

**In Review: *Time and Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects* by Johannes Fabian; *Nervous Conditions* by Allaine Cerwonka and *Anthropology and Human Rights Administrations: Expert Observation and Representation After the Fact* by Iris Jean-Klein and Annelise Riles**

**R. Alexia McFee  
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**Decolonizing Representation**

As I reflect on my reading of the three pieces discussed below as well as discussion in the seminar *Decolonizing Ethnography* I keep coming back to the question of what it means to have solidarity at the site of knowledge production. In my initial reading, I struggled to pin down the central arguments in which at least two of the pieces intervened and it was only through open dialogue in a seminar space that there was clarity around how the pieces could be placed in context and usefully deployed in my own work. The seminar space itself enacted a decolonial practice of decentering western epistemologies and drawing on diverse and intersecting experiences from our own contexts (in Jamaica, in Kashmir, in China, in India, for example) to help us to think about methodologies that would help us to do justice in our work. Although unnamed, in one way or another, issues of relationality emerged across readings, particularly how it is either problematic for Western anthropologists engaged in ethnography or that it should, in fact, be central to methodology. Time and temporality is the framework through which this issue is explored.

In *Time and Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects*, Johannes Fabian discusses the varying ways time has been used in Anthropological and ethnographic writing. His key contention is time itself, in modern anthropological discourse is always already overdetermined by western ideologically biased qualifications which set up the 'west against the rest'. Temporal devices have always structured

Anthropologists' relationship to and construction of Others which is what results in this 'denial of coevalness' by which he means "a *persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of Anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse*" (31). A major 'illness' in the field which Fabian is bringing analysis to bear on is how relations of power constantly determines and dislocates time to enable a distancing of an anthropologist from the site, that to the researcher might seem productive but in fact, reinscribe power revealing little about the site itself. To further elucidate this point, in our discussions we thought through how traveling geographically to 'a faraway place' to conduct ethnographic work is essentially a traveling back in time because of the assumptions that what we find speaks to history- including our own history- and from which western progress can be determined. In this sense, the denial of coevalness emerges from a failure to recognize and appreciate multiple temporalities and an insistence that time moves in a unilinear way from where the researched is positioned to the perspective from which the researcher gazes. In this framework, at all times, the sites of analysis, the objects/subjects of research and their contribution to knowledge are marginalized.

In *Nervous Conditions*, Allaine Cerwonka interrupts this temporalization characteristic of western ethnography through a methodology of improvisation that ethically attends to the field. A major intervention that Cerwonka makes is problematizing the notion that fieldwork and theorizing are spatially and temporally distinct and that knowledge production is a unilinear process from ignorance to enlightenment. She warns that particularly in unstable contexts researchers must adopt a posture of flexibility that allows them to differently track, record, experience, narrate and measure experience. Regardless of how attentive one might be to ethical requirements for fieldwork, one can never truly anticipate all the ways the field might stretch them, necessitating re-assessment of ethics [that attends to context), improvisation, and spontaneity. Improvisation is taken to mean the continuous traveling back, both physically and mentally, between your sites of analysis, your methods and your interpretations with

an understanding that one can never fully represent those sites. Here she is drawing attention to the multiple intersecting influences that shape research and knowledge itself with an emphasis on reciprocity.

Cerwonka offers a contemporaneous account via a thread of emails that she uses to show how her research unfolded at the level of fieldwork, theorizing and at the body- which all the time were acting on each other. Improvisation, for Cerwonka, is not a threat to theoretical soundness, but rather its an exercise in ethics that simultaneously works toward destabilizing ideas that undergird colonial epistemologies. It is important to remember that while Cerwonka's presentation of her process here might be novel she is not suggesting that this is a new way of doing research. Her form is simply the vehicle that allows access into a world that has always existed, a world where time (past, present, and future) and space are constantly operating in tandem.

But, Jean-Klein and Riles would disagree with Fabian and Cerwonka on the import of finding points of connection with research subjects. In *Anthropology and Human Rights Administrations: Expert Observation and Representation After the Fact*, they argue for a more disciplined Anthropology where Anthropologists maintain an appropriate distance from their informants to be able to process and produce knowledge. Using the Human Rights Administration as a key site for their discussion, their article problematizes the methods and epistemologies of the field of Anthropology. Among their contentions is that the anthropologist with investments in the human rights situation and who cares for the people she studies finds herself in a dilemma of actually producing authoritative descriptions of those sites. Even as care for a community is legitimate, they seem to argue that a valid ethical position would not be to bear witness in ways that further invisibilize experiences - even of those who do not wish to speak- but rather, by staying in the zone of what they call " echolocation" - where there can be a widening of the range of possible meanings for why rights advocacy is developed and delivered in that way in the first place. This form of care for the Anthropological discipline, Jean-Klein and Riles argue, is 'the ethnographic analog of promoting human rights' (p. 190). Interestingly and even paradoxically, it is in that space of full

commitment to ethnographic holism and rigor that the Anthropologist can be in service of the rights administration. My question though is what are the possibilities of anthropology that's concerned with justice, not just knowledge especially amidst the move to decolonize. Doesn't decoloniality by its very nature seek to deliver justice [not just in the juridical sense]?

For me, the work of Fabian and Cerwonka opened up more space for a collective engagement on how we might resist reproducing violence against already marginalized populations by how and why we choose our sites, how we unwittingly 'grant' or 'deny' subjecthood, how we might draw lines between spaces we should or should not enter (even when such access is seemingly granted), what we privilege and what we relegate to the background and how we eventually place people in the 'stories' we write. This is still an open space which I imagine i will sit in throughout the research process. The only closure is an acceptance of the inevitable political implications of representation- which will continue to inform the ethics in our work.