, which under New York City law is not an offense unless shown in public, which it becomes when a police officer asks you to empty your pockets. Those stopped, frisked, and arrested are overwhelmingly young African American and Latino men, and the tactic is predominantly carried out in the neighborhoods where these men live (see [New York Civil Liberties Union n.d., 2013](#)). Having to live every day

with the very real possibility of stop-and-frisk means that many black and Latino Americans no longer feel that they can dwell in their own neighborhoods, streets, or even their own front stoops.

Stop-and-frisk is responsible not only for a significant amount of the surveillance the drug war situation allows to be placed on communities and individuals but also, as a result, it has become a key factor in the vast increase in incarceration rates in the United States, particularly for small, personal-use amounts of marijuana. In the past thirty years, for example (or since the militarization and law enforcement aspects of the drug war have become fully knotted, as we will see shortly), the prison population in the United States has increased by 500 percent, and in 2012 alone, 1.55 million people were arrested on non-violent drug charges.³ This is what some in the anti-drug war movement call “the drug war gulag,” and is a significant factor in what they call a “war on people.” The effects of such incarceration rates on shaping individual, familial, and social trajectories are substantial, and they can be traced by following the various assemblage relations that have become knotted in the drug war situation.

Terrance, for example, has had his life possibilities significantly narrowed as a result of his drug-related imprisonment. For example, the only steady job he has been able to find in the past twenty years has been part-time work at a local harm-reduction center in the Bronx. Because every job application asks whether or not the applicant has ever been arrested, Terrance is systematically excluded from any job beyond the harm-reduction or drug-policy sector. Even within the harm-reduction career trajectory, however, Terrance finds himself limited. As a peer counselor, he has been extraordinarily successful and recognized throughout the region for his work. His boss has talked to him several times about a promotion, but this requires further education and training that Terrance cannot afford. As a formerly incarcerated person he is ineligible for student loans or other funding, and he therefore cannot get the education that he now wants and needs. And, as we already know, when the New York users union offered to send him to Vancouver for an internship and further training at some of the programs about which I will write in the penultimate section of this article, he was not allowed to leave the country because of his incarceration record. Terrance is trapped. He has been, as Bud puts it at the end of his poem, reduced to nothing—at least socially—as a result of the drug war.

So too have entire neighborhoods. As Michael, another leader of the New York users union, put it, “tough on crime, that whole thing, I mean, that is really code for getting rid of, you know, drug users and their communities.” Parts of

the Bronx, where Terrance lives and works, are just one such community that has become a zone of uninhabitability because of the drug war (Zigon 2014), leading to what the policy director of the users union calls the “incarceration mind-set that the drug war helped extend into all these other areas of life beyond the prison. So it’s part of housing, it’s part of all, just, walking down the street and the stop-and-frisk type of stuff.” As a peer and community development associate, Terrance, in fact, attempts to disrupt the perpetual circle of the incarceration mind-set by recruiting and training drug users, many of them formerly incarcerated, to become peer-outreach workers at the harm-reduction center. Unfortunately, the stipend pay for this work is so low that it often does not lead to the kind of “development” Terrance and his fellow agonists hope for.

To describe the above another way: Terrance, those he recruits, and to a large extent the entire neighborhood have experienced a social death as a result of being caught up in New York’s drug war situation. Globally the drug war produces nearly 200,000 deaths a year, and the number of social deaths well exceeds this number. This, of course, hardly seems surprising when we consider the *war* of the drug war not metaphor but an actually waged reality, one result of which is the production of internal enemies whose lives are rendered ungrievable (Butler 2010). Indeed, if we follow the assemblic relations of the drug war situation from these local manifestations of stop-and-frisk through mass incarceration and its personal and social consequences back to the hyperaggressive act depicted by Bud in his poem (where he writes that “both cops pull their guns and aim them at me”), we can disclose how such policing, which may take the form of intense violence, intrusive surveillance, and excessive incarceration, is intertwined with global militarism, another aspect of this assemblage. As Michael put it, “all of this is connected to militarism.”

