

Introduction

On War and Potentiality

War is the health of the State.

—Randolph Silliman Bourne

The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.

—Giorgio Agamben

Recently, political anthropologists and theorists have begun to address two interrelated problematic concerns. The first is the seemingly widespread lack of motivation for participating in political activity.¹ The second is the political and intellectual focus on critique rather than offering alternatives for possible futures.² Addressing these two problematics of politics seems increasingly urgent in a time characterized by anxiety and precarity. Across the globe a predominantly—and thus by no means exclusively—right-wing-led populist response to this has been a nostalgic return to a past greatness that never actually was. Thus, for example, the 1950s seems to be the best imagined future for many in both the United States and Russia today, while in the United Kingdom and much of Europe there is a strong desire to return to an ethnonationalist purity that supposedly existed sometime before the European Union arrived on the scene. If history did end with the Cold War, then it increasingly seems that many do not consider it to have been a happy ending and are eager to restart it, this time as farce.

While this nostalgic nationalist imperative may be to turn back time, many on the political and intellectual left hope to begin to create worldly conditions that are more open and inclusive than they have been in the past, reduce economic inequality and precarity as much as possible, and do all of this in a way that avoids the existential threat of climate change. Despite this hope, the political and intellectual left has offered very little in terms of a political vision of what that future might be like or how to get there.³ Confronted with this contemporary condition in which many clearly seek an otherwise but without a vision of what that might be, political anthropologists and theorists have come to recognize the dual problem of this lack of political motivation and alternative visions. Notwithstanding the now increasingly common recognition of these lacks and a few important attempts to offer theoretical alternatives to traditional political thinking, the actual articulation of what a possible future might be and how it may be achieved remains largely missing from this growing body of literature.

This book is an attempt to address this lacunae by offering a glimpse at one of these possible futures and showing the political process by which its potential is being ushered into existence by some unlikely political actors: active and former users of heavy drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine. I call these political actors *unlikely* because for over a century drug users around the globe have been systematically excluded not only from political processes but, as will become clear throughout this book, from humanity as well. What I hope to show and consider in this book, however, is that despite this unlikelihood, the globally networked anti-drug war political movement organized and run by drug users is, in fact, at the forefront of offering an alternative political and social imaginary. In particular, I will focus my considerations on how this anti-drug war imaginary and political activity is enacting nonnormative, open, and relationally inclusive alternatives to such key ethical-political concepts as community, freedom, and care.

For many it may seem odd that so-called addicts and junkies could show us an alternative social and political vision. But as I hope becomes clear throughout this book and as I will emphasize in chapter two, such a response is more a result of what anti-drug war agonists call the “fantasy world” created through drug war propaganda than it is indicative of the lives and capacities of most drug users.⁴ I would therefore like to ask readers to set aside any preconceived notions they may have of drug users and invite them to consider instead that in fact the lives of drug users and the war waged against them illustrate well the contemporary

condition within which many of us now find ourselves. This condition, I will argue shortly, is best considered one of war as governance. If the drug war is just one particularly clear example of this global condition of war as governance, then the wager of this book is that the ways in which the anti-drug war movement fights against the drug war—and the alternative worlds they are creating in doing so—may offer us some guidance in rethinking some of our most basic political and ethical motivations, tactics, and aims.

This book draws from an ethnographic archive accumulated from nearly fifteen years of research I have done on the drug war and the ethical, political, and therapeutic responses to it in various parts of the globe (chapter 1). In particular, I draw from this archive in order to hermeneutically interrogate the ways in which the global anti-drug war movement is currently building new worlds through political and ethical activities and relations. What I call the *anti-drug war movement* is a pluralist assemblage of diverse—and sometimes seemingly contradictory—groups and organizations that have created a counterhegemonic alternative to what I describe below as the global condition of war as governance.⁵ While in this book I focus primarily upon the political and ethical activity of unions of active drug users and their most immediate allies, such as drug policy organizations, harm-reduction advocates, and housing-reform organizations, the global anti-drug war movement also consists of such unexpected participants as organizations of law enforcement against the drug war, right-wing libertarians, and the parents of those who have died drug war deaths. Many of these unions, groups, and organizations have become globally networked, regularly meet to share ideas and experiences, and have come to agree on a long-term strategy for ending the drug war.

In addition to this network of political activity, the anti-drug war movement has also established a global information and “ideology” dissemination machine to counter drug war propaganda (chapter 2). This includes, for example, a number of websites; Facebook pages and Twitter feeds; intellectuals and journalists who produce books and articles for the general public; good relations with a number of mainstream and alternative media outlets; and conferences and workshops that regularly occur at the international, regional, national, and local levels. The anti-drug war movement, then, has established a global infrastructure for the transmission, dissemination, and enactment of a counterhegemonic alternative to the contemporary global condition of war as governance.

