

Who Gets to Be an Author?

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Abstract

Who gets to be an author in contemporary anthropology and who does not? How do both questions about authorship expose problems surrounding academic labor and scholarly knowledge production, which have become normative features of the discipline? This essay examines how inherited logics and practices of anthropological authorship allow for the accumulation of intellectual capital for select academic laborers while excluding others, most notably field research assistants and students. Among university faculty, intellectual capital tends to concentrate in the hands of an elite few who are immunized from the demands imposed on most other academics, including unstable employment conditions and heavy course loads. This essay considers how anthropological scholars of labor can challenge the reigning logics of anthropological authorship through the adoption of new methods while also working to confront the neoliberal audit culture in higher education, which has created unsustainable demands for the majority of academic laborers.

Keywords: academic labor, authorship, intellectual immunocapital, knowledge production, research ethics

Introduction

If you read the acknowledgements section of any ethnographic monograph¹, it is common to find that many different people contributed to the writing of the book—interlocutors from “the field,”² conference discussants, graduate mentors, peer reviewers, close friends from graduate school, folks from #AnthroTwitter, and romantic partners past and present. There are, as the old cliché goes, “many authors whose names do not appear on the front cover.” And yet in much of the ethnographic writing in contemporary anthropology, the single author still reigns.

Akhil Gupta (2014) doesn’t hesitate to point out that the single author is clearly a fiction. He argues that its persistence is due to many ethnographers’ self-perception as being part of a craft tradition, rather than

one of an industrial mode of production. “Instead of Taylorized processes broken down into sequential steps, to be done by different grades of laborers ... the craft of ethnography requires that the anthropologist be an integral part of each step of the research process, from the formulation of the problem to data collection and write-up” (Gupta 2014, 395). However, Gupta further asserts that authorship is essentially a claim of ownership rooted in the notion of private property (see Graber 2010). And, I might add, it reflects anthropology’s much critiqued yet all-too-present adherence to a “great man theory” of intellectual history—one that “allows a few to say what is valid for the rest of us,” as Mariolga Reyes Cruz (2008, 653) observes.³

While significant debates surrounding ethnographic positionality emerged in the late 20th century, these did not necessarily diminish the presence of the single author. In fact, the emphasis on reflexivity in ethnographic writing meant that anthropologists often dedicated more attention to their individual situatedness, interior emotional states, and senses of embodiment, among other subjectivized conditions (see, e.g., Behar 1996). However, alternative visions of ethnography that center on collaborative practices and outputs have been steadily growing (see, e.g., El Kotni et al. 2020; Lassiter 2005; Miyarrka Media 2019). These, in turn, have prompted anthropologists and researchers in adjacent disciplines to raise new questions around authorship and how it is determined, especially as interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary forms of investigation become increasingly commonplace and new challenges emerge when attempting to build solidarities in the face of existing epistemic hierarchies (Nagar 2014). As Richa Nagar (2014, 5) affirms: “radical vulnerability and love, reflexivity and risk, translation and coauthorship ... [are] mutually constitutive and interdependent in knowledge making and alliance work.” From this perspective, shared authorship is a reasonable outcome of shared laboring, and it represents an important opportunity for mutual recognition. A corollary is that the absence of such recognition can be a powerful form of denial too.

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Building on these discussions, this essay asks: Who gets to be an author in contemporary ethnographic anthropology and who does not? Moreover, how does inquiry into the norms of authorship expose problems surrounding academic labor and scholarly knowledge production, which have become normative features of the discipline? I take up these questions while considering authorship's articulation with intellectual immunocapital. Olivarius (2019) first introduced the concept of immunocapital to describe how white businessmen who survived yellow fever in antebellum New Orleans were able to leverage their immunized condition to accrue economic capital "with far more certainty" (426). Expanding on this insight, Jegathesan and Amrute (2021) have identified *intellectual* immunocapital as the "tactics of privilege and power that individuals and institutions use to build up immunities—real, performed, and imagined—in academic and other sites of knowledge production."