The assemblic link between these localized police tactics and global militarism is the militarization of the police, which began in the 1980s as part of what was called a “total war” against drugs that resulted in both the close cooperation between the military and the police and the militarization of police equipment, training, and tactics (Marcy 2010, 88; Alexander 2012, 74). As was recently revealed by the events in Ferguson, Missouri, American local police are now armed with machine guns, tanks, and military-style surveillance equipment, and trained in military-style siege, combat, and interrogation tactics, enabling them to control and occupy entire neighborhoods and regions in military fashion. This capacity has its origins in the 1980s militarization of the drug war, despite the overwhelming media claim that it is an offshoot of the war on terror. To the

extent that the latter holds true, police militarization is best understood as an intertwining knot of the surveillance and control, carceral political-economic, and global militarism aspects of the drug war situation.

Beginning from this intertwining knot of police militarization, a tracing of the assemblic relation of global militarism discloses just one of the ways that the drug war situation exceeds the United States and reveals itself as a widely diffused, differentially distributed phenomenon. The global militarism aspect of the drug war has been significant from the war's declaration by Richard Nixon in 1971, and neither the drug war nor most global military activity during the past forty years can be understood separately. This is especially so since the Reagan and Bush years, when the drug war situation became partially constituted by an intertwining of national and international legislation, economic aid and development, and military aid and eventually intervention, all of which rested on the international inequalities that characterized Cold War politics (Marcy 2010; Tate 2013). As the 1980s came to an end, it became increasingly difficult to discern precisely the distinction between drug war and Cold War military operations. This held particularly true throughout Central and South America as the U.S. military became fully entangled with counternarcotics operations. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, this late-Cold War entanglement would morph into that of counternarcotics operations, global militarism, and counterterrorism (Kenney 2003; Felbab-Brown 2013), such that today counternarcotics and counterterrorism often intertwine and emerge in the form of either military intervention (such as in Afghanistan and special-operations and militarized Drug Enforcement Administration agents in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa) or of militarized police in the United States and elsewhere. In other words, much of the military activity around the world during at least the past thirty years is inextricably linked to the drug war.

This is the "drug war" that gets most of the media and other public-discursive attention—think Mexico or Colombia. In this section, however, I have used the assemblic convergence of Bud's poem and Terrance's absence from Vancouver as a way to disrupt this narrow public discursive focus and to disclose the non-localized complexity that is the drug war situation. Beginning with this assemblic convergence as a hermeneutic *entrée*, I have tried to trace the assemblic relations of the drug war situation to show that it goes well beyond any of its localized emergencies, and that any comprehensive analysis of the drug war must recognize it as a widely diffused and complex assemblic phenomenon. In other words, in this section I have tried to show that the drug war can only be understood as a

complex assemblage of, among other things, state-based surveillance and control, mass incarceration and its personal and social consequences, militarized police violence, and global militarism in its various forms during the past thirty to forty years, *and* that, as a consequence, all of these can only be understood in terms of their relation to the drug war situation. Despite space limitations, then, I hope in this section to have offered a glimpse at just one of the benefits of an assemblic ethnography, that is, the analytic description of complex and widely diffused thickness.

ASSEMBLIC ETHNOGRAPHY

The study of widely diffused assembled phenomena requires what I am calling assemblic ethnography. As method, assemblic ethnography chases and traces a situation through its continual process of assembling across different global scales and its temporally differential localization in diverse places. Just as one never knows if, when, and where they will get caught up in a situation, so too the anthropologist doing assemblic ethnography can never know beforehand where the research will lead and when it will do so. For example, eight years ago I began research at a rehabilitation program in Russia run by the Orthodox Church (Zigon 2011), during which I became attuned to the political struggle there for harm-reduction services. This exposure led me to the central role of user unions in this struggle, which had been initially funded by the Soros Foundation based in New York. While in New York researching that initiative, I became acquainted with the New York users union and how it politically addresses the drug war, which, I came to learn, was partly informed by the successes in Vancouver, where I then went, and so on to Copenhagen, Denpasar, and elsewhere.

