COMMENTARY

Essay

The Interlocutor Slot: Citing, Crediting, Cotheorizing, and the Problem of Ethnographic Expertise

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> "What is called studying up is really 'studying sideways,' that is, studying people—like scientists, journalists, and Hollywood filmmakers—who in many ways are really not much different from anthropologists and our fellow academics more generally"
> —Sherry Ortner (2010, 213)

> "I have an anthropology joke, well actually it's my interlocutors' joke, but I'll take the credit."
> —@artisanalanthro

I was searching my name on Twitter, as one does, and I came across a live tweet from a talk I gave a few years back on my research with queer left activists and the intellectual work of activist theorizing. My lecture was about "making suffering visible," from the part of my book where I consider the relevance of the critique of "suffering slot" anthropology (Robbins 2013) for the dilemma facing the radical queer and trans activist organizations with which I worked: how to represent ("make visible") the plight of their queer and trans constituencies (to raise awareness and for funders) while knowing full well that (more) representation does not necessarily lead to political change or transformation.

The tweet (which I really appreciated, as I am not a person who is regularly live tweeted!) read: "Paradox: year Laverne Cox was on cover of Time, highest # of trans women of color homicides -Margot Weiss."

As you may know, the line of thought in this tweet does not belong to or originate with me: it is, rather famously—at least in some circuits—Tourmaline's. Tourmaline is an activist, filmmaker, and public intellectual who has long worked on visibility politics in Black trans communities. A former activist with the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Critical Resistance, and Queers for Economic Justice, she is now perhaps best known for her films documenting trans women's activism and history, based on her own archival research: *STAR People Are Beautiful People* (2009), on Sylvia Rivera and Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR); *The Personal Things* (2016), about Miss Major Griffin-Gracy; *Atlantic Is a Sea of Bones* (2017), on Egyptt LaBejia; *Happy Birthday, Marsha!* (2018), about Marsha P. Johnson; and *Salacia* (2019), which takes up Mary Jones, a Black trans sex worker who lived in Seneca Village in the 1830s. Tourmaline is a public intellectual with academic bona fides: *Salacia* is now in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection; her coedited volume, with Eric A. Stanley and Johanna Burton, *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, was published by MIT Press in 2017; and she was the 2016–2018 activist-in-residence at the Barnard Center for Research on Women. Indeed, she is famous beyond academia as well: Tourmaline was named one of *Time Magazine*'s "100 Most Influential People" in 2020.

Back in 2016, when I gave this lecture, Tourmaline was not (yet) so famous. Still, I did at the time properly attribute Tourmaline's insight. Here is what I read that day:

> When she speaks about critical trans politics, Tourmaline[1] often tells the audience that we can't point to increased visibility—like Laverne Cox on the cover of *Time Magazine*—as a sign of political change: that year, 2014, also "had the highest documented homicide rate against trans women of color ever." Along with others critical of visibility politics, Tourmaline draws our attention to the problem of hypervisibility: the way trans people of color live not so much invisibly as over-exposed, with, as she says, a "target on their back."

So why was I credited with this insight, and not Tourmaline?

In this speculative commentary, I take this tweet as an opening into a problem I am thinking through, which has to do with the challenge of thinking about interlocutors as cotheorists, the forms that we use to demarcate what counts as expert knowledge, and the links and distinctions between the politics of citation and that of acknowledgment.

My gambit is that my live tweeter was on to something, cued to hear Tourmaline as (only) an interlocutor and not a theorist or intellectual by disciplinary frameworks that appeared in my paper that day—even as they are not, I don't think, exclusive to me. I am specifically interested in whether there are normative forms of writing—ways we write our interlocuters and ways we write our theory—that reproduce an extractive mode of knowledge production by refusing to acknowledge our interlocutors as cotheorizers, even (ironically) when this is precisely what we are writing against. I want to be clear that I am not so much interested in this particular tweet but rather take it as an occasion to explore current disciplinary dilemmas as we try to think toward a decolonizing anthropology (at least in our more progressive

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fringes).[2] A decolonial anthropology, as Jafari S. Allen and Ryan Cecil Jobson (2016, 133) write, might trouble "anthropology as both a mode of knowledge production and an assembly of knowledge producers. It challenges us to consider how anthropology has maintained itself as a closed system of scholarly inquiry that legitimates its own procedures of investigation as a means of subjecting the native Other to its North Atlantic theoretics." So in what follows, I engage in a little close reading, even over-reading, of my talk that day to speculate on some of the ways this reproduction takes shape.