Despite the global reach of this political movement, much of the activity is done at the local or regional levels, addressing what in chapter one I call the localized situations of the more widely diffused complexity of the drug war. Nevertheless, because these localized situations are the situated manifestations of the globally diffused complexity of the drug war, these agonists find themselves in a shared condition of war that, as I show in chapter one, is more or less the same no matter where it manifests. As a result, although tactics and strategies differ to some extent according to the differences of the situated manifestations, overall the global anti-drug war movement has been able to construct a coherent long-term strategy because those involved have been able to recognize that they are all, in fact, caught up in shared conditions despite the local differences.

In my hopes to present as clearly as possible the political response to this widely diffused complexity of the drug war, I primarily focus upon three localized anti-drug war groups. Thus, agonists in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, Canada; in New York City, United States; and in Copenhagen, Denmark, will take the forefront of this book. This is so for various reasons, the most important of which is that in these three locales we can most easily discern the emergence and endurance of the kinds of new worlds I will argue the global movement in general seeks to build. These three locales also illustrate the different scales that worlds can take—from the intersubjective to the neighborhood and ultimately beyond—and thus help us see that transforming worlds does not occur all at once from the center outward or from the top down. Instead, that transformation spreads by means of persistent political activity and across networks of relationality through processes of attunement that hermeneutically affect and intertwine others in transformative ways.⁶ It is important to emphasize that this transformation is not temporary prefiguration but is actually happening and sticking. The anti-drug war movement is actually changing worlds, slowly but surely.

The success of the anti-drug war movement is, in part, a result of its organizational structure and the political activity this allows. Unlike the fetishization of horizontalist full participation that now dominates much of what has come to count as left political activity today, the anti-drug war movement, for the most part, combines a hierarchical, or vertical, structure with some aspects of horizontalism, such as autonomous groups, diversity, networking, and temporally limited full participation. In contrast to the long-term instability of horizontalist politics, this “combination of horizontal and more centralized organizational

models,” as Jeffrey Juris has speculated, allows for a broad-based, effective, and sustainable political movement.⁷ To be clear, however, the centralized organizational model of most anti-drug war groups that I did research with is an open and inclusive political leadership that, much like Hannah Arendt’s notion of political activity and the community of whoever arrives (chapter 3) they seek to build,⁸ welcomes anyone who wishes to participate. Thus, many of these organizations have a decision-making and leadership process that closely resembles that of democratic centralism,⁹ through which all of those who wish to participate in the political leadership debate, discuss, and come to consensus on, for example, tactical and strategic decisions, which are then carried out by the participants or members of the organization at large. The result is a politics of action that has lasting and sustainable effects. Consequently, this politics of worldbuilding has been able to go beyond the momentary prefiguration, spectacle, and protest that have come to characterize much left political activity today and is now actually building new worlds,¹⁰ which include not only infrastructure, values, and social and worldly interactive practices but the onto-ethical grounds for such worlds.

WAR AS GOVERNANCE

What does it mean to say that the contemporary condition is one of war as governance? And how does the drug war help us notice this? Responding to these questions will help us understand how it is that the anti-drug war movement is ultimately a political movement seeking to build new worlds open and inclusive “to everybody who walks by” (chapter 3), as one agonist put it to me. No doubt much of the political activity is aimed first and foremost at making the lives of drug users more bearable. But no matter where my research took me, political agonists were clear that ultimately their political vision of an open community, freedom, and care includes everyone. This is so because ultimately they understand the drug war in terms of what I call *war as governance*, a form of governance that in one manifestation or another affects everyone. They call this contemporary condition a *war on people*.

“It’s a war on people, it’s a war on communities, it’s a war on entire segments of cities.” This is how a New York City anti-drug war agonist once described the drug war to me and how it is understood and articulated by innumerable other such agonists around the globe. When representatives of governments, states, and international institutions speak

of the drug war, they speak as though it is a quasimetaphorical description of the benevolent attempt on their part to protect national and global populations from apparently dangerous substances. This rhetoric suggests that the war is waged on these substances, and this, along with the medicalization of the disease model of addiction and its therapeutic treatment, results in the contemporary dominant discourse of the war on drugs as protective policies more akin to public health initiatives than any actually fought war. When, on occasion, the drug war is articulated as an actual war, the enemy is, for the most part, officially marked as the dealers, the cartels, and the bad guys who threaten communities. Populations, in this narrative, must be protected.¹¹

This is *not* how the anti-drug war movement understands the drug war, and it is not how innumerable drug users around the globe experience it. For them it is indeed a war on people. This war, as far as they can tell, does not protect a population as much as it *creates* two populations—one to be “protectively” normalized, the other to be inclusively excluded. For it is only by means of the discursive, structural, and physical violence enacted against certain kinds of people—in this case, drug users—that a normalized and protectable population comes into being. Put another way: a protectable population never exists prior to the enactment of a biopolitical will that creates that population through acts of exclusionary violence against another and covers over that violence with the rhetorical discourse of security.¹² Whether as mass incarceration in the United States and elsewhere,¹³ which is historically intertwined with the drug war and has grown steadily worse as the drug war has escalated; or the dehumanization of drug users that excludes them from such things as jobs, housing, education, and medical treatment, as well as intimate relations of love and care; or both the active and passive state-sponsored physical violence against drug users that results in over two hundred thousand deaths a year globally,¹⁴ the biopolitical will enacted through the drug war is indeed best understood as a war on people.