Unlike the traditional ethnographer, then, the assemblic ethnographer realizes that singularly focused research on any one site results in a *decomplication* of the situation under study. This is so because the assemblic ethnographer recognizes that complexity is knotted nonlocally at least as much as it is locally. Perhaps most significantly, to do an assemblic ethnography means to recognize that this knotted complexity results from the temporary emergence of nontotalized assemblages. A primary characteristic of this method is therefore tracing the various assemblic relations that constitute the assemblage. Thus, my research did not simply move from one site to the next, but rather moved along diverse assemblic relations of the drug war. For example, when the aspects of carceral political economics and state-based surveillance revealed themselves in New York,

I traced those assemblic relations and their differential distribution to Denpasar and back again to Russia; or when the aspect of biopolitical therapeutics revealed itself, I traced it from Russia to New York to Vancouver to Copenhagen. The research unfolded, then, along assemblic relations as they become differentially distributed, and not at sites. To anthropologically consider the contemporary condition, it is therefore not enough to note the various frictions (Tsing 2005) that constitute local complexity; we must instead ourselves travel along the assemblic relations constituting the nonlocal complexity that sets the shared conditions for ways of being in diverse locations throughout the globe.

Assemblic ethnographic writing seeks to mirror this method in that it describes horizontal thickness, as it were, just as much as vertical thickness. In other words, assemblic ethnographic writing gives as much attention to tracing the widely diffused complexity of a situation across its various assemblic relations as it does to localized complexity. In the previous section I tried to show some of the widely diffused complexity of the drug war situation by briefly tracing some of its various assemblic relations as they become manifest in the United States, and particularly in New York City. In the final section I turn to Vancouver for a closer analysis of one localized and rather intense manifestation of the drug war situation and the political response that has emerged from its interstices.

A POLITICS THAT BEGINS FROM A SITUATION

Bud read his poem at a public anti-drug war event held at a university annex that is part of a recently constructed public-private housing complex on the border of the Downtown Eastside neighborhood in Vancouver, where what I have called a politics of world-building (Zigon 2014, *forthcoming*) has been going on for twenty years. By 1997, an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 drug users, more than half of whom were HIV positive, were concentrated in just a few square blocks: more than 6,000 persons lived in single-room occupancy hotels, a constant police presence resulted in regular and random harassment and arrests, and the death toll was mounting. The potential for a situation-focused politics was all around, and in fact had already begun emerging in 1993 when what would eventually become one of the key housing and drug user organizations in the neighborhood was formed, and made harm reduction—and particularly the provisioning of clean syringes and other equipment or “works”—an inseparable part of their political activity related to housing. As one of the cofounders of the organization put it, at the time this was quite radical and experimental, although now it is fairly common practice. The point, however, is that these anti-drug war agonists rec-

ognized that in the Downtown Eastside the housing problem, drug use, police harassment, and HIV and other infectious diseases were inextricably intertwined, and that, therefore, addressing only one in isolation would be more or less not addressing anything at all. Here we have the recognition of the necessity of a politics that addresses situations rather than isolated issues.

