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Fieldwork as witnessing

Anthropological knowledge-making between openness, blind spots, and personal involvement[1]

Alexander Koensler
Università di Perugia

Marion Näser-Lather
University of Innsbruck

Abstract: This essay discusses poses of identities available for anthropologists in relation to increasingly salient issues of contemporary anthropological knowledge-making. Starting with a critical evaluation of the idea of the anthropologist as a witness by George Marcus (2005), we outline cornerstones in current debates on the positionality of the researcher, such as the implications of the end of meta-narratives, the call for epistemological openness, the crisis of representation, the delimitation of fields and the discussion on human rights. In a second step, we highlight how, at first glance, the concept of witnessing seems to provide a solution for these dilemmas. Yet, witnessing entails blind spots and other limits which are often overlooked. These concern relationality, memory, involvement, understanding, and the question of how to intervene in the scenarios we observe. In sum, the essay redefines the conditions of anthropological knowledge production in an age of witnessing.

Keywords: Ethnography; Witnessing; Testimony; Blind spots; Knowledge-making

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Introduction

Anthropologists see their field increasingly populated by a number of figures similar to them who all record, document and claim to represent local situations, like journalists, experts, NGO officials, and activists. As a consequence, what distinguishes the work of the anthropologist from these other actors becomes less clear. In this essay, we reflect on the different poses of identities that are available for anthropologists, especially in light of an overcrowded field of people who represent realities. We ask: What distinguishes the anthropologist from other similar figures, like experts, journalists or activists? What identity poses are available? Which are more or less desirable? In particular, as the idea of witness seems to become an increasingly visible answer to these dilemmas, we ask: What are the blind spots of witnessing? What does this mean for the possibilities of engagement? The different range of answers given by anthropologists themselves reflects the often-tumultuous paradigm changes in anthropology. From the production of grand structuralist pictures over Marxist critical consciousness and literary interpretative approaches to self-reflexive auto-ethnography and the ontological turn – anthropological interpretative paradigms have offered a huge variety of epistemological and ethical approaches. In what follows, we will offer different inputs from a range of interdisciplinary debates in dialogue with one another.

Epistemological openness and the construction of ethnographic authority

Across all paradigms, one key element that characterizes contemporary anthropological knowledge-making is the longing for a fundamentally epistemological "openness"[2] towards unknown horizons. This openness is the most powerful conceptual tool of anthropology to destabilize our certainties, our knowledge of the world (Fischer 2018; Mattingly 2019). "Go and uncover something", Erving Goffman used to say to his students (Atkinson 2017). The popularity of this perspective among ethnographers manifests itself, among other things, in the frequent application of Grounded Theory Methodology with its explorative, inductive approach (e.g., see Strauss, Corbin 1996).

However, even if this longing for a heuristic openness remains a key stone in contemporary anthropological knowledge production, it may entail sometimes contradictory approaches to legitimate authority for undertaking research. In *The Anthropologist as Witness in Contemporary Regimes of Intervention*, George Marcus (2005) investigates such ways to legitimate the authority for undertaking research. These are questions that concern not only the identity of the anthropologist, but also the ways how anthropology understands its practices of knowledge-making. George Marcus asks: "What identity does the anthropologist create? What is the self-claimed rhetoric of authority for research undertaken in such situations?" (Marcus 2005: 31). Aware of debates on the constructive character of identification (Brubaker 2004), Marcus does not presume that the anthropologist "has" an identity, but creates one.

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[2] This openness is firmly anchored in the tradition of anthropology, e.g. the interpretative turn (following Geertz), feminist and marxist interventions of the 1970s and the debate on representation during the 1980s (Clifford, Marcus 1986). For more recent discussions on epistemology see Toren, de Pina-Cabral 2011.