Increasingly, social and political theorists consider our contemporary condition one of war. For example, Giorgio Agamben has characterized our contemporary political paradigm as that of civil war,¹⁵ and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri provide perhaps the most sustained theoretical analysis of how this is so.¹⁶ Yet the primary example utilized in both cases is the war on terror. I agree with these and other thinkers who argue for the existence of this global condition of war.¹⁷ But if we want to understand what war as a form of governance entails, then we must

go beyond analyses of the war on terror, counterinsurgency, or other forms of perpetual war between and within nation-states and those groups that seek to overthrow or harass them. As I show in chapter one, the drug war illustrates well that in the contemporary condition of things, war as governance is primarily a war on people fought potentially anywhere and against anyone. If we want to understand this contemporary condition of war, then we must interrogate the ways in which this war is waged against ordinary people right here in the midst of everyday life by means of both active and passive violence, a global carceral system, propaganda, surveillance, and even chemical warfare.¹⁸ In this book I will do just that and show how some of those against whom this war is waged fight back.

In his *Society Must Be Defended* lectures, Michel Foucault famously inverted Clausewitz's claim that "war is politics by other means,"¹⁹ and this has been an influential move for many of those who now study such phenomena as the war on terror or the security state. But Foucault's inversion—"politics is war by other means"—in fact may have been redundant. For Clausewitz already understood well that war is a form of governance. Thus, Clausewitz writes that

war is simply a continuation of political intercourse, with the addition of other means. We deliberately use the phrase "with the addition of other means" because we also want to make it clear that war in itself does not suspend political intercourse or change it into something entirely different. In essentials that intercourse continues, irrespective of the means it employs . . . Is war not just another expression of [political intercourse], another form of speech or writing? Its grammar, indeed, may be its own, but not its logic.²⁰

War and politics for Clausewitz, then, are essentially the same phenomenon. The Foucauldian inversion is not necessary because as Clausewitz has already made clear, war and politics already share a logic and are merely aspects of the same process. The respective grammar of war and politics may differ; their forms of speech or modes of writing power into the fabric, bodies, and beings in worlds may differ. But what Clausewitz sought to clarify is that war is and never has been separable from politics, just as politics is and never has been separable from war.²¹ War has always been one of the—if not the primary—instruments of political power,²² whether waged abroad or domestically.

Clausewitz begins his *On War* with a definition: "War is thus an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will."²³ He continues by clarifying this definition. Force is what he calls "the *means* of war." The political object of war is what Clausewitz describes as the imposition of "our

will on the enemy.” He then goes on to make a distinction between the political object, which he also calls the “original motive” of any war, and what he calls the aim of warfare, which is rendering the enemy powerless.²⁴ Ultimately, however, once the aim of warfare is realized (that is, once the enemy is rendered powerless by means of force), the political objective returns to the fore so that the victor can impose its will on the defeated.²⁵ Thus, while the aim is internal to the grammar of the instrument of war, this instrument is wielded according to the logic of the political object.²⁶ It is this distinction between the aim—rendering the enemy powerless to resist—and the object—the imposition of will—that allows us to begin to see how war has today become a form of governance. For as political objects change—that is, as the will to power of politics changes—so too do the instruments of war. “Thus,” Clausewitz concludes the section on the political object of war in book one, “it follows that without any inconsistency wars can have all degrees of importance and intensity, ranging from a war of extermination down to simple armed observation.”²⁷ As will become clear in this book, particularly in the first two chapters, the drug war as a war on people covers the range of these intensities.

If the political object of war is the imposition of will, it should be no surprise that as biopolitics has become the dominant form of politics on the globe today, war as an instrument of politics has increasingly become a condition of everyday existence. To be clear: I entirely agree with Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose that biopower should not be conceived as an all-encompassing and epochal form of power.²⁸ I also agree with Elizabeth Povinelli that our analytic fascination with biopolitics has partly blinded us to other forms of power and politics and most particularly that which governs the distinction between life and non-life.²⁹ Still, it is difficult not to acknowledge that despite these caveats, biopower and biopolitics remain dominant today. It is important to recognize, however, that dominance does not entail a universal, all-encompassing power. Rather, similar to how Talal Asad employed the notion of “strong language,”³⁰ the claim that biopolitics is the dominant form of politics on the globe today is simply to recognize that other forms of power and politics, more often than not, still remain (at least for now) less able to be fully exercised in relation to biopolitical alternatives. The contention of this book is that one of the ways in which this biopolitical dominance is exercised is through war as governance in the form of wars on people, such as the drug war, and that the anti-drug war movement offers an example of an alternative to this dominance.