Indeed, well beyond Vancouver the global anti-drug war movement is one that mirrors the characteristics of the situation it addresses. Just as the situation of the drug war is an assemblage of diverse aspects of other assemblages, so too the anti-drug war movement is an assemblage of diverse collaborators (cf. [Laclau and Mouffe 2001](#)) that mobilize to address, for example, local, national, and international antidrug legislation and policy, fatally dangerous therapeutics, carceral political economics, and punitive policing, among others. The kind of politics done by the anti-drug war movement, then, recognizes the multiple ways in which the drug war situation touches and affects their and most others' ways of being, and it mobilizes accordingly. This is the kind of political movement [William Connolly \(2013, 11, 137, 41\)](#) argues is needed today to address what he calls the "contemporary condition," a movement he describes as "anchored entirely in no single class, gender, ethnic group, creed or generation" and taking "the shape of a vibrant pluralist assemblage acting at multiple sites within and across states." This is precisely what the anti-drug war movement is, and it takes this form because it addresses one of the most widely diffused situations shaping the contemporary condition, no matter where one might be and whether or not one uses drugs.

Despite these early attempts by Vancouver agonists to initiate a situation-focused politics, throughout the 1990s overdoses in the neighborhood continued to increase—two hundred in 1993 alone. Finally, however, in 1997 a kind of tipping point—an event—occurred that issued a demand from this world that could no longer be avoided. A public health survey of drug users in Vancouver revealed that the Downtown Eastside had the highest HIV rate in the world. This report, which articulated something that many of those living in the neighborhood already felt and experienced, entered the world and motivated some to act. Bud was just one of those who did. He approached the housing organization mentioned above, and together they organized the political event that would become known as 1,000 Crosses. This event for many marks the true beginning of the experimental political activity that has come to make the Downtown Eastside famous the world over among anti-drug war agonists. It derives its name from the one thousand crosses erected in a neighborhood park to commemorate each of the

drug users who had died in British Columbia since 1993, the vast majority of them in the Downtown Eastside. But the event went beyond commemoration. Drug users also occupied parts of East Hastings Street—the main street running through the neighborhood where all the commuter buses run—and stretched a steel chain across the street with a sign reading “THE KILLING FIELDS.” The users of the Downtown Eastside thus began to respond to the political demand that had emerged from the interstices of their drug war situation. Motivated by an ethics of dwelling (Zigon 2014), the users and inhabitants of this neighborhood began the long and difficult political process of transforming their “Death Zone,” their killing fields, into a world where they could once again dwell.

In just a few months, Bud and others would form the by now globally famous Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), and this union, along with housing and other allied organizations, would begin a political process ongoing today. The result has been the transformation of the Downtown Eastside into an attuned world in which drug users not only no longer die at extraordinary rates but also where they can now actually dwell in a world designed for them as drug users. This world consists of, among other things, a neighborhood bank organized specifically for the needs of active drug users and those with precarious housing, social enterprises that employ drug users and adapt to their schedules, art studios and galleries where users and other neighborhood inhabitants can create and show their works, and increasing amounts of public housing, some of which is combined with private housing. Each of these is networked with the others, as well as with various health and therapeutic services in the neighborhood, such as the safe-injection site that Vancouver has become famous for, a trial heroin prescription program, a health and dentistry clinic, and a detox clinic.

The agonists have, in other words, built a world attuned to itself and its inhabitants, and as a result it remains open to ever-new possibilities for becoming as it continually maintains this attunement (Zigon forthcoming). In this new world of the Downtown Eastside, for example, a bank is no longer an exclusionary profit-driven establishment, but a place open to anyone no matter his or her credit history, residence status, how they smell, or what they say. As we will see below, it is also a place where one can get a crack pipe. In this new attuned world, drug users are no longer excluded from employment possibilities; rather, the social enterprise employers negotiate and adjust their hiring and work expectations to the vicissitudes of users’ semistable lives. In this new world created by experimental, situation-focused politics, drug users no longer die at extraordinary rates because, as I will make clear below, the entire neighborhood has essentially

become a “safe zone” for drug use. All of this and more has become possible, I suggest, because the Vancouver agonists were able to, as other anti-drug war agonists elsewhere are beginning to as well, tap into the sites of potentiality of their drug war situation. As I hope is clear, this form of politics under way in Vancouver is beginning to allow new conditions of existence to emerge that challenge and counter those of the drug war situation.

