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[ZERO ANTHROPOLOGY](#)

Turning and turning in the widening gyre | The falcon cannot hear the falconer | Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold | Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world | The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere | The ceremony of innocence is drowned | The best lack all conviction, while the worst | Are full of passionate intensity. — W.B. Yeats, The Second Coming

On Eritrea: Cross-Talk Without Dialogue

Posted on September 20, 2014 by [Maximilian Forte](#)

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What follows immediately below is a letter sent to me via email today. Beneath that is my response.

Academic Research, Intelligence Gathering, and Character Assassination: Is It the Same Everywhere?

We are among an international group of researchers – social scientists, historians, legal scholars and journalists – with decades of experience working on the Horn of Africa country of Eritrea and/or the Eritrean diaspora. We are citizens and/or residents of many countries: Eritrea, Canada, the US, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway, Italy, Germany, and the UK. While our perspectives and orientations differ, our research foci have largely converged around the critical interpretation of patterns of political intolerance precipitated by a militarized, authoritarian regime in power since 1991. Because of these patterns of intolerance we have all been targeted to varying degrees by the regime and its supporters – and sometimes its opponents as well. Some of us have been threatened physically and/or prevented from returning to Eritrea. Many of us have endured repeated attacks on our personal and professional integrity and efforts to discredit our research findings by suggesting that we are working as agents of foreign governments and/or intelligence agencies. In some cases information about our backgrounds and funding sources has been misrepresented to support conspiracy theories about our “real” motives or identities. Such

dynamics are not unusual. In countries around the world – especially highly militarized ones, whether of the left, right, or neoliberal variety – researchers have faced similar efforts to discredit, silence, intimidate and curtail freedom of thought, information, and conscience.

Recently we were named in a “controversy” promoted on the website/blog and Facebook page called Zero Anthropology (<http://zeroanthropology.net> (<http://zeroanthropology.net/>)). The “controversy,” as it was named by Zero Anthropology’s principal author, Dr. Maximilian Forte, refers to an article by Ms. Sophia Tesfamariam, a vocal Eritrean-American supporter of the regime. In the article titled “ERITREA: The Modern Day Carpetbaggers and Scalawags – Final” (<https://www.facebook.com/zeroanthropology/posts/769446439779607> (<https://www.facebook.com/zeroanthropology/posts/769446439779607>)).

Tesfamariam collectively characterizes our research, professional publications, conference activity, and public outreach or advocacy work as constituting an effort to “sensitize” the American and European public so that any actions of their governments [against Eritrea] will then be easily accepted.” She lists a decontextualized series of publications we have produced and venues where we have spoken, as well as academic agencies that have funded our work, as “evidence” of our corruption. She equates our empirical findings and the advocacy work some of us have done on behalf of or in collaboration with Eritrean refugees and human rights activists as colluding with interventionist or opposition efforts to destabilize and overthrow the regime in Eritrea. Much of the information she provides is inaccurate or unsubstantiated and she dismisses the validity of our scholarship without engaging its substance.

Tesfamariam’s article, the derisive tone it uses, and the unsubstantiated charges it levels is the latest in a long tradition of character assassination attempts. For decades, similar ad-hominem attacks on researchers and on Eritreans who critique the regime have been launched by regime supporters, including Ms. Tesfamariam. Over the years many of us have tried to correct these inaccuracies and address these accusations by engaging critics in productive dialogue and debate. With few exceptions we have discovered that the use of logic and reason cannot effectively counter the irrationality and conspiracy-theory orientations of these “debates.”

Rooted in such experience and context, we do not see Tesfamariam’s article as constituting “a controversy.” Nor will we here address point by point the many inaccuracies and mischaracterizations she levels at us collectively and individually. Several of us have engaged the substance of similar arguments made by Ms. Tesfamariam and by other regime supporters in our published work and at various conferences and venues because these reflect dominant patterns in much of Eritrean political discourse (particularly in the diaspora). Attempting to correct her misinformation invites further abuse. Character assassination stifles debate under the guise of provoking it. We would welcome a serious critique of our work which would require engaging

with the ideas and arguments we advance and the methods and data we use to support them. A debate of that kind, unlike personal attacks, would actually have the possibility of contributing to the understanding of Eritrean politics, as well as promoting the understanding of social science theories and methods.