THE POLITICS OF WORLDBUILDING

If the political objective of war as governance is the violent imposition of a biopolitical will such that victory is measured by the normalization, or perhaps better put, the rectification of being-human with an extremely narrow a priori definition of what, who, and how to count as human, then the struggle against this war is primarily fought as a nonnormative attempt to become human and worldly otherwise.³¹ To put it plainly, if war on people is meant to force persons to become what counts as human today and to exclude all those who will not or cannot be counted as such, then the struggle against this war entails not only remaining uncountable but doing so in a manner that discloses the violence of the count and through that disclosure brings into the open new possibilities for becoming human and worldly otherwise. This is precisely what I will show those in the anti-drug war movement doing through their political and everyday ethical activity. For by means of this political struggle against a global condition of war as governance, the anti-drug war movement is allowing potentialities to emerge as new possibilities for nonnormative political and communal ways of being-with.

This is a politics, then, as a process of worldbuilding. In *Disappointment* I described a politics of worldbuilding as the political activity done within particular situations, the aim of which is altering the range of possibilities that limit a world and its existents.³² In that book I argue against the single-world ontology increasingly advocated by some anthropologists and instead posit a relational ontology of multiple worlds.³³ In doing so I begin from the position set out by the philosopher Andrew J. Mitchell, which he articulates as “there is no ‘world’ in the abstract but always only [populated and articulated ones] of particular situations at particular times, and likewise no encapsulated things, but always these outpouring gestures of relationality.”³⁴ Because this conception of world is so central to this book and the politics of worldbuilding I am trying to critically hermeneutically describe, I will quote at length from *Disappointment* so as to make it as clear as possible for our purposes here:

By *world*, then, I intend a multiplicity of situations structured by nothing other than this very multiplicity,³⁵ and because worlds are structured by these situations that are never contained within one world, these situations constitute a link or a bridge between *multiple worlds*. The fact of multiple worlds and their linkage by situations entails not just that worlds can exist separately, as it were—although, to be clear, they are always potentially connected through the “wormhole” of a situation. But also, importantly,

some of these worlds can partially overlap such that we have “worlds within worlds,”³⁶ as Elizabeth Povinelli has put it echoing the words of Malinowski, which can and do slip into one another, even if temporarily. In this sense, both worlds and the situations that structure and link them can be described as ecstatically relational and emergent multiplicities. Such a notion of world is ripe with sites of potentiality, and thus open for a politics of worldbuilding.³⁷

Thus, in that book and in this one, I intend worlds as a multiplicity of situations ontologically structured by ecstatic relationality. As a result, a politics of worldbuilding begins from a situation (chapter 1) and is aimed at opening possibilities for what worlds can become and how to dwell (be-with openly) within them by means of altering the relationalities between those existents that populate a world.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, in contrast, have famously responded to the condition of war as governance with a call to the multitude to resist by means of what they call *biopolitical production*, or the immanent creation of “social relationships and forms through collaborative forms of labor.”³⁸ But the question must be asked: Why fight the imposition of biopolitical will with more biopolitics? Because it remains within the plane of *bios*, or socially qualified life, does biopolitical production not risk a differential reproduction of the same that I have argued elsewhere is characteristic of reformist politics?³⁹ In contrast to this call for more biopolitical production, I will argue and show throughout this book that today we need to think, conceive, and act beyond biopolitics and begin thinking in terms of an onto-ethical politics of worldbuilding. It is my contention that the anti-drug war movement offers a glimpse of such a politics, by which new forms of social relations are created *because* new worlds and ways of being-with are created. This is recognition that worlds and social life—including labor—as well as, human-nonhuman relations always have a particular onto-ethical grounding, and so a desire to change the former demands the political and intellectual experimental creation of the latter.⁴⁰

