



Of Words and Sounds: Curating an Epistemically Plural Anthropology Symposium

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This video essay argues and shows a form of academic symposium curation that works to combat epistemic coloniality. Convened by Caroline Gatt and Valeria Lembo, the symposium held in Aberdeen in May 2018 was called "Of Words and Sounds". Gatt and Lembo organised this symposium with the explicit aim of holding space for different ways of knowing and acknowledging their scholarly value. Epistemic coloniality delegitimises and attempts to erase a wide variety of ways of knowing. The university has been and remains key in what has also been referred to as epistemicide. It is the institution of the university which consecrates the epistemologies considered properly scholarly, and defines for instance Indigenous, non-Western, performative, gendered, neurodiverse, poor ways of knowing as mere culture or belief. In other words, as forms of non-knowledge. Collaboration was the basis of the principles of the way Gatt curated the symposium; organising a meeting, where the most important underlying aim was to enable the participants to have meaningful encounters with each other. To share their work and experiences in ways that made sense on their own terms.

Keywords: ways of knowing; anthropology; epistemic justice; performance; music



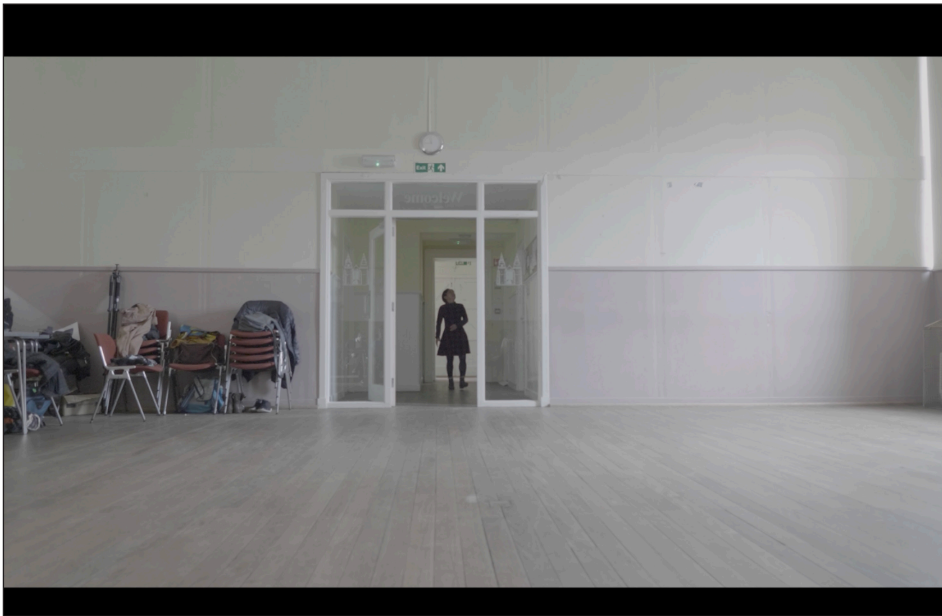
VIDEO ARTICLE

Available to view here: <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.15519>.

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STILLS FROM THE VIDEO ARTICLE





VIDEO ARTICLE TRANSCRIPT

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[00:23]

[Caroline Gatt:]

In April 2018, I invited a group of researchers to come to Aberdeen in the north-east of Scotland to participate in a workshop called Of Words and Sounds.

We met for two days in a church hall, which was almost next door to the anthropology department of the University of Aberdeen.

I organized this workshop together with Valeria Lembo. Valeria made sure that the workshop was welcoming to local artists and students.

Together, we had been working on the project knowing from the inside.

Knowing from the Inside

With Tim Ingold as principal investigator.

[01:02]

I was coordinating a sub project that I called 'Crafting Anthropology Otherwise'

What is a "good" anthropological presentation?

What is the unquestioned orthopraxy of academic anthropology?

What forms of movement, expression, practices of presentation, which relations are allowed and which are not?

Which onto/epistemologies are considered properly anthropological and which need to be 'translated' into more 'conceptual' or 'intellectual' packages to be considered anthropological?

The great political value in laboratory theatre.

[01:14]

The focus of my subproject was on the politics of knowledge.

My collaborators and I explored ways in which an anthropologist could carry out research with laboratory theater practitioners, and to do so in a way which gave equal value to the way of knowing of anthropology and the way of knowing of theater.