Changing landscapes of anthropological knowledge-making

Importantly, the search for authority in anthropological knowledge-making is shaped by the decline of trust in universally valid contextual frameworks. First, there is the relative decline of available meta-narratives which gave the impression that there were "outside vantage points, intellectual, scholastic platforms, from which to render critical assessments" (Marcus 2005: 33). Nowadays these certainties have vanished for most of us, as they have vanished in social sciences in general since the advent of the postmodern condition (Lyotard 1991). In anthropology, one starting point of this tendency began with Franz Boas' rejection of evolutionism. In sociology, it was probably the Frankfurt School's referral to the self-destruction of enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002). For some time, Marxist or development theories allowed anthropologists and other social scientists to root their knowledge production more or less firmly within broader conceptual frameworks, able to confer a modernist certainty to their accounts.

Secondly, the poses of objective certainties of anthropological knowledge production have been questioned first and foremost by feminist and post-colonial epistemologies, de-centering the white, male scholar perspective which has posed for centuries as universal and "normal", its hegemony masking its partiality (e.g. Lewin 2009; Moore 2013). George Marcus' own involvement in the "writing culture"-debate was crucial in the "crisis of representation" of classical anthropological knowledge production tightly interconnected to this dynamic (Clifford and Marcus 1986), that echoes indirectly the issues taken up by feminist anthropologists.

In short, nowadays, multiple tentative lines along which we can try to make sense of our work have replaced universal frameworks. An enlightening example are human rights. A classical perspective has considered their normative implications at face value. However, more recently a different approach opened up a sounder understanding of socio-cultural processes around human rights (cf. Eckert *et al.* 2012; Koensler 2015). Most notably, Richard A. Wilson (2006) proposes to study the "social life" of human rights and to understand its performative dimension. Mark Goodale (2009) argues that "human rights" have developed into one of the rare new available contemporary meta-narratives. Goodale shows that the human rights framework can be interpreted in consensus with the neoliberal paradigm of communities in a competition over claims, transforming human rights into "neoliberal rights".

The expert, the journalist and the witness

These changing landscapes of anthropological knowledge-making have implications on how the identity of the anthropologist can be conceived. Marcus (2005) surveys three different alternatives: the expert, the reporter and the witness. Each of these identity poses entails different epistemological assumptions with regard to knowledge-making. From a contemporary anthropological perspective, both the expert and the reporter find themselves in rather unsatisfactory subject positions. In many settings, the stance of the classical expert ascribing unquestionable interpretive power to him_herself has become out of fashion for anthropologists, with the ethos of self-restraint resulting from feminist and postcolonial questions of authority and ownership. The roles of experts have diversified. However, although the expert might be disinterest, he/she tends to be less independent than scholars working for academic institutions who, despite being involved in social, economic and university power relations, may feel the self-demand and the duty towards the scientific community to strive for independence. Moreover, the trust in objective knowledge which this position implies and its positionality towards the subjects of research have been problematized (Marchand 2010). Then again, positionings as witness and expert are sometimes entangled, when anthropologists are perceived as both at the same time, resulting in conflicting behavior expectations and conventions regarding knowledge production. Modesty, caution and awareness of positionality and situatedness stand opposite the need to demonstrate expertise and authority and to make clear statements (Kurtovic 2018).

The journalist might be the most easily available identity pose for anthropologists. It entails a certain independency and offers to create engaged accounts. However, journalistic accounts leave little maneuver to problematize representation. Firstly, methods, theoretical foundation for the evaluation of empiric material, and time available for research enable scientists to do a much more in-depth analysis. Secondly, in most cases academic research is uncommitted whereas the work of (online-) journalists is increasingly geared to readership figures and click rates. The identity of the activist could be added to Marcus's alternatives, but this role either does not allow much representative independence. In short, most of the identity poses seem to remain stuck in one way or another in the issues that came to light with the changing context of anthropological knowledge production outlined above.