We are therefore disturbed that Dr. Forte and Zero Anthropology would link to and endorse Tesfamariam's potentially libelous allegations against a large group of fellow researchers on an online public forum without first examining the context of research on Eritrea and/or contacting any of us. What we find controversial is how Forte facilitated and participated in a very serious attack on his colleagues. His link to Tesfamariam's article on Zero Anthropology's Facebook page is prefaced with the following statement: "This article outlines and denounces the work of US anthropologists in Eritrea in US-funded campaigns backing political opposition in the country. The author of the piece is a prominent Eritrean American activist. Those involved in the AAA [American Anthropological Association] should have a close look and perhaps consider further action." And in his related article on Zero Anthropology, titled "Militarization: It's All the Same, Everywhere. Or Is It?" he implies that researchers on Eritrea do not critically reflect on dynamics of militarization in countries other than "tiny little Eritrea all the way across in Africa." Had he been familiar with our work or knew any one of us personally or professionally, we doubt he would have made such statements.

While it is true that some of us have interfaced with international human rights organizations, stated positions on sanctions and arms embargoes on Eritrea from a critical human rights perspective, or have engaged with officials in various governments about the problems in Eritrea that produce high numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, these are matters of our own conscience and we each take nuanced positions rooted in careful research and years of understanding of the Eritrean situation. Scholars who study Eritrea indeed disagree among ourselves about the merits of these positions and whether these are the best methods for applying our empirical knowledge. Many of us explicitly address these tensions in our work. And while some of us have received research funding from private academic foundations and federally-funded sources, there is a difference between social science funding and that related to national security objectives (e.g. the National Science Foundation is not the Department of Defense). Our activities or orientations do not equate to intelligence gathering, promotion of militarized interventions in Eritrea, or to "US-funded campaigns backing political opposition in the country." These are gross misinterpretations that Forte has promoted in a most irresponsible manner.

We understand from the content of Dr. Forte's work that he is deeply opposed on political, ethical and moral grounds to the use of anthropological and other academic knowledge in the context of interventionism, militarism, and covert intelligence gathering. We respect and appreciate this position. Some of us agree wholeheartedly with him and this same position has informed our own

critiques of patterns of political repression and militarization in Eritrea and in the countries where Eritreans reside. We are gravely disturbed that a scholar of Forte's standing rushed to endorse Tesfamariam's allegations and helped manufacture a public controversy that is potentially damaging to our professional and personal lives and stifles effective dialogue. We are equally troubled that he responded to efforts by one of us to address this "controversy" on the Facebook page of Zero Anthropology with statements such as the following: "Why not write honestly, and engage in full disclosure of your own services to Western governments that have targeted Eritrea with sanctions?" and "No wonder then that so many Africans hate us...it is with ample justification, thanks to people like you." Such statements do not constitute the "debate" Forte has claimed he is inviting. They constitute abusive speech and unprofessional conduct.

It may have been Tesfamariam's aim to silence, discredit, and defame scholars of Eritrea. We do not know if that was also Forte's aim. However, as a result of his promotion of Tesfamariam's piece and this "controversy," several of us have received renewed threats and further abusive messages by regime supporters. We have noted with consternation that the "controversy" is being picked up on various websites and Twitter feeds, highlighting why scholars who use the internet to promote "debate" or air "controversy" must observe careful standards of professional and ethical conduct. We have every reason to believe threats will continue against us for some time.

To reiterate, the controversy here is not that some people find critical scholarship on Eritrea objectionable, but that an otherwise critical scholar like Forte would carelessly promote and publicize ungrounded, personal attacks on fellow researchers. If anything, this episode illustrates the truth of Albert Camus' observation that "Intelligence in chains loses in lucidity what it gains in intensity." We hope that this "controversy" can be re-contextualized for what it reveals about how regimes of power can hijack discourses of human rights and social justice, confusing otherwise intelligent individuals regardless of academic credentials.

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Reflecting on Silences and Silencing

The signatories above initially complained that they had no opportunity to respond to what was Sophia Tesfarmariam's article on western anthropologists and Eritrea (<http://stesfamariam.com/2014/09/13/eritrea-the-carpetbaggers-and-scalawags-final/>), before it was published. Clearly this would have been beyond my control: I did not author the article, I did not publish it, I did not reproduce it, I did not host it, and I cannot dictate to another site what it must do. However, in the interest of transparency, I did offer to the above signatories a chance to respond, on my website (since they seem to have none of their own)—an offer I never presented to Sophia Tesfamariam. I did this with the erroneous assumption that the signatories above would take this opportunity to clear the air about their research, and address themselves directly to the Eritreans concerned. Instead, much of their letter of denunciation is curiously directed squarely at me. When Eritreans are rightly agitated and understandably suspicious in a geopolitical context that is hostile to their state, then this was probably not the wisest choice of response. I am not sure if they have validated or denied the entirety of the substance of the accusations against them.

First let me clarify what I did say, and what I did do, and why. Then let me address what the critics above think I said, followed by how they make light of what one of their own has said. Finally, I will comment on what remains to be done, by others perhaps, as with this I will now cease to act as a conduit or provide a platform, for either side.