Caroline Gatt, with Diego Galafassi and Gey Pin Ang. 2021. "From an ethics of estrangement to an anthropology in life," illuminated video essay, *Journal of Embodied Research*.

[01:38]

Through this research, it became very clear that dominant academic epistemologies continue to subjugate all sorts of ways of knowing. And over the course of my project, I slowly began developing ways of curating exchanges between researchers and knowledge bearers from various backgrounds, which not only held space for different ways of knowing, but also celebrated them.

[02:10]

Who defines what is considered valid academic knowledge?

E.g. Michelle Z. Rosaldo. 1984. "Toward an anthropology of self and feeling." In *Culture Theory: essays on mind, self, and emotion*. R. A. Shweder and R. A. Levine, editors. pp. 137–157. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Over the past 5 decades anthropologists have questioned the assumption that academic knowledge can only be considered as such if it is rational, impersonal, abstractable. These critiques came mainly from feminist and post-colonial scholars.

Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli expression. Third Edition. Steven Feld. A Thirtieth Anniversary Edition With A New Introduction.

Growing from these critiques, other anthropologists also began questioning the established epistemological basis of academic knowledge as being reason separate from emotion and sensation.

For instance, Steven Feld has endeavoured since the 1970s to convince the mainstream of anthropology that sound recordings are as ethnographic as written forms.

The Taste of Ethnographic Things: The Senses in Anthropology

Paul Stoller

Embodiment and Experience

The existential ground of culture and self

Edited by Thomas Csordas

Doing Sensory Ethnography

Sarah Pink

Annual Review of Anthropology

“Multimodality: Reshaping anthropology”

Mark Westmoreland

“Multimodal Anthropology”

Nat Nesvaderani, Department of Anthropology, Université Laval.

These seminal works gave rise to the anthropology of the senses, the paradigm of embodiment, and amongst other things, more recently, multimodal anthropology.

[03:08]

Visual Anthropology

Editor Paul Hockings

In parallel, visual anthropology has also long questioned the association of anthropological knowledge with rationally argued texts.

[03:09 – 03:18]

Victor Turner

and

Edith Turner

In relation to performance, Victor and Edith Turner in the 1980s used to develop ethnographic performances with their students

[03:28]

Victor and Edith's students perform a fabricated Central Virginian wedding

considering this a better way to teach anthropology, rather than relying solely on reading ethnographic texts.

[03:37]

Johannes Fabian. 1990. *Power and performance: Ethnographic explorations through proverbial wisdom and theatre in Shaba, Zaire*.

In his book, *Power and Performance*, Johannes Fabian presents his work with theatre actors in the Democratic Republic of Congo, then called Zaire. He noted how the actors he had collaborated with carried out their own ethnographic reflections and discussions.

Troupe Theatrale Mufwankolo with whom Fabian collaborated.

This led him to present the text of the performance they co-developed as a main part of the book, and to state that this was 'ethnography with' rather than an ethnography 'of'.

Radical proposals are domesticated or silenced

George Marcus. 2001. "From Rapport under Erasure to Theatres of Complicit Reflexivity." *Qualitative Enquiry* 7 (4): 519–28.

What has tended to happen with every one of these movements is that their challenge to mainstream, rationalistic assumptions of academic knowledge is either domesticated or sidelined and excluded from mainstream anthropology. Radical proposals are made palatable and turned into standard academic texts or, they become sub disciplines, sometimes separate disciplines.

Performance Studies: An introduction

3rd Edition

Richard Schechner

Media editor – Sara Brady

For instance, the performative approach the Turners developed in collaboration with Richard Schechner led to the development of Performance Studies.

[04:41]

Edward Schieffelin. 1998. "Problematizing Performance." In *Ritual, Performance, Media*, edited by Felicia Hughes-Freeland, 194–207. London: Routledge.

In the 1990s Edward Schieffelin, another anthropologist, wrote that this was not heard of again in anthropology except to distinguish an ethnographic from a performance studies approach.

Staging strife: Lessons from performing ethnography with Polish Roma women.

Magdalena Kazubowski-Houston

Nowadays there are a handful of anthropologists who work primarily through performance methods, and even develop forms of performative writing.