This experimental politics has become possible because of the sites of potentiality these agonists have actively disclosed within the interstices of their drug war situation. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the way that they have mobilized political action around harm reduction, which sits right at the interstice between the state-based surveillance and control aspect and the biopolitical health-management aspect of their drug war assemblage. In nearly every country, the drive to manage the normalized health of a working population by controlling what can and cannot be put into a body has increasingly resulted in the institutionalization of harm-reduction programs once organized by people who used the drugs themselves. This change has shifted what was once a political project of drug users and their allies to a state-funded therapeutic intervention run by bureaucrats, college-educated managers, and public health therapists, thus largely taking it out of the hands of drug users, who are now mostly left in the position of docile beings who must normalize or wait until they are able to do so. Additionally, the attempt by both international and national harm-reduction organizations to convince governments to accept harm reduction is regularly posed in terms of supporting security and economic development (Zigon 2013). Harm reduction, then, falls directly in the interstice of biopolitical therapeutics and state-based surveillance and control.

Whereas this institutionalization of harm reduction has in most cases led to the isolated clinic as the only location where a drug user can acquire clean works, the political activity in the Downtown Eastside has resulted in an entire neighborhood that is now essentially a safe zone of harm reduction. As one user agonist in Vancouver described it to me, unlike the typical harm-reduction model that is linear and isolated, the Downtown Eastside is networked, so that there is nowhere a person can be such that clean works or a safe-injection site are not close by. A crack-pipe vending machine in the bank lobby, a safe-injection site in the geographical center of the neighborhood, syringe exchanges in numerous community centers, clinics, and housing units—no matter where one finds oneself at any given moment, it is nearly impossible to be more than a minute or two away from harm-reduction services. Unlike in many of the other places my assemblic ethnographic research has taken me, harm reduction in Vancouver is beginning

to disentangle from its biopolitical therapeutic and surveillance and control aspects to simply become part of ordinary life.

As a result, Vancouver has become a model and inspiration for anti-drug war agonists around the globe. No matter where I go or with whom I talk, everyone asks if I have been to Vancouver, and they always compare themselves negatively with the successes there. Increasingly, though, these other user agonists are mobilizing to wrest control of harm-reduction practices from state-based and -funded institutions. Consider the example of safe-injection sites, which is one of the most radical initiatives enacted by anti-drug war agonists around the globe, and what Vancouver is best known for. Safe-injection sites are locations where people can use drugs—initially conceived for heroin injectors but increasingly so for smokers and snorters of various kinds of drugs—under the supervision of trained personnel. Where officially sanctioned, such as in Vancouver, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen, safe-injection sites are statistically recognized as responsible for significant decreases in overdose. Globally, however, many safe-injection sites are run underground, and although no official statistics exist to confirm this, hearsay suggests that these have proven just as successful in reducing overdose as the sanctioned sites.

Despite the clear evidence that safe-injection sites work, the political tactics for enacting them vary at different localizations of the drug war situation. In Copenhagen, for example, where the national union of drug users and allied organizations convinced the government to fund and support a range of initiatives—safe-injection sites just one among them—the tactic tends to be engagement with legislators and the strategy is quickly shifting toward decriminalization. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, on the other hand, in a country that has one of the fastest growing HIV rates in the world, a rate driven by heroin use, and yet where the government, along with police and medical personnel, persecute, imprison, and leave many drug users to die (Zigon 2011), this drug war currently is more effectively fought—though dangerously so—using illegal and underground tactics to offer such things as safe-injection sites. In New York City, I have found that combinations of these two tactics are regularly used, depending on the relata or aim being addressed. For example, legislative and judicial tactics are utilized for policing issues, illegal and underground tactics for safe-injection sites.