When I revisited that lecture, I noticed that the citation under consideration came directly after a paragraph where I described my fieldwork, the paragraph where I "set the scene" for the vignettes, conversations, and anecdotes that would follow. This situated what I was about to share as something I had learned "in the field." In this paper, I told a story from the Class Institute workshop at the LGBTQ conference "Creating Change" and shared an insight from an interlocutor I called "Karen": "Karen's comment asks us to consider: to whom are we 'making visible' precarious lives? Tourmaline, who has worked with Queers for Economic Justice (QEJ) since almost the beginning, told me . . ." Looking back on this paragraph, I reread it as an establishing scene, one that establishes ethnographic authority by returning to older forms of "being there" that, I think, are still normative in anthropological writing, even as we can rehearse our critiques of them. And so, in part through this ethnographic convention, Tourmaline was already located in the "interlocutor slot" when I cited her—in the category of people whose insights and words (located "in the field," even when the "there" is "here") are fodder for further scholarly analysis.[3] And this is the case even as I was intentional about avoiding the more typical ethnographic move of turning to a scholar in order to explain (or, perhaps, authorize) the importance or meaning of activists' ideas.

This exploration left me wondering what other kinds of writing conventions reproduce disciplinary hierarchies, dividing the world into "interlocutors" (people who tell us things that then become *ours*—our insights, our knowledge to share) and "scholars," experts whose knowledge remains theirs through attribution?

For instance, I noticed that I call scholars by last name, and interlocutors by first. In that part of the paper, I cite by name Joel Robbins, Sherry Ortner, the Williams Institute, Jay, Queers for Economic Justice, Karen, Tourmaline, Eric Stanley, #BlackLivesMatter, Cop Watch, Streetwise and Safe, Rosemary Hennessey, Yana Walton, Elizabeth Weed, Karl Marx, Bruno Latour, Lewis, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and Jackie. The scholars mentioned more than once are referred to by their last names: Robbins, Hennessey, Trouillot. My interlocutors are (typically) referred to by their first: Jay, Karen, Lewis, Jackie. Tourmaline is an exception—at the time, she was using a first and last name (she has since gone to the single name), and I first introduced her ideas using both her first and last name, as one would with a scholar. But then—unlike what I did with Hennessey or Trouillot—I used her *first name* for subsequent references, so that the reference would be in line with other interlocutors.[4] Although I meant to be citing her as an expert, scholar, intellectual, *and* interlocutor, my own naming convention put her on the side of interlocutor.

I also introduce citations from experts differently than I do interlocutors. I almost always write "writes," "argues," or "notes" when I introduce a quotation from a scholar—something like, "In a widely read essay from 2013, Joel Robbins argues . . ." I am sure we all have our tics, but also that they are not ours alone—these are ways of flagging ideas that matter, but also whose ideas matter (and so must be named). On the other hand, in this same lecture, I introduced the ideas of my interlocuters with more dynamic, writerly words befitting ethnographic vignettes: Jay "wonders" and "complains," Karen "recalls," Jackie "chides." I also perform the "being there" of ethnography, falling back on "told me" quite often: "Listen to Lewis, describing the work he does coordinating the Alternatives to Policing project with Project NIA, a center that fights youth incarceration in Chicago. 'You know,' he told me . . ." In contrast, I rarely—perhaps never—use lush descriptors or reflexive language with scholars. Instead, even when talking about someone I know quite well off the page, I turn to standard, formalized conventions of credit: last names and language that draws attention to their argument or text—never descriptors of what I was doing when I was reading or thinking about their ideas, never my context and rarely theirs.

Now, I am not exactly calling for us to start narrating our theoretical insights with such language—although I will confess that I am curious about how that might read. Instead, I offer these mundane details to open up space to consider how writing conventions produce interlocutors as people who are distinct from theorists, even when our argument says otherwise. In this lecture, for instance, my main argument was, as I put it, that we need to be "thinking *with* others as subjects, rather than objects of (our) knowledge," to encounter interlocutors as experts and, more specific to my own project, activists as theorists. Yet, even as I argued this, I reproduced some of the conventions that I suspect are part of why these calls don't end up transforming our discipline and its disciplining epistemologies, as Trouillot (2003, 8–9) argued, as much as we might wish.