Mbonde, Nadia. 2023. "Media, Mediumship, and the Supernatural." *American Anthropologist* website, May 19.

Although multimodal anthropology became all the rage about 5 years ago it is already beginning to be side-lined. Journals such as *American Anthropologist* have a section for multimodal anthropology on their website, but the actual journal has no way of accommodating multimodal contributions.

[05:24]

TAJA: The Australian Journal of Anthropology

"A bird, a flock, a song, and a forest: The decline of Regent Honeyeater life"

Thom van Dooren, Zoë Sadokierski, Myles Oakey, Timo Rissanen, Samuel Widin, Ross Crates.

The Australian Journal of Anthropology published a special issue in 2024 called Epistemic Attunements.

What you see here is one of the pieces on the curatorium website that the editors set up specifically to host the intermedial articles. In their introduction, the editors also explained that this double special issue is likely to be a one off because the journal does not have the resources for work of this sort.

Movements

Hover over the Honeyeater below for play button

[06:24]

Caroline Gatt @ CRASSH

Cambridge Anthro

“There is an orthopraxy at work”

Post Grotowski theatre.

How do people relate?

Maxime le Calvé 25.03.2025

While some key journals are attempting to mainstream multimodal anthropology, such as the Cambridge Anthropology Journal, the vast majority of anthropological publications, conference presentations, ways of teaching, and so on reproduce a colonialist understanding of what academic knowledge is, it is understood as being rational, impersonal, abstractable and only accepted as scholarly when it follows established canons.

Most anthropology conferences and symposia are held in lecture halls like these. The seating is literally bolted to the ground. The orientation is frontal.

While major anthropology conferences now also invite participants to propose workshops or exhibitions, these are normally sideshows.

[07:13 – 07:10]

When I tried to book rooms through the University of Aberdeen for the ‘Of Words and Sounds’ symposium, it was these sorts of rooms that were available. Of course the university also has other very beautiful and flexible venues such as the Linklater rooms. But, these were prohibitively expensive to rent on my research budget.

This is why I preferred to host the event outside of the university at the Dunbar Hall.

[07:56]

Echo and Narcissus: A study on sounding and reflecting

Caroline Gatt

he calls it an epistemological imperative to separate the personal

Martin Savransky. 2016. *The Adventure of Relevance: An Ethics of Social Inquiry*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

from one's subject of study and he talks about this as an ethics of estrangement. In order for a methodology to be considered rigorous, it needs to be an objective methodology, and not a subjective one.

And of course, we know that there are many critiques

Donna Haraway. 1988. "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3: 575–99.

on this with the humanities and social sciences. I'm thinking about Donna Haraway's situated knowledges, way back in the 90s.

but if you think about it, this idea that one's own responses, one's own positions is the only way that we can know is still not that dominant at all. And,

I've come across recently a book by Bruno Latour

Bruno Latour. 2013 (2002). *Rejoicing: Or the torments of religious speech*. UK; USA: Polity Press.

called *Rejoicing, or the torment of religious speech*, in it. The point is that there's one way of speaking which is this aim to convey information, and another which is to generate a transformation, to generate relationships.

Now I wonder

what would happen.

What would happen to forms of argument?

To forms of education.

If, if

Academic speech

were dedicated

to creating forms of closeness

and, distance?

[10:16]

I invited each presenter to use the hall as they needed to. It turned out that they each used a different part of the hall and invited the participants to do something different each time.

a cave!

The participants were at times invited to listen attentively. At other times they were invited to participate in musical improvisations, or theatre tasks generating different atmospheres.

For one presentation the participants were invited to contribute their thoughts on written stickies. For another, they experimented with listening tools.

A rainforest.

Aberdeen!

For each presentation, with a different way of using the hall, the participants helped move tables and chairs, set up, or clear away.

We ate meals together in the kitchen, and washed up together too.

Tim Ingold!!

