

# Discussion and Criticism

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## On Reflections on *Darkness in El Dorado*

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The editor and most contributors to the forum on *Darkness in El Dorado* (CA 42: 265-76) should be commended for engaging in constructive discussion, something usually lacking in the cyber and media hysteria since September 2000. However, some important points are mistaken or missing. Contrary to Alan Fix, research on Yanomami began not in the 1960s but as early as 1800. Now there are more than 60 books, albeit of widely varying quality, on aspects of Yanomami. Sufficient literature exists to recognize a field of specialization—Yanomami Studies or Yanomamology. It is possible to identify points of agreement and disagreement among the numerous and diverse writers who have published on Yanomami and draw conclusions (Sponsel 1998:99).

Contrary to Peter Pels's allusion to the "supposedly" confidential letter written by Terence Turner and me, we certainly intended it to be confidential, and its contents were obviously so. It was specifically addressed only to the president and president-elect of the American Anthropological Association, not "To Whom It May Concern." A copy was sent to four other top officials of the most relevant AAA units. We never intended or anticipated that the letter would be more widely circulated. Whoever leaked it into cyberspace lacked the common sense and professional courtesy to first request permission of the authors, violated copyright, and breached about half of the principles of computer ethics (see *The Ten Commandments of Computer Ethics* of the Computer Ethics Institute at [http://www.brook.edu/its/cei/cei\\_hp.htm](http://www.brook.edu/its/cei/cei_hp.htm)). We intended the letter for one purpose—to alert top AAA officials to the inevitable explosion of scandal. We aimed only to summarize Tierney's main allegations, not to make any claims ourselves. We felt a special obligation to write the letter because for several years we had both served on the AAA Committee for Human Rights, Turner had chaired the AAA Yanomami Commission, and I had conducted fieldwork with Yanomami in 1974-75 and since then continued to follow the literature and their situation as closely as possible and to publish about their plight, even though moving on to other areas for research. We would not hesitate to write a letter again as a matter of principle.

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My comments quoted on the back cover of Tierney's book were initially made after reading a couple of chapters of a much different version of the book in 1995, one focused on mining and its impact on indigenes and their environment. Last July, after reading for the first time the entire new book in the form of bound galley, I allowed the quote to remain because it was still relevant and valid, and it has been repeatedly validated in the controversy since September 2000.

In many respects, but obviously not all, this is the most important book ever written about the Yanomami. None of some 60 books previously published on the Yanomami ever drew attention to the violations of professional ethics and abuses of human rights by *anthropologists* in the ways and to the extent that Tierney does. Not one of those books was subjected to a panel discussion and open forum at any AAA convention, any forum in a journal like CA, investigations in three countries, discussions in international media and cyberspace, etc. As Alcida Ramos mentions, Brazilian anthropological critics of Napoleon Chagnon never began to have such an impact as Tierney. The same must be said about the many critics elsewhere over three decades (Sponsel 1998:114). Tierney served our profession with a sorely needed wake-up call unprecedented in its effectiveness, whatever the negative consequences that inevitably accompany controversies and scandals and to whatever degree his numerous and diverse allegations prove true.

Tierney exposed the ugliest affair in the entire history of anthropology. It cannot be summarily dismissed by a vocal minority as simply a matter of personal animosities, turf war, postmodernist critique of science or scientism, objectivist versus activist, differing interpretations of Yanomami aggression, sensationalist or tabloid journalism, etc. As Susan Lindee recognizes and contrary to Raymond Hames, not all of the fundamental claims made by Tierney have been discussed, let alone refuted.

There is far more to Tierney's multitude of allegations than merely the epidemic and James Neel, despite the partisan tactics of smoke and mirrors. I agree with Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs; it is time for this entire affair, however repulsive, to be thoroughly, accurately, and fairly investigated, discussed, and debated. One of the best sources to start with is the information clearinghouse developed by Douglas Hume in a web site that not one of the contributors to the forum mentions (<http://www.anth.uconn.edu/gradstudents/dhume/darkness>) although other blatantly biased web sites filled with misinformation and disinformation are mentioned repeatedly. The Hume web site includes an extensive Yanomami bibliography as well and a link to my 1998 article in *Aggressive Behavior*. Those who have a genuine interest in Yanomami survival, welfare, and rights may consult Cultural Survival (<http://www>

.cs.org), International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (<http://www.iwgia.org>), Pro-Yanomami Commission (<http://www.proyanomami.org.br>), and Survival International (<http://www.survival-international.org>). Most of these web sites also contain statements on this scandal. Some readers may also be interested in Tierney's replies to Bruce Albert and John Tooby (<http://www.darknessineldorado.com>) and the round-table discussion at <http://www.publicanthropology.org>.