I started this reflection with a quote from Sherry Ortner, who points out that when we say "studying up," we often really mean studying laterally—and even more specifically, she means that we (academic anthropologists) share the same professional-managerial class position as our interlocuters. It intrigues me that we would misrecognize "lateral-ness" (horizontality, parity) as hierarchy, imagine ourselves studying "up" when we are really studying "sideways."[5] It seems akin to the misrecognition around our use of the word "interlocutor": the way that, when we swapped out the word "informant " for "interlocutor" in the early 2000s, the swap (alone) failed to transform our larger epistemology—even as I do think that it marked a real desire to move away from

the extractive and unidirectional model of "informant" and toward a more conversational, horizontal "interlocutor."[6]

But maybe Artisanal Anthro's Twitter joke does all the work we need here: telling us who is doing the work and who is taking the credit, whose ideas need attribution and whose can be stolen. Some might call this plagiarism; "soft plagiarism" is the phrase Yasmin Nair uses to describe the way some "left" academics, under pressure not only to publish (or perish!) but also to take increasingly public stands as "engaged scholars," scour "the feeds and public writings of people like me to see what they might be able to pass off as their own."[7] Nair is a writer, public intellectual, and activist with Against Equality,[8] a queer left online publishing and arts collective. As member Karma Chávez put it in a roundtable dialogue we had in 2012, "we are not always engaged with as intellectual equals by academics inside academia . . . our intellectual labor is sometimes seen as a resource to pilfer from" without acknowledgment (Weiss and Against Equality 2012, 847).[9] Even as, of course, "intellectual work and thought and analysis can rarely be pinned down to a single originary point," Nair added, this is something a bit more direct: the way academics are "willing to poach the work of activists in order to strengthen their own analyses." In what ways is Nair's and Chávez's critique of the theft of activist insight and theory relevant to anthropology's understanding of our interlocutors—even when activists are not our "objects of study"?[10] How might we think more deeply with Nair's and Chávez's point that the intellectual work of activists is not work that *needs* to be cited; rather than the work of an equal or collaborator, it is a "resource" that might be extracted, expropriated, mined?

Of course, an extractive model of knowledge production is nothing new to anthropology (or other disciplines, it is worth noting). But I am wondering about the role our writing plays in reproducing what we seek to challenge: the epistemological bifurcation that divides the world into experts and data, theorists and examples, those you cite and those whose ideas can be turned into anecdotes, ethnographic material.

As Black feminist scholars have long argued, the normative whiteness (and masculinity) of anthropology's canon is reproduced through citation, entrenching the overdominance of white men while discounting and undermining the work—often work that predates and supersedes—of women of color.[11] The crucial work of #CiteBlackWomen, begun by Christen A. Smith in 2017, has challenged the discipline to rethink not only the politics and practice of citation but also how we might challenge our notions of "theory." Recent interventions have critiqued the ideal of disembodied fieldwork (done by bodies purportedly unmarked by gender, race, class, nation, and sexuality), showing how women of color are too often confined to the "native ethnographer" role, conflated with their research projects (Berry et al. 2017; Navarro, Williams, and Ahmad 2013). Our bodies in the field and in our writing reflect and refract disciplinary orders of legibility that differentially allocate ethnographic authority, my whiteness shoring up my authority as a subject who might speak for others, even as my gender and sexuality complicate that reception. In the face of these hierarchies, the interventions of #CiteBlackWomen have challenged anthropology (and beyond) to think more critically about whose scholarship is treated as scholarship and whose is overlooked, ignored, and stolen from—about who is (over) credited for important ideas, theory, or innovation and who is treated as extractable "data."

And so I wonder if we might want to connect a politics of citation to a politics of acknowledgment or attribution. I wonder about the connections between citation practices that steal from the work of Black women scholars and those that steal from other folks without name recognition or scholarly shine, folks who aren't made to matter or who are rendered unrecognizable as experts through disciplinary frames: students, scholars outside the academy, activists, and interlocutors. I wonder about the disciplinary conventions that encourage us to avoid giving credit to our interlocutors' ideas or recognizing them as *theory*. For ideas that do not need to be acknowledged become available to us, extractable, transferrable. And these generic conventions reproduce the disciplinary hierarchies that construct our own authority and expertise (alongside that of anthropology as a discipline)—even when we are working toward, hoping for, something else.