As I hope to make clear, a politics of worldbuilding is quite different from what most left-leaning political activity has become today. This difference is best understood in terms of the necessity of offering a political vision and the tactics for realizing this vision in a lasting manner. Although there are certainly some left-leaning movements that have clear and articulated aims with a variety of tactics well suited to meet them, this is clearly not the case for the Left in general and especially so for the most visible of left political activity today. To a great extent this

political activity—perhaps the epitome of which was the horizontalist prefiguration of Occupy and other similar “activity”—has become limited to temporary spectacular and carnivalesque protest, increasingly combined with some form of occupation, that emphasizes process over results, tactics over strategy, intimate locality over abstract globality, identity over conditions, and individualizing simplicity over complexity.⁴¹ This has led to a current state of affairs in which it often seems as though the only aim of political activity is little more than performative rituals for voicing dissatisfaction,⁴² oftentimes articulated in the register of moralism,⁴³ symbolic occupation of buildings or public space, and a temporary prefigurative enactment of a localized process with no long-term strategy for any actual transformation.⁴⁴ Far from actually changing worlds, this prefigurative politics of performative ritual primarily results in a seemingly endless process of network building and the realization of affective solidarity.⁴⁵ Such a “politics,” then, has come “to be about feelings of personal empowerment, masking an absence of strategic gains.”⁴⁶ To paraphrase Lauren Berlant’s assessment of a similar form of political activity: this may feel good but it does very little to change anything.⁴⁷

In contrast, a politics of worldbuilding rejuvenates one of the essential features of political thinking and activity—that is, the articulation of and attempt to realize a political vision.⁴⁸ As Srnicek and Williams rightly put it, such a political vision and a sense of how to realize it is precisely what is missing in contemporary Left politics, and therefore, “articulating and achieving . . . better world[s] [should be] the fundamental task of the left today.”⁴⁹ While there is no doubt that articulating a vision of postcapitalism and postwork worlds is vital, what is missing from Srnicek and William’s political imaginary is the fact that worlds do not change through the mere alteration of relations of production, labor, and exchange. Rather, these alterations must be accompanied by, if not preceded by, alterations in the onto-ethical relationalities that constitute these worlds. If nothing else, then, the primary argument of this book—and what I hope to show the anti-drug war movement is doing through political activity—is that worlds are built first and foremost through the creative and experimental enactment of such relationalities of being-with, which give way to new modes of labor and exchange, and that it is only through these newly acquired habits of being-with that new worlds can stick and endure.⁵⁰

Sticking and enduring is key to a politics of worldbuilding. For the demand to build a new world is a demand to build one that persists, and

if it does not, then it must remain as a resource for yet another new world to come. Imagination is key for this. But imagination must be *enacted*—and not merely discussed and debated—if there is any hope of turning a vision into an actual new world.⁵¹ To the extent that prefigurative politics creates such worlds of duration and potential, then I would consider these examples of worldbuilding. Perhaps the Paris Commune or prerevolution Russian workers' councils (*sovety*) are the best-known examples.⁵² Unfortunately, however, because so much contemporary prefigurative politics has become primarily limited to process,⁵³ as well as temporal and spatial immediacy, it has rendered itself little more than spectacle. That is, its “effectiveness” is primarily limited to a self-referential affective moment that has very little, if any, lasting effect on anything or anyone other than those who participated.

Process is also important to a politics of worldbuilding, but it is not an end in itself. Rather, it is the first step to action that changes worldly conditions: “Freedom of discussion, unity of action,” as Lenin once described democratic centralism.⁵⁴ Thus, a politics of worldbuilding is first and foremost concerned that the effects of political activity endure and are always relationally linked to other globally dispersed situations (this will become clear throughout the book). In order to accomplish this, anti-drug war political agonists have become keen political actors who simultaneously do pragmatic policy-oriented political engagement while also experimentally enacting alternative relationalities, values, and thus, possibilities. Far from a reformist agenda, however, the pragmatic policy engagement is better understood as deploying potentiality time bombs within the “system” that open more sites of potentiality for future experimentations with new worlds. Thus, for example, the policy, legislative, and judicial work that was necessary to open Insite—the first legally sanctioned safe-injection site in North America—in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver was the opening that allowed for the eventual transformation of that neighborhood into an entirely new world (this worldbuilding process and how it is now expanding beyond the Downtown Eastside and across the globe will become clear throughout the book). The consequence, so I hope to show, is that anti-drug war political activity is effectively creating and experimenting with potentialities, out of which a future with radically different forms of sociality and politics can emerge.

The ultimate aim of a politics of worldbuilding, then, is the actual building of new worlds, which include not only infrastructure, values, and social and worldly interactive practices but, first and foremost, the

onto-ethical grounds that allow for such worlds—that is, the relationalities of being-with that onto-ethically sustain new possibilities of community, freedom, and care. A politics of worldbuilding as agonistic experimentation with an otherwise, then, entails *actually enacting* this otherwise so that it begins to *stick and endure*, rather than dissipate as if it never was, as much prefigurative horizontalism tends to do.⁵⁵

AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF POTENTIALITY AND CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS

A politics of worldbuilding is a form of politics that seeks to allow potentiality to emerge as new possibilities for being-with, thus laying the onto-ethical grounds for new worlds. To understand such a politics, we need a theoretical-analytic that is attuned to this link between potentiality and possibility. One such theoretical-analytic, and the one that I take up in this book, is what I call *critical hermeneutics*, which is one approach to an anthropology of potentiality. An anthropology of potentiality differs in significant ways from anthropology as a field-work-based science focused on the descriptive analysis of the actual.⁵⁶ If the discipline has become one that primarily focuses upon the thick empirical description of that which is, then an anthropology of potentiality is perhaps best understood as a hermeneutics of the emerging contours of a not-yet.⁵⁷