Here, I specifically examine how the inherited logics and practices of anthropological authorship allow for the accumulation of intellectual capital for some academic laborers while excluding many others. I begin by questioning the exclusion of research assistants, using the working relationship between Franz Boas and George Hunt as a point of departure for exploring dynamics of attribution and authority. I follow with a discussion of "intellectual contribution" as a basis for authorship, which implicitly denies significant forms of manual labor—commonly performed by student researchers—that are foundational to many research projects. In the second half of the essay, I make the case for how anthropological scholars of labor can begin to challenge the existing logics of academic authorship. I highlight, in particular, methods for broadening authorial recognition developed by the CLEAR Lab at Memorial University. At the same time, I show how neoliberal universities' demands for ever-increasing authorial output require other forms of response, exemplified in the slow scholarship movement. Although these two approaches could appear to be at odds, when taken together they offer a glimpse at a more sustainable and equitable model of academic authorship—one that recognizes more diverse anthropological laborers as authors while resisting the pressures to churn out more and more "minimum publishable units."⁴

Authorship Too Often Denied? The Role of "Field" Research Assistants

Though many ethnographers may understand their research and writing to be an individualized craft, this self-conception obscures the reliance upon other laborers who make contributions—both large and small—to the publication of articles and books. Some of the laborers whose names rarely grace the

pages of anthropological journals or scholarly monographs are collaborators "from the field" or research assistants. This exclusion is deeply entrenched in the discipline, and while there are many reasons behind this absence, Gupta (2014) speculates that one may be a desire to cover up anthropologists' anxieties, embarrassments, and "post-colonial guilt" (398). The acknowledgement of research assistants can undermine ethnographic authority because it makes evident that others often serve as the anthropologist's eyes, ears, and mouth—not to mention, hands and feet—when conducting research.⁵ Anthropological inquiry is almost always mediated by and highly reliant on others, but as Gupta notes, admission of this fact can "expose how little the anthropologist knew" about their site of research as well as the people who live and work there (Gupta 2014, 398).

It is a fairly common practice in contemporary ethnographic investigation to pay a research assistant for their labor, but intellectual acknowledgment in the form of authorship can be considered—at least by some—a step too far. In fact, a colleague once shared with me that they did not feel obligated to include research assistants as authors on any manuscripts because they already paid them for their labor. To be sure, this ignores the fact that the scholar who composes any written text based on the same research frequently holds a salaried position or is paid through a research grant. Even when the ideas put to page are exclusively written by the anthropologist, the insights shared and observations reported are rarely, if ever, produced by that single individual.

One need not look much further than the relationship between Franz Boas and George Hunt to expose some of the deeper ambivalences in the anthropological relationship to research assistants and their role as authors. Hunt, who was the son of an English father and Tlingit mother as well as husband of a Kwakwaka'wakw woman, collected artifacts and developed texts of Kwakwaka'wakw oral culture for Boas over the course of 40 years. Boas compensated Hunt for this work and even acknowledged his role in authoring such written accounts. In fact, the volume *Kwakiutl Texts* attributes authorship to both Franz Boas and George Hunt on the cover. However, the frontmatter of the book identifies the texts as being "recorded by George Hunt, edited and revised by Franz Boas." While this acknowledgment is significant in its own right, there are other ways that Hunt's intellectual contributions were obscured or denied by Boas, even intentionally, as Briggs and Bauman (1999, 497) expose in detail:

Although Hunt was vitally interested in contextualizing the texts vis-a-vis the way he had obtained the information (as personal experience,

observation, or through elicitation from particular individuals), Boas does not seem to have been interested in these aspects of Hunt's metadiscursive practices, and he deleted this material from the published texts. Even though Hunt wrote the texts in his own voice, Boas often headed texts with the name of Hunt's source—giving the impression of a much less mediated route of transmission. While Boas thought it important to publish contrastive accounts of the “same” narrative or cultural practice that he obtained from different individuals, he did not point out instances in which Hunt had synthesized several individuals' versions in a single text.