I have offered just a few examples of how the transformative possibilities available at this interstitial site of potentiality have been recognized by user-organized groups. Inspired by the transformations underway in Vancouver, these

groups and their allies have begun to politically experiment as they respond to the particular situational emergence of the drug war in their locale, some of them by necessity acting outside the law. The consequences have been real and include, among other things, communally run safe-injection sites, housing, and health care. Such an experimental politics has become possible, I have shown, because of the way the anti-drug war movement conceives its political agonist. Unlike the bounded issues and identities addressed by many contemporary political movements, the anti-drug war movement has recognized the drug war as an assembled situation that at one and the same time discloses its widely diffused complexity and its openness to becoming otherwise. For unlike an isolated issue that can only be won or lost, and unlike Morton's hyperobject that seemingly cannot be touched, situations always hold sites of potentiality at their interstices, from which experimental political activity can begin to transgress the situation, and as such remain open to becoming otherwise by means of those and that which are already intertwined. Vancouver has shown the global anti-drug war movement how such a politics is possible, and this movement as a whole, I hope, has shown anthropologists how reconceiving our analytic concepts may do more than simply make our worlds more understandable: it may also reveal how we can begin to engage in the becoming otherwise of these worlds.

A CLOSING WORD ON ANTHROPOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT

In this essay, I have followed the lead of the anti-drug war movement I have been researching and conceptualized the drug war as a situation widely diffused across different global scales and differentially emerging in various worlds, thus affecting those and that which get caught up in the situation. As such, the drug war situation is best considered a nontotalizable assemblage constituted by various aspects of other nontotalizable assemblages such as global militarism, state-based surveillance and control, carceral political economics, biopolitical therapeutics, and international and national inequalities, among others. Conceiving the drug war as such helps make it more analytically clear for both intellectual and political purposes. This article, then, has been a response to recent concerns both within and outside anthropology that new and creative attempts must be made in the analysis of the worlds we engage as researchers and intellectuals, as well as the concepts and models we might offer for further engagement in these worlds (e.g., [Bennett 2010](#); [Povinelli 2011](#); [Morton 2013](#)). If anthropologists seek such engagements in an attempt to participate in the becoming of an otherwise, it behooves us not only to research those inclusively excluded communities, groups,

and peoples that may point to such a becoming but also to discern the potential hidden in these worlds and activities. In contrast, however, to those anthropologists who call for a political ontology with a “primitivist ethos” (Hage 2012) or a turn to the “nonmodern” (see Blaser 2009) as the only possible alternative, I have shown that political potentialities for becoming otherwise, and the ontological basis for such politics, are already right here in the midst of globally diffused shared conditions that can potentially affect anyone. I submit that the concept of situation discloses this fact and that the anti–drug war movement shows us how a politics of a situation might be done.

ABSTRACT

In this essay, I offer a new conception of situation through a delineation of the situation named the drug war and the politics that have emerged out of it. I explore how what I have learned from the anti–drug war movement in terms of what they see themselves addressing, how they address it, and how their manner of organization may help anthropologists rethink their own objects of study. I hope to show that the concept of situation significantly adds to anthropological knowledge because it allows us to consider that which is widely diffused across different global scales as a non-totalizable assemblage, but yet in its occasional and temporary local manifestation allows us to understand how persons and objects that are geographically, socioeconomically, and culturally distributed get caught up in the shared conditions that emerge from the situation. Furthermore, this conception is offered in response to recent concerns within and beyond anthropology that new and creative attempts must be made in the analysis of and engagement with the worlds we study. I argue that by being attuned to hidden potential in the worlds we research, and creatively and speculatively conceptualizing such potential, we can offer a uniquely anthropological contribution and engagement in social and political projects of becoming otherwise. [situation; politics; political ontology; becoming; global; ethnography; drug war]

NOTES

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1. I use the term agonist instead of activist to emphasize the agonistic nature of the political struggle of those fighting against the drug war.
2. Because he is known around the globe for his political activity in Vancouver, I am using Bud Osborn’s real name. All other names are pseudonyms.
3. See the Sentencing Project website, www.sentencingproject.org.

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