According to Marcus (2005), the figure of the witness constitutes an increasing point of reference for ethnographers. The witness allows to closely observe circumstances of everyday life with a self-awareness of the limits of representation. Importantly, the witness preserves his/her individuality and allows to problematize political interests in the research endeavor. S/he can have an independent and distinct voice. Didier Fassin (2006: 353) reminds us about the distinction in Latin between *testis* and *superstes*: The term *testis* refers to someone who observes from the outside a conflictual event and can contribute to conflict resolution as s/he observed "objectively" what happened. By contrast, superstes is the person who survived the events at stake and contributes with his/her subjective account to commemorate or sensibilize for the accordant issues. The *testis* needs to be objective, while the *superstes* can be subjective. S/he "tells the world what s/he has seen and experienced" whereas the *testis* has a second-hand testimony which may be more detached and more neutral, but which relies on the subjective perspective of the *superstes* (Fassin 2008, cited in Guilhot 92). Ethnographers may find themselves in both roles. Of course, these are only tentative heuristic remarks that reflect on the strength and limit of each identity pose, but there are many examples of investigative journalism that resonates more with ethnography rather than journalism.

In contemporary ethnographic field experiences, political and ethical themes, e.g., inequality, devastation, or rights struggles, have gained a revived importance. The witness seems to offer a valid solution to these challenges. Moreover, the idea of an ethically responsible, political engaged research has been received growing interest. For instance, some intellectual strands in Italy shaped by both Gramscian thought and critical theory have established long-standing research partly overlapping with Marcus' concept of testimony

(Papa 2020; Boni, Koensler, Rossi 2020)[3]. Yet, there are some significant limits in the identity pose of the witness as well.

Blind spots

Not everything can be seen by the witness. Our perception, our bodily experiences and our interpretation of a given situation may differ from those of our interlocutors respectively the actors involved (Bonz 2016) – not only related to biological differences (such as short-sightedness) but also to specific modes of perceptions and (emotional) experiences[4]. For instance, an ethnographer who seldom works bodily will experience ploughing by hand in a different way than the peasant on whose farm he conducts participant observation (Devereux 1987: 459, in Bonz 2016: 21). What seems sensorily 'normal' to us is not normal for our interlocutors and vice versa. In addition, animals have different ways of perceiving space and time than humans (cf. Moses 2006) – which we should take into account in the realm of multispecies studies. Moreover, perception is always an interplay of bottom up – sensory stimuli reaching our brain – and top down – their processing dependent on socialization (e.g., see Goldstein 2011: 52).

Take for example the ability to recognise objects: without knowing what a table is – through growing up in a culture which uses tables – we would not recognize it and only see geometrical forms. Following Kelly Oliver (2001), one can ask how we can witness that which we do not recognise? The ability of recognition is dependant one´s perspective and situatedness which is often the dominant white, western one. Franz Fanon (1986 (1952)) has stressed the connection between recognition and concepts of "the human" vs. (racialized) "others". Enabling „others" to witness would require a change in these conceptualisations (Awan, Musmar 2000: 146). Thus, perception can be influenced by social dynamics, one´s own attitudes, the relationships between researcher and field partners and the choice of methods and theoretical approaches. These differences in perception create blind spots regarding witnessing[5]. In what follows, we will examine the different aspects of those blind spots.

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[3] An overview of research that is influenced by the pose of witnessing can be found in Marcus (2005) and, slightly more updated, in Fischer (2018). Though interesting, it goes beyond the scope of this essay to discuss this literature in detail.

[4] This regards all senses whose education is formed as a function of socialisation and individual momentary interests (Vanini, Vaskul, Gottschalk 2012).

[5] For a more recent inquiry into the anthropological foundations of the senses see Classen 2010.