Thus, Hunt's authorship is fundamentally recognized, but his intellectual contributions are largely limited to that of a “recorder,” not unlike the analog and digital technologies that would later become standardized tools of anthropological investigation. In this manner, Boas acknowledged Hunt's instrumental role in the research process without ever ceding his own power as the primary analyst. This framing would seem to suggest that Hunt offered information and Boas transformed it into anthropological knowledge.

That identities of class, race, and gender—and their intersectional dynamics—shape authorship should be surprising to no one.⁶ But it is all too rare that ethnographers openly discuss how these unequal labor relations are foundational to most academic careers, prompting Roger Sanjek (1993) to describe the relations between “assistants and their ethnographers” as anthropology's “hidden colonialism” (see also Middleton and Cons 2014). While attribution of authorship is not a resolution to these inequities, the generalized lack of recognition continues to obscure the diverse and often vital contributions of field research assistants in the production of anthropological knowledge.

“Intellectual Contribution” and Student Authorship

Just as the role of field research assistants can be underplayed or simply ignored in ethnographic authorship, so, too, are the contributions of student researchers. At many institutions of higher education, undergraduate students are encouraged—and sometimes even required—to gain research experience by assisting or working alongside faculty mentors. Undergraduate students help faculty researchers to do literature reviews, transcribe interviews, organize sloppily formatted bibliographies, or assist in attempts to “finally learn EndNote.” In archaeology and biological anthropology, undergraduates may also perform primary data collection—counting potsherds, measuring teeth, or recording biostats. Any faculty member guiding undergraduate researchers knows

that the consistency and quality of such undergraduate input can vary considerably. Still, student labor is foundational to the functioning and execution of many anthropological research projects. The question once again remains whether undergraduate students are also worthy of acknowledgment as authors when lead researchers begin the process of writing up the results of such investigations for peer-reviewed publications or scholarly monographs.

The Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI), which provides the basic guidelines and training of research ethics for most colleges and universities in the United States, suggests that recognition of authorship should be considered for anyone who makes a “significant intellectual contribution to the new information that is the core of the paper” (Bird 2021). But how one identifies or assesses the significance of such intellectual contributions is far from obvious. Does the individual have to contribute directly to the design of the project or the analysis of its findings? Should authorship be considered for someone who raises a few incisive questions at a critical juncture in the research and helps to shape its trajectory and that of ensuing publications? What about all of the tedious work that is not considered to be “intellectual” yet is completely necessary for enabling the publication of research and the “new” knowledge it contributes—all of the data recorded in Excel sheets or interviews transcribed?

This question of “intellectual contribution” strikes at the heart of intellectual immunocapital in higher education. Tenured and tenure-track faculty are expected to draw upon the labor of students and staff to further their scholarly research agendas and career aspirations, but only a limited portion of all laborers will be identified as authors or contributors. What this means, over time, is that recognition of research contribution is concentrated in the names of a select few. Those identified as the theorists, the high-minded analysts, the intellectuals—their labor is treated as what matters, or at least what is deemed worthy of recognition as authors and contributors to “the literature.” All too often, other contributors are treated as “unskilled” or hired hands who merely facilitate and implement the research but whose contributions are almost machinic—treated as recorders and transducers, not intellectual contributors worthy of having their names follow the title of the finished work.

Of course, some might argue that one's early apprenticeship in a discipline like anthropology is oriented toward the mastery of basic tasks that make research projects possible but do not necessarily make “significant intellectual contributions” or lead directly to the development of new knowledge (see Lancy 2012). The lack of available field schools for

emerging ethnographers, especially ones that guide trainees through the writing and publication process, also limit early opportunities for authorship (Hawkins 2014). However, what is ironic is that as one's status elevates in the field, less and less may be required for one's authorship to be identified, particularly where team research is the norm and where seniority looms large. In some instances, it can be an expectation that graduate advisors are included as authors on their student's work. Some of these advisors are, by all accounts, deeply involved with the work and their mentorship underwrites their authorship on any article manuscripts regardless of whether they wrote a single word or not. However, in other instances, authorship is a premium paid for working with an advisor, regardless of whether they contribute significantly to the student's body of work or not. The question that remains is: How might diverse laborers—including students and field researchers but also advisors and other interlocutors—be evaluated fairly and equitably for potential recognition as authors?