As Fernando Coronil advocates, the Pandora's box opened by Tierney should be examined and debated within the framework of the ethics and politics of knowledge production in the West, and that includes professional, ethical, and moral responsibility toward the communities who host research. The three basic questions I raised at the open forum on this controversy at the last AAA convention remain: What have the Yanomami contributed to us? What have we contributed to the Yanomami, for better and for worse? How are professional ethics and human rights involved? The "us" and "we" include not only those who to varying degrees gained fame and fortune from Yanomami research but any anthropologists who have used Yanomami "data" in their research, publications, or teaching. Genuine reciprocity to the Yanomami is long overdue. As Ramos suggests, this includes recognizing their intellectual property rights. Furthermore, some form of reparations seems to be in order, if any of the relevant allegations in Tierney's book prove true. The bottom line of the various AAA statements on ethics is that anthropologists should do no harm to the people they study, but shouldn't they also do some good for them? Or are host communities only a means to serve the ends of anthropologists, as fodder for academic fantasies, debates, and careers?

## Replies

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Sponsel's response to the reviews of Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* is a constructive contribution to the serious discussion promoted by CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY; it both advances this debate and helps to identify its limits. If the national controversy provoked by this book has revealed a certain "darkness" in the heart of the academy (as I suggested in my CA review of Tierney's book), the discussion promoted by CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY has illuminated its depths and countered its effects.

While it is understandable that this national controversy has drawn attention to a group of U.S. scholars whose reputations have been affected by it, it is disturbing the extent to which this focus has personalized the debate, often turning it into a parochial battle over in-

dividual turfs and distracting attention from what should be our main concern: the Yanomami and anthropology's relation to its subjects.

A symptomatic expression of this Wild West outlook is the kind of attention that has been given to the confidential memo that Leslie Sponsel and Terence Turner sent by e-mail to AAA officials. The facility with which its shortcomings have been interpreted as proof of its authors' dark hidden intentions and used to dismiss its basic message has only helped to polarize and trivialize this debate. One may question the manner in which they did so, but I think few would dispute that they were entitled to notify officers of the AAA about the publication of a book that was likely to impact the profession. Assertions and innuendoes about their intentions not only have distracted attention from the memo's message but also have made it more difficult to examine its flaws. After all that has happened, it is reassuring to know, as Sponsel says, that they "would not hesitate to write a letter again as a matter of principle." It would be helpful to know as well how he thinks their new letter would incorporate what they have learned from this experience.

Sponsel considers that "in many respects, but obviously not all, this is the most important book ever written about the Yanomami." His criteria for this evaluation center on the tremendous impact the book has had in the United States and abroad. In my view, the book's impact cannot be separated from how it was produced and how it was marketed in the United States. Had the same book been published in Brazil or Venezuela, it would not have had the same effect. In my view, the book's impact reveals, rather, the importance of the United States as an imperial center and the power of its universities and media to define global disciplinary canons, intellectual agendas, and cultural fads. While I am not a Yanomami expert, I would hesitate to rank the book's importance in relation to the 60 or more books previously written on the Yanomami, some of which have made significant contributions to our understanding of their culture as well as of the problems raised by Tierney's book. I would prefer to ask: Why do some books achieve prominence and others not? Under what global conditions is knowledge produced, circulated, and canonized?

I agree with Sponsel that anthropologists not only should do no harm but should do good. This controversy has highlighted the complexities—the contradictions as well as the possibilities—of both doing "good" science in the context of Western institutions and doing "good" for the non-Western people studied by Western scholars. I believe that the task ahead includes examining the criteria for "goodness" in phrases such as the above. If we are to counter the ongoing reproduction of imperial relations, criteria for defining scientific excellence, ethical integrity, and political empowerment must be produced by taking into account how the current expansion of global inequality is affecting peoples with different traditions of knowledge and conceptions of life. Since Western science has been deeply implicated in the making of the modern world, only by transforming its own

practices can it contribute to challenging practices that continue to divide people, subordinating their forms of knowledge and turning some into the sole producers of science and others into objects of study and of aid.

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Sponsel's comments fail to address the fundamental issue: most if not all of the allegations in Tierney's book are unsubstantiated or simply false. The possibility that some may be true requires the profession to examine the case. To Sponsel, the enormous impact of Tierney's book ("unprecedented in its effectiveness") in calling attention to the Yanomami situation justifies all the misrepresentations, innuendos, and false inferences. If he truly believes that Tierney's tactics in this case are ethical and justified (and "effective"), I disagree with him fundamentally. To expose the misrepresentation regarding the hysterical claims of genocide by James Neel is not simply "partisan tactics of smoke and mirrors." As I stated in my review, it is exactly this defamation of individuals to achieve "social good" that must be resisted. The ends do not justify the means.