How might we disrupt the bifurcations on which the discipline is grounded—the divide between knower and known, theory and data, and anthropologist and object of study—in our writing and in our practice? How can we better encounter and acknowledge our interlocuters as experts and credit them with their own insights? What else might we do to unsettle the authorial expertise that rests on the shoulders of those who are not named?

These are the questions with which I am left, questions to which I would not presume to have the answer. Nor, of course, am I the only one asking. For some, collaborative and participatory research projects present a way forward, a means of cowriting and cotheorizing—although not without their own dilemmas.[12] In my current project, while I have been able to do some collaborative research and cowriting (as with the roundtable discussed above and in Hollibaugh and Weiss 2015),[13] by and large my interlocutors are not particularly interested in what I might offer by way of publications or platforms: they are already respected writers, thinkers, and scholars, and a more extensive "collaboration" would present an unwelcome burden. So in cases where we are working horizontally, where "donating" our services is a kind of intellectual condescension, are there other ways to write our interlocuters' expertise into our work, ways to disrupt the routinized denial of acknowledgment?

In her "Afterword: Why Anthropology?" Aimee Meredith Cox calls for "a way of thinking and acting with others that is richer than what has been called cotheorizing in many

ethnographies, including my own. I am suggesting that we not only take interlocutors seriously as people who can help to sharpen the critical analysis in our texts, but as fellow travelers on this life journey with whom we are connected in processes of dynamic interaction as we mutually constitute one another and the landscapes we inhabit."[14] I look to Yarimar Bonilla (2015, xvi), who engages with Trouillot's critique of the "'epistemological status' of native discourse" in order to explore how we might write interlocutors as theorists, noting that "our interlocutors are never merely describing their world—they are perpetually analyzing their world and making arguments about it. The challenge then is not simply to incorporate native voices, but to engage seriously with native *arguments*." Or, in her ethnography *Streetwalking: LGBT Lives and Protest in the Dominican Republic*, Ana-Mauríne Lara (2020) builds on Audre Lorde and Maria Lugones to follow the (theoretical) lead of the Dominican LGBT activists—the "streetwalking theorists"—with whom she writes in community.[15] In my own recent work, I've tried to reimagine writing as "queer study," taking a page from Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's (2013) reading of Black study as an unregulated, antiprofessional thinking alongside others.[16] Acknowledging the way knowledge is always made collaboratively, Harney and Moten's call urges us to resist replicating disciplinary forms and turn, instead, to play, speculation, the liveness and creativity of ideas produced in relation.[17] I sometimes imagine myself as a host of a queer cocktail party, the authors and interlocutors that I cite as guests engaged in multiple and overlapping conversations in which I am participant, curator, and scribe.

Sara Ahmed characterizes citation practices as a disciplinary mechanism, a "reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies. These citational structures can form what we call disciplines."[18] Citation repeats and reentrenches authority, reinforces power, creates the canon within which we learn how to marshal our own authoritative speech. It is often expressed, as Ahmed puts it, as "a tendency to frame our own work in relation to a male intellectual tradition . . . giving your allegiance or love to this or that male theorist." For those of us committed to an otherwise anthropology,[19] committed to rethinking our politics of citation, I am increasingly thinking that we need to pay more attention to our politics of attribution.

What might anthropology be if it is not conveying the words of distant others to "our" pages, as raw material, data to be analyzed? An anthropology that refuses extraction, that might begin to think alongside our interlocutors as true partners in conversation and horizontal exchange—it is possible that this would no longer *be* anthropology. This is the radical provocation of Savannah Shange's (2019b) abolition anthropology, an inspiration for Ryan Cecil Jobson's (2020) suggestion that we "let anthropology burn" rather than rescue the discipline from its own (necessary) undoing. I offer this reflection on the epistemology of acknowledgment as a minor contribution to this project. For I suspect that the forms of hierarchy embedded in the way we write our interlocutors trap us in an inadvertent reproduction of the foundational hierarchy of knower and known, subject and data, expert and informant—one that, I think, we must be committed to rewriting as we seek more liberatory possiblities.