Methods for Authorship Otherwise

Many researchers are questioning the reigning logics and status quo assumptions of authorship in anthropology and adjacent fields. One significant departure from the model centered solely on “intellectual contribution” has been developed by the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR)—a feminist, anti-colonial, marine science laboratory. In the CLEAR Lab Book (2021) specific guidelines are established for determining authorship and equity in author order in any research publications. This process begins by members of the lab taking into consideration contributions to both “the heart of the work” (i.e., what makes the paper significant) and “the hands of the work” (i.e., all the forms of labor that went into the paper). This includes “things that are usually recognized in science like sample collection and statistics” but also “types of labour involved in care and reproduction of the research collective like coordinating meetings, cleaning, organizing” (CLEAR 2021, 59). The “hands of the work” recognized by CLEAR is wide-ranging, including: research design, ethics and permissions, sample collection, processing of samples, coordinating (with partners, shipping, data transfer, meetings, travel), training, data entry, cleaning data, statistics, developing and testing protocols, cleaning, quality assurance and quality control, writing, editing, validation (via community review, internal review, ethics compliance), validation (via models, statistics), conducting literature reviews, acquiring funding, administration of payments (including fees, material costs, and salaries), theorization, analysis, ensuring the health and

wellness of the research team, and making hard calls on accountability and ethics.

Once the contributions involved are recognized, the lab identifies which types of labor most contributed to “the heart of the work” and who contributed that labor. Further steps are then involved to determine equity in author order (see also Liboiron et al. 2017). For step 9 in this process, the lab book asks: “who is an author?” It states: “Not everyone in the list might be an author. Authors must be accountable to the contents, findings, and arguments of the paper. They must, in effect, be researchers in the broad definition of the term (that includes Inuit hunters, but likely not fish). When in doubt, ask. Do not remove an author without consent from them” (CLEAR 2021, 62).

In tracing CLEAR's methods, one finds a much more intentional and expansive notion of authorship than what is commonplace in anthropology. Most important, this approach provides a methodology for identifying the various forms of labor that contributed to a work, the laborers who contributed, the order by which authors should be recognized, and the responsibilities that come with such recognition. Not only does this allow for broader recognition of authorship, it also allows the lab to develop consensus around the labor that matters most, independent of status or standing. While far too many academic laborers are denied recognition of authorship, the opposite problem is also widespread in academia: authorship granted without “significant intellectual contributions” made. Through the methods outlined above, the CLEAR Lab offers one viable model for authorship otherwise.

Anthropologists and ethnographers should be paying closer attention to these innovations in method, which can produce greater equity among the laborers who contribute to any individual publication. However, it is worthy of cautioning that the adoption of these methods will not necessarily challenge what has been described as the “publication arms race”—a competition for scholarly status and prestige waged through publication output (Barrett 2019). In other words, while more laborers' names may appear on more papers using the methods outlined by CLEAR, this will not alter expectations of scholarly productivity in the neoliberal university, nor discourage scholars from seeking distinction by “outpublishing” their peers. In fact, such methods could even have the unintended effect of ratcheting up the already high expectations of authored publications. To address these problems, then, it is necessary to confront neoliberal audit culture—and its obsessive metricizing of research output—which

has come to dominate in much of North American higher education.⁷

The Problem of Authorship under Neoliberal Audit Culture

“Publish or perish” no longer holds. The ethos now is “always publish more.”⁸ Graduate students, postdoctoral scholars, visiting lecturers, and starting assistant professors all find themselves working—sometimes sleeplessly—to keep up with the rising bar of expected research output. As another adage, recently reinvigorated on #AcademicTwitter, observes: “academia is like a pie eating contest where prize is more pie” (Lindeman 2018; see also Planey 2021).