In this sense, an anthropology of potentiality is not very different from how some have recently described a newly developing philosophical anthropology. For example, the anthropologist Michael Jackson has described the contemporary challenge of philosophical anthropology in terms of resisting the intellectual reproduction of what already exists and instead, allow our thinking to point beyond itself.⁵⁸ Perhaps, in this sense, following Vincent Crapanzano,⁵⁹ we could consider philosophical anthropology as the analysis of imaginative horizons. Similarly, Jonathan Lear describes philosophical anthropology as an inquiry into possibilities.⁶⁰ In contrast to empirical studies of the actual that might ask questions such as “what historical trajectories or cultural order have brought such and such about and rendered it meaningful,” Lear’s philosophical anthropology asks, “What are the conditions of its being possible?” or “What would it be?” for such a possibility to have been the case. For philosophers such as Thomas Schwarz Wentzer and Rasmus Dyring—both of whom have collaborated closely with some anthropologists—these questions are best taken up by considering the

responsivity and therefore the openness of the human condition.⁶¹ Similar to these, an anthropology of potentiality seeks to disclose the conditions of the not-yet by hermeneutically considering enactments of an incipient otherwise in the here and now of everyday life. As a result, fieldwork and other forms of empirical research remain important to an anthropology of potentiality.⁶² But as will become clear throughout this book, the importance of these methods is not that they provide the “data” for a quasipositivist “thick description” of ordinary life but rather that they offer an entrée into the hermeneutic processes already underway within various worlds, from which critical hermeneutic analysis can begin.

Such an approach can be understood as similar to other recent anthropological work that has sought to go beyond the actual in its consideration of the incipient not-yet. I am thinking here, for example, of the work of Robert Desjarlais on image in relation to perception, memory, and fantasy;⁶³ or Cheryl Mattingly on the possibilities invoked through moral striving and Jason Throop on the in-betweenness of moods;⁶⁴ or Ghassan Hage on alter-politics and Elizabeth Povinelli on the otherwise and more recently on geontologies;⁶⁵ or Anand Pandian on speculative anthropology and Stuart McLean on fictionalizing anthropology.⁶⁶ Each of them in their own way have acknowledged the necessity, as Joel Robbins has put it, “to be attentive to the way people orientate to and act in a world that outstrips the one most concretely present to them.”⁶⁷ Such attentiveness, I would argue, is precisely what is needed for those who wish to respond to recent calls both within and outside anthropology for new and creative attempts to 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.⁶⁸ A key component of this attentiveness and engagement, I would argue, and one that with few exceptions has not (yet) been embraced by anthropology,⁶⁹ is concept creation and reconceptualization. As will become clear, concept creation and reconceptualization are central to critical hermeneutics.

So, then, what is critical hermeneutics? An adequate answer to such a question, I suggest, can only be found through a close reading of this book, in combination with my previous, more theoretically focused book *Disappointment: Toward a Critical Hermeneutics of Worldbuilding*. But in short, a critical hermeneutics can be understood as at one and the same time an ungrounding and an opening. Thus, the critical ungrounding aspect can be considered in light of Foucault’s description

of critique as “seeing on what type of assumptions, or familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based . . . uncovering that thought and trying to change it.”⁷⁰ Put another way, the critical component of critical hermeneutics is an analytically self-aware process of deconstructing the a priori that limits being and becoming to a narrow range of possibilities, or what we might alternatively call the a priori that grounds normalization. The hermeneutic aspect of critical hermeneutics, on the other hand, is a process of opening possibilities by disclosing the potentialities that always already have been but that have been foreclosed by the limiting assumptions of the a priori. Here we see how potentiality and possibility are always linked and that hermeneutics is the process of clearing and activating, as it were, this linkage. For on the one hand, potentiality can be understood as the always-already-have-been-possibility that is not-yet. Hermeneutics, on the other hand, is that which ushers potential into the possible, whether we consider hermeneutics as a theoretical-analytic or as an ontological condition.