Relationality

Witnessing is not merely an individual act. As witnesses, we are, as for example actor network theory shows, always part of relationships of human and nonhuman beings, and cannot remove ourselves from the consequences – us being influenced by them (Latour 2005). Along this line, Donna Haraway (1997: 23-24) criticizes what she calls the "modest witness" – the naturalization of the white male gaze which has been set by patriarchy as default, universal, neutral, and thereby alleged objective perspective, obfuscating its being partial and positioned. Haraway points out:

> This is the culture within which contingent facts – the real case about the world – can be established with all the authority, but none of the considerable problems, of transcendental truth. This self-invisibility [of the witness] is the specifically modern, European, masculine, scientific form of the virtue of modesty. This is the form of modesty that pays off its practitioners in the coin of epistemological and social power.

Her point invites us to interrogate biographically, culturally and historically determined views, their construction through social interaction and accordant discourses on perception. They make it possible to produce representations of the "objective" world out there and actively contribute to render the witness's gaze invisible.

In addition, the position of the witness is always embedded in power relations (cf. Awan, Musmar 2000: 164). Who can be considered a witness, and who is accepted as a reliable witness – who can, citing Spivak (1988), speak? Clearly, women, POC, queers, poor and disabled persons might not be ascribed the same authority of witnessing as privileged, white, western males. Alessandra Gribaldo (2021: 68, 73) shows how female victims before courts are not always being taken seriously. Moreover, the chances people have to witness events depends on privileges and field access – to who is admitted to a fieldsite. Of course, hybrid or contradictory roles may result from intersectional positioning and multi-layered involvement in the field – as Braidotti has pointed out, subjectivity is non-unitary and occupies multiple positions (cited in Awan, Musmar 2020: 167).

Blind spots can also occur due to our relations to our publics. Angel-Ajani (2004: 134) emphasises that in our publications, we tend to smooth over aversive sensations because of their being difficult to digest or because of non-written academic rules such as not wanting to appear "too sentimental". In addition, the target audiences of our publications influence form and content of our testimonies, be it lawyers and legal systems, communities seeking recognition of their rights, or our discipline. Angel-Ajani argues that the conditions of our witnessing might contradict the ethical (self-)image of the anthropologist as noble (activist) to whom the act of witnessing confers a moral authority (for this position see Scheper-Hughes 1992: xxi). Constraints related to field access and power relations as well as attempt of actors within the field to use the anthropologist for their own agendas can play a role here. Thus, witnessing is never a moral absolute, as Guilhot states (2012: 89-90).

Memory

Another important aspect of witnessing is memory. Memory modifies and alters the process of witnessing with passing time. Marcus points out that "the witness in Western law is a truthful observer" (Marcus 2005: 37) – yet we all know how unreliable the perception of witnesses really is (Albright 2017) which is why we have to free the anthropological idea of the witness from the notion of inherent authority and/or objectivity. Which details of an event and its participating actors are remembered, and how, is influenced by its emotional saliency and, again, by a focus configured through socialization and current perspective (Markowitsch 2005). Moreover, often our witnessing as well as our memory thereof is clouded by a distinctive position for or against field partners, of action anthropology vs. researching against.

Bodily involvement

The witness also needs to take into account the limitations of his/her body. Phenomenologists like Schmitz (2007: 30-32, 37) highlight that, while experiencing a situation, our senses are affected immediately, bodily noticeable, by atmospheres and strong impressions like, for instance, sensations which evoke the feeling of danger. The supposedly detached view implied in the notion of witnessing therefore needs to be questioned for two reasons: Firstly, sensory experiences are always interwoven with emotions, meanings and memories (Hsu 2008: 440). Based on feminist thought which highlights the role of the body, Awan and Musmar (2020: 165) point to the circulation of emotions engendering affective witnessing. Feelings are shaped by our biographical socialization, and emotions are culturally formed and therefore, affective witnessing also can be but a mediated, distorted account. Secondly, if we witness an event in which we are directly involved, and if that event evokes strong emotions, e.g., sadness, anxiety, panic, or rage, bodily mechanisms take place which highly influence our perception. When confronted with a stressful situation, adrenalin und noradrenalin have a stimulating effect on the sympathetic nervous system and the ability to process information is suppressed or blocked. Also, tunnel vision may occur, reducing the field of vision and hiding environmental details outside that focus from view (Litzcke, Schuh, Pletke 2013: 18-20). These and other phenomena may lead to difficulties for the ethnographer as a witness in perceiving and interpreting situations. Fassin asks, "how much of the intelligibility of the conflict is obscured at the moment when one speaks of the trauma and the victim? […] what is lost in this translation […] is, precisely, history'' (cited in Guilhot 2014: 91).