The numbers bear this out. Recent research in sociology, for example, shows that starting assistant professors today have published on average twice as much as their predecessors in the same position only 20 years ago (Warren 2019). Such pressures have also unleashed what Gusterson (2017, 441) describes as “an epidemic of ‘salami publishing,’ whereby research results are reported in multiple separate publications” to maximize the number of scholarly outputs. Not only does this contribute to bad research (Smaldino and McElreath 2016) and the oft-unwelcome proliferation of theoretical neologisms through which scholars “make a name” for themselves, but perhaps most important, these trends in publication are unsustainable for the majority of academic laborers.

The pressure on scholars to author more and more articles—either as solo written pieces or collective team efforts—can be attributed, at least in part, to the rise of what Marilyn Strathern (1996) identified as “audit culture,” which is integral to the neoliberal model of higher education (see also Gusterson 2017; Strathern 2000). This includes the expanded use of bibliometrics for evaluating research output, including the impact factor of journals in which scholars publish, citation counts of individual publications, and other indices that are designed to capture general scholarly productivity and influence (e.g., h-index; i10-index). Through this process, Shore and Wright (2000, 62) describe how audit culture has cultivated a new image of the scholarly subject too: “The audited subject is recast as a depersonalized unit of economic resource whose productivity and performance must constantly be measured and enhanced” (also cited in Gusterson 2017).

Unsurprisingly, audit culture has imposed rigid hierarchies of value when assessing the different forms of academic labor that are integral to the university (Boyer 2016). When not researching or writing, most academics are likely teaching—or attending to its many related demands—but as Harney and Moten (2013) point out, teaching in the university is “often mistakenly taken to be a stage” (27). It is what

comes *before* academics establish themselves as authors with recognizable names. “If the stage persists, there is a social pathology in the university,” Harney and Moten quip with biting irony (27). In the neoliberal university, being an author is what matters. Being a teacher matters less.

Yet it is largely the well-endowed elite universities that can provide scholars with significant time and support—including course reductions, research releases, and generous sabbaticals—to be just writers. The net effect is that this allows for intellectual capital to concentrate in the hands of an elite few who are immunized from the demands imposed on most other academics, including unstable employment, heavy course loads, and overwhelming service requirements. To put it plainly, a tenured professor at an Ivy League institution has more time, resources, and social capital than most recent PhDs adjuncting at a regional university ever will, and this fundamental difference matters greatly for who has the time to write, whose writing appears in the most prestigious scholarly venues, whose name circulates most widely and frequently in academic circles, and, ultimately, whose authorship comes to matter.

In this light, neoliberal audit culture exacerbates authorial inequity while reinforcing the concentration of intellectual immunocapital in the hands of an elite few. But because all of this works against the interests of the majority of academic laborers, creative forms of response and resistance are brewing. One of the most resonant calls has come from a collective of feminist geographers advocating for a movement of “slow scholarship” (Mountz et al. 2015). Slow scholarship is designed and practiced with the intention of resisting the accelerated timelines and outputs expected of academic laborers under the neoliberal restructuring of higher education. As Mountz and colleagues point out in plain terms, both good scholarship and good teaching require time—slow work that is threatened by the institutional accounting practices of audit culture. Such demanding conditions, they add, “exact an isolating psychic and physical toll that is neither reasonable nor sustainable” (Mountz et al. 2015, 1237). “We find a need amid the chaos,” they further assert, “to slow—things—down” (Mountz et al. 2015, 1238). For many academics now reeling from the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, heeding this call is not a question of choice—it has become a necessity.

Conclusion

In the recent debate over “the case for letting [US academic] anthropology burn,” one of the discussions has pivoted around what of American anthropology’s history and inheritances might be salvaged and what might be better left in the ashes (Jobson 2020). One place to start is with what we might call (at least half

tongue-in-cheek) “critical meta-anthropology”—an approach that investigates the everyday ways that anthropological work reproduces social inequities.⁹ Such a project can help sort out how the discipline can begin to unlearn its most troubling habits, including those involved in the practices of research, writing, and representation. This includes, as I have shown here, dedicating greater scrutiny to inherited norms of authorship, which are inextricably linked to colonial models of knowledge production and capital accumulation.