This is so because a fundamental assumption of hermeneutics is that existence—human and otherwise—is always ahead of itself and as such is constantly engaged in an existentially responsive process of becoming in the attempt to catch up with that which it never is,⁷¹ a process that creates gaps of being that can never be filled.⁷² As such, hermeneutics as a theoretical-analytic understands being as an onto-hermeneutic process of becoming. Seeking to tap into, as it were, this flow of onto-hermeneutic becoming, critical hermeneutics as a theoretical-analytic is best described as disclosing, tracing, and describing the contours of the not-yet. As such, critical hermeneutics as an anthropology of potentiality does not simply take fieldwork “data” as that complicated empirical stuff that must be made sense of. But rather it asks, for example: What potential for becoming is trying to be enacted? Or, what other possibilities of being are pointed toward? In doing so, critical hermeneutics not only discloses the normalizing limits of ordinary everyday existence but, more importantly, participates in the opening of new possibilities for thinking, saying, doing, or being. Critical hermeneutics, then, is a theoretical-analytic of the otherwise.⁷³

In the rest of this book, therefore, I begin with a basic starting assumption of which I am (critically) aware and which can be articulated as the following: if the kind of political activity done by the anti-drug war movement attempts to allow potentialities to emerge as new possible modalities of being-with one another in new worlds, then an

anthropology of potentiality can participate in this emergence, and critical hermeneutics would be one, but certainly not the only, way of doing so. This book, then, is best *not* read as an ethnographic thick description of a social movement but rather as a critical hermeneutics as an anthropology of potentiality.⁷⁴

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE BOOK

What are these political agonists doing, and what can they teach us as intellectuals and as politically concerned beings? That is to ask: What potential are these agonists ushering into possibilities? Furthermore, what can I do as an intellectual to participate in their worldbuilding activity? Several years ago I was lucky enough to be welcomed by a number of anti-drug war agonists around the globe to observe and participate in their political and everyday activity. Many of them were already quite used to having researchers around and, frankly, had grown a bit wary of them. As I was told on more than one occasion, “we have researchers here all the time but they usually just tell us what we already know.” From the beginning, however, I was clear that I have no interest in telling them or anyone else what they already know they are doing. Rather, my concern is what they are trying to do; what possibilities they are trying to bring into being.⁷⁵ That is, I told them that I am interested in the ways in which their political and everyday ethical activity opens new possibilities for being and acting together and, as such, may provide a model for a new form of politics and ethics in our time. This intrigued them. This, they wanted to hear. And this is what I hope to have done in what follows.

I could have written this book as yet another account of a rights-based social movement looking to make reformist legislative change. To write such a book, however, would be to break my collaborative promise of disclosively articulating the potentialities this political movement is trying to turn into possibilities. Thus, by critically hermeneutically *thinking with* the anti-drug war movement, in this book I disclose and articulate three interrelated but analytically separable interventions that I contend these agonists are already living out, even if some of them may not yet be aware of this fact and most certainly would not articulate as I do here.⁷⁶ What I hope becomes clear is that these three interventions are not only important for understanding what it is the anti-drug war movement is trying to do through political and ethical activity but, perhaps more importantly for our purposes, how they point us

toward what both an anthropology of potentiality and a politics of worldbuilding could become.

Widely Diffused Complexity

The first intervention is in terms of addressing the widely diffused complex phenomena that constitute our contemporary condition (chapter 1 and throughout). Intellectually, this condition demands that we question just how it is that we can conceive of, articulate, and study widely diffused and nontotalizable complex phenomena that can potentially emerge at any time and at any point on the globe. Anthropologists are already excellent at analyzing the complicated intricacies of locality. But complexity is not complicated intricacy. Given enough time and information, complications can be figured out. Complexity, in contrast, can never be fully grasped since the nonlinearity of its dynamics resists totality, predictable causal relations, stability of being, and spatial and temporal contiguity and limitation.⁷⁷ All of this combined with the assemblic nature of complex phenomena makes them ripe with potential. In order to remain relevant in an increasingly complex global condition, anthropology would do well to begin to develop new methods and conceptual apparatuses for the study and analysis of these widely diffused complex phenomena, part of which would entail tracing the contours of their potential not-yet. Throughout this book I hope to have contributed to this in some small way by showing how such concepts as *situation*, *assemblic ethnography*, *hermeneutics*, *community of those without community*, and *attunement* can begin to help us conceptualize a contemporary condition constituted by widely diffused complex phenomena ripe with potential.

Comprehending, analyzing, and addressing globally diffused complexity is also necessary for any political activity today that expects to have actual transformative effects on our worlds.⁷⁸ The simplification of global complexity by the contemporary “folk politics” of the Left, through its emphasis on temporal, spatial, and conceptual immediacy, is in large part responsible for the Left’s recent failure to bring about any large-scale transformation and even to imagine what a possible alternative future might be like.⁷⁹ As Srnicek and Williams argue,⁸⁰ the Left today not only needs a new political imaginary or vision but must accept, comprehend, and learn to address the complexity of our global condition for it to come about. It is my contention that this is precisely what the anti-drug war movement has done, and this, at least in part,

accounts for the successes those involved have so far realized in changing the worlds in which they are attempting to dwell. Recognizing and politically addressing this widely diffused complexity, then, is one essential achievement of the anti-drug war movement that the political Left in general could learn from.