The attempt to stage oneself as a modest witness – thereby conferring oneself the authority of "objectivity" – remains related to the burdens of the positivist past in social sciences: the expectation of objectivity still is implicitly brought to scholars, especially against the background of the fight for power of interpretation and funds, a pressure felt even more by the humanities and the social sciences, who are often devaluated by the non-scientific public as well as by politicians for not producing "exact" knowledge like the natural sciences. The still-present longing for objectivity manifests itself in recent interdisciplinarian discussions on scientific knowledge production and constructivism (Boghossian 2006, Žižek 2018). Haraway (1988) and the debate on the crisis of representation highlight that we are always necessarily situated in the field: knowledge is always partial and locatable. However, that does not mean that we may not reach out for objective knowledge (cf. Bourdieu 2012). The question is how to deal with this positionality while adopting the stance of the witness – an acknowledgement and consideration of the several blinds spots and imperfections of witnessing could be the beginning.

Understanding

According to Marcus, the figure of the witness allows the "return to a position of a kind of disinterestedness" in order to develop a critique from the inside (Marcus 2005: 32). Witnessing enables a process of translation, reflexion and abstraction. Thus, the position of the witness could be a solution to the emotional dilemmas deriving from the negotiation of distance and closeness. This becomes especially important in situations when we strongly oppose ethical and/or political attitudes of our interlocutors – i.e. when we are confronted with, as Bangstad (2017) puts it, "people we don't necessarily like", such as may be the case with neo-nazis (see Shoshan 2016) or violent forms of masculinity (see Ellis 2017). Of course, the same dilemmas arise when we carry out research with people we like “too much”. Positions of closeness to or membership in the researched group bear, as we well know, the risk of counter transfer and/or over-identification (e.g., Mannitz 2009: 15).

There has been an intense debate on how to react to such risks. For instance, a sharper distinction between empathy and sympathy has been proposed (Bubandt & Willerslev 2015), as well as avoiding methods like interviews and participant observation altogether in order to distance oneself (Esseveld, Eyerman 1992) or simply arguing that distancing is not necessary and that on the contrary, “going native” is desirable (Hegner 2019: 30-33). The figure of the witness can enable to preserve independence and detachment (within the margins pointed out above) and can confer “authority and purpose” (Marcus 2005: 36) to the presence and the work of anthropologists. Yet, can this dynamic also lead to erect to what has been described an “empathy wall”? According to Arlie Hochschild (2016: 5), such a wall would prevent fieldworkers from engaging seriously with the life-worlds and worldviews of people whose moral standpoints we don’t share and therefore, creating even more blind spots.[6]

Intervening: How? When? Why?

Witnessing can, as Marcus states, counter pressure to act in “regimes of intervention”. Therefore, the position of witness seems to exclude action-anthropology or engaged anthropology – where researchers intend to empower their field partners in order to support a certain cause.

In some cases, intervening could be a duty instead of a liability. Moreover, a positioning not only *for*, but sometimes also *against* the people we research seems sometimes necessary – or doesn’t it? This depends on the question whether we adopt a cultural relativism as demanded by Benjamin Teitelbaum (2019), who takes the stance of unconditional support for his field partners regardless of their morals. In other cases, anthropologists as Aihwa Ong (1995) and Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995), propose a new form of universalism leading to a politically committed and morally engaged anthropology. In particular, Scheper-Hughes (1995: 419) combines witnessing with the obligation to “’take sides’ and make judgements”. Aihwa Ong (1995: 430), instead, has stated that the task of anthropology is to “developing a mobile sensitivity to cultural difference that nevertheless insists on defending minimal modern human rights”. But in the end, the question remains: In how far do we have an obligation to our interlocutors and other actors in as well as outside the field which implies not only witnessing, but also acting?