To begin with, as mentioned above Sophia Tesfarmariam published this article (<http://stesfamariam.com/2014/09/13/eritrea-the-carpetbaggers-and-scalawags-final/>), and then forwarded it (<https://twitter.com/stesfamariam/status/510789846546542592>) to me specifically, in a public forum. I thought the article, given the severity of the accusations and allegations presented, required much more in the way of substantiation, documentation, and careful analysis. That does not mean the article is just “wrong,” just that it is not yet convincing enough, at least by my standards. However, would I simply ignore it?

At this point, one could choose to do one of a number of things: One would be to stay absolutely silent, and not mention to anyone that there is [this article](http://stesfamariam.com/2014/09/13/eritrea-the-carpetbaggers-and-scalawags-final/) (<http://stesfamariam.com/2014/09/13/eritrea-the-carpetbaggers-and-scalawags-final/>) on the Internet that condemns the work of anthropologists. I gather from the letter above that this is what the signatories wish I had done. That, of course, would not address the fact that the article does indeed exist.

The other option was to give this a hearing. I thought that the accusations were too important, alarming, and critical, and rather than circle the academic wagons like the signatories above are doing, and block out the noisy drumming of angry natives, I decided to pay attention to the article and I asked others to do the same. This is what the signatories above call “endorsing” the article and helping to “manufacture” a “controversy”. Indeed, they repeatedly put quotes around the word *controversy*, as if it is somehow problematic or questionable to think of such public accusations—with some of the same stakes involved that they themselves point to (including even questions of physical security)—as being anything other than controversial. Rather than say there is no controversy at all, they would instead prefer to mislead readers into thinking that the entirety of the controversy is this Max Forte person, and only secondarily, an Eritrean “regime defender”. Eritrea almost vanishes from view mid-way through the letter.

How did I present Sophia Tesfamariam’s article to possible readers? With these words:

“This article outlines and denounces the work of US anthropologists in Eritrea in US-funded campaigns backing political opposition in the country. The author of the piece is a prominent Eritrean American activist. Those involved in the AAA should have a close look and perhaps consider further action.”

Since the signatories above seem to be having some difficulty in dealing with the content and intent of this statement, let’s look closely. First, yes there is in fact an article that outlines and denounces the work of US anthropologists in Eritrea, in what the author of the article sees as part of US-funded campaigns backing political opposition in the country. I am merely stating what the article is about—whether you, as a reader, accept the premises, hypotheses or evidence in the article, is left up to your judgment (and keep in mind the response in the letter above). Second, the author is indeed a prominent Eritrean American activist, as any web search will surely indicate. The third part is the least clear and the most open to misinterpretation: I am not an American anthropologist, nor a member of the AAA, but I do know that a number of individuals and committees try to maintain active oversight on any conflicts involving research practice. And what kind of further action *might* they consider? Anything from none, to urging that the allegations are countered with better information, to asking their colleagues questions about their research. Indeed, it is at the higher levels of the AAA that one may hear speakers argue that the solution to bad speech is not censorship, but better speech. Do they mean it?

Let me also state the obvious: I am not only the furthest thing from an expert on Eritrea that one could ever find, having studied little and written nothing about a country to which I have never been, I do not know enough about any of the parties to make judgments about their characters. I have never heard of the persons who signed the letter above, nor had I ever seen their names until Sophia Tesfamariam's article came out. There could thus be little in the way of a personal motive in attacking them—and as actual readers of Zero Anthropology would know, I never shy away from relentless, direct criticisms, elaborated at length, not just across one or two lines, but across one or two hundred essays, or over a period of years—exactly when I feel it is justified to do so. On this issue, I have written not a single article to date, apart from what I am writing now. Indeed, what I have said amounts to little more than a few sentences.

Therefore, to be absolutely clear: I have not accused, nor am I accusing any of the signatories above of anything, because I simply do not know anything about them. I have not made up my mind about anything concerning this subject.

In addition, given the above signatories' ostensible concern with matters of professional decorum, then why do they so lightly treat David Bozzini's sneering accusations and mocking derision of readers on [ZA's Facebook link](https://www.facebook.com/zeroanthropology/posts/769446439779607) (<https://www.facebook.com/zeroanthropology/posts/769446439779607>) to Tesfamariam's article? Do they take the standards of their profession seriously? If so, then why back someone whose public utterances in this case were far from any professional courtesy? Are they then, by the same logic of their letter above, endorsing him when he calls me a "regime defender," when I do not even know enough about Eritrea's "regime" to know what I should be defending?