This raises the following questions: What alternative models of anthropological authorship are possible, and what existing experiments are worthy of amplification? Here I have highlighted two models, developed by feminist scholars largely working outside of anthropology, which deserve further consideration and engagement. First, CLEAR’s methods for author identification provide a useful set of guidelines for expanding recognition beyond “intellectual contribution” while also considering issues of equity in author order as well as responsibilities that come with authorship. Second, the slow scholarship movement draws critical attention to the fact that the ever-increasing demand for authored publications under neoliberal models of higher education is unsustainable, even impossible, for the majority of academics. When taken together, these two models offer opportunities to simultaneously expand ideas about what labor (or whose labor) is worthy of recognition while also resisting the pressure to increase authored publications and outputs at all costs. As we face a global pandemic with no clear end in sight, and as academic laborers have been stretched to their limits (and beyond), there is no better time to reimagine how authorship is enacted, identified, shared, and valued.

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conversations with Sydney Silverstein and Mark Moritz were also critical to the development of several of the ideas presented here. Kathy White deserves a special shout-out for exemplary copy editing. Any errors remain my own.

Notes

- 1 There is an uncomfortable irony here that this essay fundamentally questions the myth of the single-authored article and then implicitly reproduces this myth here at the onset. Many different individuals contributed to the ideas presented here, including the special issue editors, two anonymous peer-reviewers, interlocutors from a conference panel, and several close colleagues (see Acknowledgments). I wrote this, at least in its original form, as a personal essay and not as a research article that may have otherwise required input from research assistants, student laborers, or other contributors. Undoubtedly, if this essay had been written collaboratively, it would more effectively model some of the arguments laid out here. This is a fundamental contradiction that I must acknowledge and take responsibility for.
- 2 The problematics of the construction “of the field” in anthropological fieldwork also demand greater attention and scrutiny, as highlighted recently by Savannah Shange (2019, 159), among others.
- 3 Foucault (1984) argued that an author’s name is not just an element of speech but also a “means of classification” that serves to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society. This is what he comes to describe as the “author function.” Notably, prominent theorists’ surnames (almost always of men) are frequently used in an adjectival form to reference their theoretical approach (e.g., “Foucauldian” analysis; see Lutz 1995 for a feminist critique). In a more recent decolonial critique, Mariolga Reyes Cruz (2008) questions how academic knowledge production consolidates power in the names of an elite few while denying the knowledge of social scientists’ non-academic interlocutors, who oftentimes provide “intellectual grounding” not just “data collecting” (652).
- 4 This is a phrase used by academics, particularly in the sciences, to describe the minimum elements or information required to publish an article from a larger research project. The intention behind this strategy—also known as “salami publishing”—is to maximize the total number of published outputs or findings from a single research project. Such minimum units of publication can also be referred to as “smallest publishable units,” “least publishable units,” or “just publishable units.”
- 5 Questions should also be raised here, following Erin Durban (2022), regarding the implicit ableism in much of anthropological fieldwork that is derived from earlier colonial models.

- 6 For example, Laura Heath-Stout's (2020) recent intersectional study of authorship in archaeological journals demonstrates how, despite growing numbers of women, people of color, and queer people in the field in the past few decades, articles in the most prestigious journals continue to over-represent archaeologists who are white, straight, cis-gender men. See also Hutson 2017 on gendered citation practices in archaeology.
- 7 This echoes other recent calls by scholars in the social sciences and humanities to examine the seemingly banal and everyday workings of the neoliberal university that perpetuate the logics and practices foundational to settler colonialism, white supremacy, and US military hegemony (see, e.g., Chatterjee and Maira 2014; Williams et al. 2021).
- 8 This comes with a caveat—there is pressure to publish more but also to do so in the most prestigious journals (see Beck et al. 2021).
- 9 Gusterson describes this critical and reflexive approach to anthropology as a form of “homework.”

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