Finally, and trivially, Sponsel is surely right that observations of the Yanomami began before the 1960s. However, of the multitude of references in Tierney's book, only seven are prior to 1960, and these are all essentially traveler's tales. There are *no* references earlier than 1960 in the article Sponsel cites to document the extensive literature on the Yanomami.

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Sponsel's letter of defense of Patrick Tierney—and himself—assumes the legitimacy of an old argument familiar to politicians, movie stars, and other publicity seekers: There's no such thing as bad press. He suggests that Tierney's ability to attract public and international attention to the very real injustices visited upon the Yanomami constitutes a *de facto* justification of the text, errors and all. Earlier critics of Chagnon, including Brazilian anthropologists disturbed by Chagnon's field practices and concerned for the Yanomami, were unable to attract so much as a paragraph in international cyberspace. Tierney, he proposes, singlehandedly made the world listen.

Well, sort of. There's just one small but significant detail: The massive public attention was generated not by Tierney but by Sponsel himself, who, with Terry Turner, turned the publication of the book into a media circus. Without a homicidal geneticist this was not a breaking international media event.

Tierney, as everyone now knows, *never* made the most

egregious claims about the measles epidemic attributed to him in the infamous Turner-Sponsel e-mail. His arguments were limited to vague innuendo and tenuous guilt by association, well-tempered with cautious backtracking and confusing self-contradiction. Respectable reporters would never have picked it up.

But Sponsel and Turner concentrated Tierney's fuzziness, ambiguity, and lack of evidence into a startling, highly mediagenic fact: a charge of scientific mass murder backed up by years of painstaking research and hundreds of footnotes. They were wrong, of course, but it was stunningly effective in attracting sensational global press. The fact that the Turner-Sponsel e-mail itself appeared virtually unedited on page 1 of *The Guardian* suggests just how media-savvy this message was.

Sponsel is much too modest. He should take credit for the one aspect of Tierney's work that he suggests makes it "the most important book ever written about the Yanomami."

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In many respects I am sympathetic to Sponsel's claim that Tierney's book "is the most important book ever written about the Yanomami" because of the unprecedented extent to which it draws attention to "the violations of professional ethics and abuses of human rights by anthropologists." My main worry is—in line with recent statements in CA and elsewhere by Fernando Coronil, Alcida Ramos, Stephen Nugent, and others—that the whole discussion is being taken, as Sponsel puts it, to be "the ugliest affair in the entire history of anthropology" (my emphasis). This erasure of all the other instances of anthropology's usually colonial and often ugly past can only be based on a myopic understanding of our discipline, one that seduces itself with a narrow, professionalistic self-understanding. Such a self-conception obliterates the extent to which its production of knowledge is rooted in circumstances that, as Sponsel acknowledges in the case of Yanomami as well, go back several centuries (instead of just to the 1960s). This implies that any morally responsible argument about the relationship of scientific research to Yanomami life should take a much broader moral responsibility than that given by the "professional" anthropological relationship into account.

Therefore, I do not think I overstated the importance and impact of the letter that Turner and Sponsel wrote to the chiefs of the AAA by suggesting that its confidentiality was compromised from the start. If, as Sponsel writes, the letter was sent to no less than six "top officials" of the AAA, if Turner and Sponsel have as much experience with the diversity of political opinion within AAA ethics circles as I do, if they are as conscious as I am of the fact that "leaking" confidential information

is one of the primary operations of (post-) modern politics, in the Netherlands as well as in the United States, then the least they could have done was to moderate their description of Tierney's accusations to exclude conspiratorial, witch-hunting, and Holocaust-invoking language. "Whoever leaked [the letter] into cyberspace lacked the common sense and professional courtesy to first request permission of the authors, violated copyright, and breached about half of the principles of computer ethics," says Sponsel. To many European anthropologists such a statement sounds like the socially irresponsible legalese so characteristic of much American ethics talk. Since Malinowski's *Crime and Custom*, anthropologists should know that human beings tend

not to follow explicitly stated rules and act on that understanding in their own practice. However much I sympathize with Sponsel's commitment to the plight of Yanomami, I am afraid that his defense, relying as it does on semilegalistic notions of ethics and copyright, skirts the extra-anthropological issues of political communication, modern power games, and plain morality that, eventually, really define our stakes.

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