NOTES

1. At the time, Tourmaline was going by another name; I've silently updated it throughout this essay.
2. I'm thinking across Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's (2012) critique of the empty use of "decolonial" as metaphor to the lineage of a decolonizing anthropology, starting with Faye Harrison's (1997) central intervention *Decolonizing Anthropology*.
3. My phrase "interlocutor slot" plays on Michel-Rolph Trouillot's (2003, 10) "savage slot," extending his analysis of how anthropology's historical claim to a monopoly over "native discourse," in the form of quotations, is challenged—epistemologically—by the emergence of those "natives" as speaking subjects of history.
4. Also worth consideration is how naming practice sheds light on the triangulated relationship between anthropologist-as-author, interlocutors, and cited theorists. In my first book, for instance, I followed the convention of citing interlocutors by first name and decided to call myself "Margot" in extended dialogues, both to mark parity and to better reflect what had been more conversations than "interviews." At the time, using one's initials or only last name was the more common approach, at least in the ethnographies I was reading. I don't mean to hold up that book as a model—were I writing it today, I would write it differently. Still, I remain curious about how we name, and thus locate, ourselves in relation to questions of ethnographic authority.
5. Other relevant approaches to this include Ulf Hannerz (2006) on "studying sideways" and George Marcus (1997) on "para-ethnography" (see also Holmes and Marcus 2008). John L. Jackson's *Thin Description* (2013) also takes up the opportunities and challenges posed by increasingly flat distinctions between anthropologist and interlocutor.
6. From the Oxford English Dictionary, an informant is "a person who communicates knowledge of a particular fact, subject or event; a provider of information," whereas an interlocutor is "one who takes part in a dialogue, conversation, or discussion."
7. Yasmin Nair, 2019. "Update: On Publishing, Plagiarism, Philz Coffee, and Persistence" and (forthcoming) "On Soft Plagiarism." https://yasminnair.com/. See also Bailey and Trudy (2018).
8. Founded in 2009, Against Equality advances a queer critique of mainstream gay and lesbian political agendas and making available an archive of radical queer thought in order to, as they put it, "reinvigorate the queer political imagination." The collective includes academics, activists, and activist-academics. See http://www.againstequality.org.
9. *American Quarterly* only lists the citation in my name; I am adding Against Equality.
10. Or, indeed, when they are: see Nair's (2019) review of Myrl Beam's *Gay, Inc*.
11. See Bolles (2013), Williams (2020), the special issue of *Feminist Anthropology* on "Cite Black Women" (Smith 2021), and Cite

Black Women's five principles of critical praxis: https://www.citeblackwomencollective.org/our-praxis.html. Also, Christian (1987).

12. See, for a recent example, the *Decolonizing Ethnography* project of coresearchers and coauthors Carolina Alonso Bejarano and Daniel M. Goldstein, activist anthropologists, and Lucia López Juárez and Mirian A. Mijangos García, activists working on undocumented immigration (Bejarano et al. 2019). Collections include Christa Craven and Dána-Ain Davis's *Feminist Activist Ethnography* (2013) and my own collection on "collaboration": https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/collaboration.
13. This coauthored article is part of Amber Hollibaugh's queer survival economies project, which explores queer organizing around labor, class, sex work, housing security, and other economic justice issues. See http://queersurvivaleconomies.com. My very minor contributions to this project included doing research and writing preliminary reports as part of my volunteer work with QEJ, assisting in organizing the 2015 "Invisible Lives, Targeted Bodies: Impacts of Economic Injustice on Vulnerable LGBTQ Communities" conference, and jointly authoring the 2015 article.
14. In "From Reciprocity to Relationality: Anthropological Possibilities" series: https://culanth.org/fieldsights/afterword-why-anthropology.
15. See also Shange (2019a).
16. For some of this work, see Weiss (2015, 2020), Hollibaugh and Weiss (2015), and "Collaboration: Integration" at https://culanth.org/fieldsights/collaboration-integration.
17. They write, "study isn't disciplined, or ready-made," it "is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking … playing in a band … old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory." "The point of calling it 'study' is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present" (Harney and Moten 2013, 110). This is an explicit turn away from forms of institutionalized professionalism and toward a deeper horizontality of thought. See also Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell (2008) and Osterweil (2013) on how social movements produce knowledge and theory, as well as Zach Schwartz-Weinstein, Abigail Boggs, Eli Meyerhoff, and Nick Mitchell's call for an Abolition University at https://abolition.university/invitation/.
18. Sara Ahmed. 2013. "Making Feminist Points." https://feministkilljoys.com/. Thanks to Dána-Ain Davis for this reminder!
19. See Laura McTighe and Megan Raschig's collection "An Otherwise Anthropology": https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/an-otherwise-anthropology.

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