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[6] For discussions on empathy within anthropology see Hollan and Throop (2011).

At least, witnessing seems to entail the responsibility of the anthropologist to remain true to victims (Hatley 2000: 2-3, cited in Angel-Ajani 2004: 138). According to Liisa Malkki, witnessing also implies responsibility in the form of "a caring form of vigilance" (1997: 94, cited in Angel-Ajani 2004: 137). As Angel-Ajani (2004: 134) states, using as an example her research on imprisoned migrant women, witnessing might also mean the omittance of certain aspects. This might conflict with expectations that are placed on the anthropologist expert-witness whose ascribed role is "recovering the truth" and thus, whose account shall be as accurate and as complete as possible.

Conclusion

Marcus' figure of the anthropologist as a witness productively circumvents aporia resulting from the end of the meta-narratives of anthropological knowledge-making – and yet, presents us with new shoals and pitfalls, as we have shown. Anthropological knowledge-making remains precarious and fragmented. In this essay we have asked what distinguishes the anthropologist from similar figures such as experts and journalists who all record and represent specific situations. We have stressed the importance of considering knowledge as necessary fragmented and politically embedded rather than objective and neutral. It is anthropology that has an extensive tradition of reflexivity in which the figure of the witness seems to allow to combine a certain self-reflexive awareness with a more universal ambition of knowledge-making and ethical stance. Yet, the figure of the witness implies as well some limits which are often overlooked: the blind spots of testimony as they emerge through its fragmented memory, its bodily involvement and its limits of understanding. In sum, the-anthropologist-as-witness can reflect on these blind spots as conditions of the possibility of anthropological work, while clinging to the ideals of knowledge and striving for honesty regarding its production. What might render the anthropologists way of witnessing valuable is the "productive hesitation" of ethnographic practice mentioned by Strathern (2004) which, as Gribaldo argues, "allows for taking a stance" (Gribaldo 2021: 130). Understanding these dimensions of the more and more common pose of the anthropologist-as-witness means to address a controversial topic in a particular epistemological moment of anthropological knowledge production.

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Alexander KOENSLER (PhD University of Siena 2009) is Associate Professor at University of Perugia since 2019, where he coordinates the MA program in Social Anthropology and Sociology. Before joining University of Perugia, he served in different faculty positions at Queen's University Belfast (UK/Northern Ireland), University of Münster (Germany) and the Institutes for Desert Research at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Israel). Among his recent books, *Etnografie militanti. Prospettive e dilemmi* (2020 – with Stefano Boni and Amalia Rossi), *Antropologia dell'alimentazione. Produzione, consumo e movimenti sociali* (2019 – with Pietro Meloni) and *Israeli-Palestinian Activism: Shifting Paradigms* (2015).
alexander.koensler@unipg.it

Marion NÄSER-LATHER (PhD University of Marburg 2010, habilitation 2019) is Assistant Professor at the Institute of History and European Ethnology at the University of Innsbruck. She has held post-doctoral positions at the Universities of Paderborn, Innsbruck and Marburg and was a visiting scientist at the University of Perugia and the Helmut Schmidt University Hamburg. Among her recent books, *Vampire. Zwischen Blutdurst und Triebverzicht* (2020 – with Marguerite Rumpf), *Ein Land für Frauen. Ethnographie der italienischen Frauenbewegung Se Non Ora Quando*? (2019), *Backlash?! Antifeminismus in Wissenschaft, Politik und Gesellschaft* (2019 – with Anna Lena Oldemeier and Dorothee Beck).
marion.naeser-lather@uibk.ac.at