There is an old saying, "if you throw a rock into a pack of dogs, the one that barks is the one that got hit". Enter David Bozzini who, rather than correct wrong information, proceeds to attack the *messenger of the messenger*. If matters have been made substantially worse for Bozzini, who apparently initiated the rounds of emails that produced the letter above, then it is almost entirely of his own doing. What the authors above would prefer to do, however, is something unpardonable: to cherry-pick certain words and phrases of mine and lift them out of context. My [first response](https://www.facebook.com/zeroanthropology/posts/769446439779607?reply_comment_id=769922366398681&total_comments=15) (https://www.facebook.com/zeroanthropology/posts/769446439779607?reply_comment_id=769922366398681&total_comments=15) to Bozzini challenged his abominable responses to another reader, who was abundantly turned off by his aggression and refused to return to the discussion. My [second response](https://www.facebook.com/zeroanthropology/posts/769446439779607?reply_comment_id=770018216389096&total_comments=15) (https://www.facebook.com/zeroanthropology/posts/769446439779607?reply_comment_id=770018216389096&total_comments=15) to Bozzini was much sterner, provoked by his incessant resort to ad hominem arguments, deflection, and avoidance of questions—and yet I, despite the wording produced in annoyance, stand by that comment. I cannot retract facts: Bozzini only criticizes militarization when it comes to Eritrea, and I stand by

my criticism of that logic (<http://zeroanthropology.net/2014/09/14/militarization-its-all-the-same-everywhere-or-is-it/>) for the gaze it deliberately averts when it comes to our much greater, far worse militarization. That there was at least some Eritrean outrage with his comments is clearly evidenced (https://www.facebook.com/zeroanthropology/posts/769446439779607?reply_comment_id=770018216389096&total_comments=15) for all to see, at one point involving even an ambassador for Eritrea. If some Eritreans were suspicious of Bozzini, I doubt he did anything to placate them.

Finally, I can put myself in the same shoes as the signatories above, which is not difficult to do. If there should be an anthropologist out there, now or in the future, who decides to point—even *very* approvingly—toward an article by Trinidad’s indigenous Caribs with whom I worked for years, in which they publicly denounce me, then I ask myself how I would approach this. Would I lose as much as a second even addressing that other anthropologist? I would be amazed if I would so easily misplace my priorities. Instead, I would proceed immediately to give a public accounting that directly responds to each and every one of their criticisms and fears, what lies between the criticisms, and what lies beyond them. These are the people in the country where I did my work—if they have something to say, I need to deal with it tactfully, diplomatically, with phenomenal sensitivity, and not just because my personal reputation is at stake, and not just because an entire way of producing knowledge is at risk, but because they were my hosts and they deserve immense respect and gratitude, no matter what they think of me.

Yet none of the above signatories seems to be walking in such shoes after all, and their response is almost precisely what it should not have been. It would not be surprising if they thus continued to fan the flames of suspicion. When they write that, “we have discovered that the use of logic and reason cannot effectively counter the irrationality and conspiracy-theory orientations of these ‘debates,’” then this is precisely the kind of culturally loaded language they should avoid because it has ethnocentric undertones. Some will see their statement as suggesting that their Eritrean critics lack logic and reason, and only produce conspiracy theories, in their phony so-called debates. And no, it is nowhere near adequate to allude to past, alleged responses to unspecified accusations, given in private venues or in pages held behind pay walls. These accusations have now been made in public, so your answers have to be public and very detailed, so as to leave no shade of doubt. This was not done, and it is extremely disappointing to not only witness this failure to grapple with profound ethical and political issues, but to make a supposed colleague bear the brunt for allegedly manufacturing some purportedly non-existent controversy (yet one they claim to have responded to before, in private).

But could I have done a better job? Could I have worded matters more carefully? Absolutely: that is always the case, even with writing that is the product of ten stages of revision, let alone a comment quickly dashed off to Facebook. Do I regret anything? Of course, it is impossible to come

out of this situation without regrets: greatly regretting matters if Tesfamariam's allegations are ever proven right; regretting if they are not proven right (for never deserving a hearing); regretting what academics say, what they do not say, and so forth. There can only be regrets.

What I do not regret is this, however: having been over-exposed to western patterns, logics, and practices of ceaseless demonization of all those who take a different path in the world, or who oppose the west in some way, I have become self-disciplined in constantly counteracting the grossly imbalanced public discourse (whether it is or warranted or not). I will thus always be disposed to give a hearing to voices such as Sophia Tesfarmariam's. This is an important role, and in our culture it is one that is more necessary than ever.

If I decided to facilitate the response of the signatories above, it was not out of a sense of duty to them or to anyone, apart from the very confused reader. Having said that, no matter how much more some on any side of this may wish to continue propelling the debate, from this point forwards the parties in question will have to find (if so inclined) their own ways and means of addressing each other directly.

Tagged: *american anthropological association, conspiracy theories, David Bozzini, demonization, Eritrea, ethics, ETHNOGRAPHY, professionalism, regime change, Sophia Tesfamariam*

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