[11:28 – 11:22]

8. Gey Pin Ang and Nickolai D. Nickolov

“Music Performance by Heuristic Approach”

6. A George Home-Cook

“Sounding Atmospheres: Aurality, Attention and the Aesthetics of Atmosphere”

6. D George Home-Cook

6. C George Home-Cook

6. B George Home-Cook

2. Caroline Gatt

“Echo and Narcissus: A study on sounding and reflecting”

9. Floris Schuiling

“Notation and entextualisation in improvised music”

7. Daniel Rocha

“Improvising together: Making collaborative music with images”

3. Suk-Jun Kim

“Hums, lips sealed, and line”

[12:32]

Hums, lips sealed, and line

Suk-Jun Kim

Suk-Jun’s performance reminded me, that shifting mainstream anthropology’s disciplinary practices, in this case how conferences are curated, would necessarily entail listening to our bodies more, and this in turn could at times be uncomfortable.

[Suk-Jun Kim:]

So I ended up doing a series of humming projects in Berlin, New Mexico and I did this, I did this also in Aberdeen as well. So now I have collected about about 5000 hums from 500 or 600 people.

And, I did I did a couple routes, and, one time it took me five hours for me to walk from one end to the other. The point is that you do not stand still, you have to actually continuously moving. So I so I had to move. But then, you have to walk very, very slow slowly.

That gave me a very interesting aspect of my, my body.

My listening body.

Then, and I needed to make a decision and then so, so certain things about the sound was that the sound was always changing.

I started in there around 930 in the morning, and I ended up, about late in the afternoon. Whole soundscape changes, and you can realise it. But at the same time your body aches, your body really aches.

[15:55]

Music performance by heuristic approach

Gey Pin Ang and Nickolai D. Nickolov

Gey Pin and Nickolai’s research brings to anthropology the living relations song and performance can elucidate between the present and the past, between persons and places.

[Gey Pin Ang:]

Music is here

Whether I call for it or not.

It is always here.

I can not resist.

So this is my way.

Oh, land! Me who shake.

I have walked paths

where my ancestors had to walk

and I have been

Welcomed home.

To speak about what is already happening is like embarking on another journey.

This work started two years ago in the context about questions of space within the architecture in Canterbury Cathedral. Was to bring about sound, music in conversation with that how old?

And before that, of course a part of my journey was about finding the voice of grandparents' generation, which in a different way, has been my since my elementary school has been kind of blocked.

And that was after some ten years that somehow through theater, I was able to refind that contact. So a part of me of that, a conscious search about what is my own songs. If you can say mine. And a part of, of course, this process of working, if you remember that I think was when you were quite a sometime long time ago. I was asking about that and question about songs as steps.

Every steps that we go through, there is some kind of voices, every step, every time. There is somebody.

[21:32]

Floris Schuiling, Utrecht University:

I participated in the 'Of Words and Sounds workshop' in Aberdeen. And what I remember very fondly is how there was a great sense of everyone doing what they felt comfortable doing. Everyone giving a kind of workshop that suited their skills and their interests, and their aims as well in what they wanted they wanted to bring to this symposium. There was a very open atmosphere.

Daniel Rocha, designer:

Things we [sic] just going, and by noon, I felt like I already knew everybody like for ages. I don't know, it's all the faces are so familiar. I could describe everybody's way, just like. And it's. No, it's really quick and that that gave me really the courage to come here today, you know, and to do it.

And I think, I think it's really nice because that thing that you said, we're collectively building this bravery I don't know, everybody's been like more relaxed, more prepared to experiment and therefore more open.

[22:53]

[Caroline Gatt:]

Daniel felt that he needed bravery, a collective bravery to run his session at the symposium. This is because while anthropologists have drawn attention to the importance of human difference, in the dominant mainstreams such difference is only ever presented once it has been through grinder of rational academic analysis.

In order to open the very heart of anthropology to difference, different ways of knowing and the people who bear them will need to be engaged with on their own terms.

[23:47]

Full programme

Aural tools

Attila Faravelli

Echo and Narcissus: A study on sounding and reflecting

Caroline Gatt

Hums, Lips Sealed, and Line

Suk-Jun Kim

Music as an active memory and force connected to a lost world

Miléna Kartowski-Aïach

What is a line of sound?

Tim Ingold

Towards an ecology of singing: Entanglements of places and voices

Valeria Lembo

Improvising together: Making collaborative music with images

Daniel Rocha

Music performance by heuristic approach

Gey Pin Ang and Nickolai D. Nickolov

Notation and entextualization in improvised music

Floris Schuiling

Caroline Gatt – film editing and workshop organisation

Valeria Lembo – workshop organisation

Diego Galafassi – filming and sound

[24:17]

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