Concept Creation and Reconceptualization

The second intervention I seek to make concerns the rethinking of concepts, most particularly those ethical concepts that have political implications. Over the course of the last decade or so, anthropology has gone through a so-called ethical turn, by which anthropologists have increasingly and explicitly taken up ethics and morality as objects of research and theorization.⁸¹ Unfortunately, however, much of this work has done very little to actually rethink morality, ethics, and their concepts. Instead, for the most part, anthropologists of moralities and ethics have tended, for lack of a better way of putting it, to socialize already well-established traditional Western moral and ethical concepts. As I have argued elsewhere,⁸² the ordinary ethics approach is perhaps the most obvious example of this, but no matter where one looks these days, it is not very difficult to find an anthropologist writing about such things as the good, the right, or concerns with dignity. It is as if we already know what morality and ethics are, what motivations and aims are related to them, and more or less how these are done, so the task of the anthropologist has primarily become to show how all of this plays out in localized social relationships. If an anthropologist writing about divination, for example, interpreted this phenomenon utilizing concepts from the Catholic catechism or biomedical therapeutics, most would no doubt simply find this to be bad scholarship, if not inappropriate. Yet for some reason, it has become perfectly acceptable, for example, to write about our informants in terms of doing “what they think right or good” and “act[ing] largely from a sense of their own dignity.”⁸³ This general acceptance I find interesting, and we might consider its relationship to a broader moralism that seems to have become prevalent within the discipline, most obviously so with an overwhelming concern with suffering while simultaneously turning a blind eye to the foundations of this concern within political liberalism.⁸⁴

In contrast, much of my previous work has sought to rethink morality, ethics, and their concepts by recursively engaging my ethnographic work with both moral philosophy and post-Heideggerian continental

philosophy so as to reconceive moral and ethical motivations, processes, and aims in terms of relationalities and thus to move beyond thinking and being in terms of the qualified behavior of good and evil individuals.⁸⁵ In this book I continue this project through an explicit reconceptualization of being-with in a community of whoever arrives (chapter 3), freedom as the openness of letting-be (chapter 4), and care as attunement and hospitality (chapter 5) and do so by showing that these new ways of being-in-the-world emerge through the political activity of the anti-drug war movement.

As I argue throughout, transformative political activity is onto-ethical activity, and this becomes clear in the ways in which through explicit political activity new worlds emerge through the very process of this acting. Therefore, a key part of the argument I will make is that in a global condition of war as governance that is primarily fought on the two fronts of normalization and dehumanization, a central aspect of the counterattack is the invention and enactment of new ethical ways of being-with that can provide the onto-ethical grounds for actually transforming worlds, and not only prefiguratively. My contribution to this counterattack is the intellectual articulation of this reconceptualization of the onto-ethical grounding of these new worlds.

Otherwise

The third intervention I will make concerns the question of the otherwise. A good deal of what I will show throughout this book is the slow emergence of an otherwise. In this global condition of war as governance, thinking through and ethnographically showing how an otherwise emerges through sustained and organized political activity with a vision are crucial tasks both intellectually and politically. Since it has become abundantly clear that the horizontalism of the contemporary Left is incapable of making any actual and lasting political impact beyond personal empowerment, it is now a political and existential imperative to begin to imagine and do political activity that eschews the spectacular for the nitty-gritty of the long-term struggle of worldbuilding. The difficulties arise, however, when we realize that the otherwise of new worlds is not simply “measured” by change or transformation. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, the otherwise is not merely the fact that the dog outside has stopped barking or, in terms closer to this book,⁸⁶ that populations are no longer incarcerated at extraordinary rates. Indeed, oftentimes the otherwise may not at first even be empirically

observable. It is, again as Agamben puts it, in the “tiny displacements” of the sense and limits of things that the otherwise begins to emerge.⁸⁷ This is why political activity must always be sustained over the long term. For “tiny displacements” do not occur and stick through spectacle or consensus but rather only through the sustained and grueling excavation of possibilities out of the seemingly impossible. This is the kind of onto-ethical-political activity I will consider and show throughout this book.

And here we return to the anthropology of potentiality. In a contemporary intellectual context in which academics are increasingly asking how they can contribute to the becoming of an otherwise, this book’s response is that our best bet is to do what intellectuals have traditionally always done: think, imagine, creatively experiment, and articulate the emergence of possibilities along with the worlds we find ourselves in. The great privilege of being an anthropologist is that we, more than most other academics, begin from worlds that we have been invited into. This hospitality, I suggest, is more than an invitation to record the happenings of everyday life or to make sense of their complicated intricacies. Rather, perhaps it is time to begin to understand these as invitations to enter the *thresholds* of possibilities within these worlds. In doing so, we may be able to understand these worlds better or perhaps even make a political contribution to the otherwise of those worlds. But ultimately and more importantly, we might be able to make a contribution to the ongoing openness of existence as such. This book is an attempt to do just this.