

Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 14 | Issue 1

Article 13

4-30-2016

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Recommended Citation

Londoño Sulkin, Carlos D. (2016). "On Engagement with the Works of Peers," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 13, 147-151.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol14/iss1/13>

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On Engagement with the Works of Peers

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Abstract

The *Conversations in the Lobby* event was established in memory of Steve Rubenstein, a colleague brimming with generous advice for young colleagues and peers. On the occasion of the X Sesquiannual Conference of SALSA, Carlos D. Londoño Sulkin follows in this spirit by generating and facilitating discussion about scholars' engagement with peers' work, when they anonymously review manuscripts, tenure applications, and grant proposals, or when they sustain vigorous academic exchanges with colleagues via email, letters, and blogs. Londoño Sulkin addresses the importance of such engagement, its forms, and its political, institutional, and personal entailments, and proffers some advice.

This brief presentation was part of the third iteration of the *Conversations in the Lobby* event. The inaugural *Conversations in the Lobby* took place at the VIII Sesquiannual Conference of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA), in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2013. The event was created to honor our much-loved, then recently departed colleague Steve Rubenstein, particularly by reproducing in a different format a service that he provided to students, young colleagues, and peers: Steve would constantly distill and formulate insights about our professional lives as anthropologists and as academics, and share them as advice. He also connected colleagues, introducing people to each other not just by name but by suggesting at some length which arguments, articles, or other features of one acquaintance could be of interest to another. This usually took place at American Anthropological Association (AAA) or SALSA conference venue lobbies, where, as his friend Daniela Peluso put it, he would camp at a table and "hold court", surrounded by students and friends. (Hence, *Conversations in the Lobby*.) He was very good at this, and even when people disagreed with the particulars of his advice, most of us bore it in mind because it was based on keen observation, careful thought, and long experience.

As Academic Program Chair for the SALSA conference back in 2013, I asked Glenn Sheppard (Museu Goeldi) to speak about ways of making anthropological insights and knowledge public, other than as academic articles and books; he broached the matter of blogs. A great discussion ensued, with colleagues bringing up stories of different venues for publication and efforts at making their work available or more accessible. I also asked another colleague to speak about issues, practices, and politics of citation, with instructions to address it in Steve's style, as avuncular advice for younger colleagues. At the IX Sesquiannual Conference's *Conversations* event, in Gothenburg in 2014, Beth Conklin initiated an exploratory discussion about engaging more optimistically and idealistically with the possibilities of our discipline. She called for a consideration of how Amazonian anthropologists' intimate knowledge of cultural differences might serve as resources to think critically about alternative paths toward a healthier, more equitable future. I keep hoping these *Conversations in the Lobby* will become standard SALSA fare at our Sesquiannual conferences.

This time I've been asked to speak myself, and in the same spirit of prior events, I want to broach the matter of anthropologists' engagement with peers' work, when they review manuscripts, tenure applications, and grant proposals, when they take on service roles such as editorships, or when they sustain vigorous academic exchanges with colleagues via email, letters, and blogs. I will address the importance of such engagement, its forms, and its political, institutional, and personal entailments, proffer some advice, and then open the floor for discussion.

At universities and for learned societies, the value of *being* peer reviewed is well established. For one thing, peer review ensures (for a certain value of 'ensuring') that scholars' data, analyses, and presentations are exposed to critical scrutiny, and on that basis accepted as persuasive, well-founded, or otherwise virtuous accounts of some aspect of our world, or else rejected. Ideally, peer review serves a certain pragmatism, making it all the more likely that publications meet institutional and disciplinary academic standards as determined by the application of relevant criteria -- explanatory clarity, thoroughness of argumentation, adequacy of literature review, technological applicability, predictive success, originality, elegance of expression, contribution to community-building, or some other established value. Most of us would probably be less trusting of the claims put forward in a vanity press publication than we would in claims put forward in a journal renowned for its stringent, double-blind review process. Some would also value the fact that in its various forms peer review can serve to keep key decisions -- whether an article gets published, or a faculty member gets tenure, for example -- from being solely the purview of an editor or administrator. This arguably makes these matters more democratic and meritocratic.

Peer review can do much to improve the quality of the work that scholars eventually publish. I know of peer reviewers effectively pushing authors to streamline a book or article's central argument, to provide early, crisp signposts, to reorder sections or chapters so that important points are presented in the most logical or effective order, to get rid of fluffy or unimportant bits, to include pertinent literature, and generally to present materials in ways that make them more interesting and relevant. I am always impressed when readers clearly grasp the big picture of a complex piece and can formulate critical insights incisively and helpfully. An example of such a case was when an anonymous reviewer compellingly identified several important points in a manuscript I'd submitted, formulated the relationship between these and the main gist of my manuscript elegantly and crisply, and asked me to make this relationship explicit early on, rather than let these important points sneak up on readers. A comment that is almost a cliché but is nonetheless useful -- in one form or another it's been addressed independently to me and to several colleagues -- is that this or that piece should either feature summing-up paragraphs at the end of each section or chapter, or come up with some other form of helpful signposting. A common piece of advice in anthropology is that authors not separate theory chapters from ethnography chapters, but rather have the theory come up organically in the ethnographic descriptions. Peers at times also help each other hit the right spot between thin and therefore unpersuasive ethnographic descriptions, and an excess of ethnographic detail that may actually distract from compelling main claims. Finally, reviewers can catch onto that little typo, unhappy turn of phrase, unclear reference, or improperly referenced quote, that our manuscripts perversely hide from our own tired eyes.

Of course, at times reviewers are tough. They may catch onto the fact that an author's claims are poorly buttressed, the background readings insufficient, the choice of venue not quite right, or that there is some other issue with quality, relevance, or rigor. By recommending that a piece be rejected, they thereby protect the journal or press, the discipline, the state of knowledge, perhaps the people the author was writing about, and arguably, the reputation and potential of the author him or herself. Much more often than not, because anthropologists are for the most part an intelligent, ethically motivated crowd, reviewers' comments are useful, or at the very least honest. (Lest it all be virtues, let me admit that peer review can on occasion have a conservative or quietistic effect, when reviewers have difficulty engaging with an open mind with arguments that fly against established theories.) In any case, I would always urge us to engage with their comments judiciously and graciously.

Most colleagues, young and old, don't need this piece of advice, because it is common wisdom and aligns well with the requirements of academic employment. Still, I'll proffer it: *put your work out there in ways that will subject it to critical scrutiny. Consult on it with friends or colleagues, but go for blind peer reviewed venues as well.*

That hardly needed saying in our current academic economy, and the greater focus of this piece is on the other side of the coin: scholars' own engagement with peers' work, as a service to their disciplines, their institutions, or to academia more generally. Recognition of the latter is not as straightforward or clear. This is paradoxical, since it's a necessary condition for the peer reviews that academia values so much. Not long ago, a colleague in a performance review committee grumbled to me about a fellow in the same committee who questioned the importance or value of faculty members' book reviews and grant evaluations, while taking for granted the value of applying for grants and getting them, and of having one's book reviewed in a journal. She reported that she had angrily posed the question "Who, then, is going to bother to review your book when it comes out?!" So there are forces militating against peers' engagement with others' work. While requests for reviews can be an honor –after all, if a journal editor or tenure review chair asks one to evaluate and comment on colleagues' work, he or she is to some extent recognizing one as a reliable person of discernment and expertise –I suspect that much of the evidence scholars provide of their own review of peers' work tends to get short shrift in the considerations of tenure and promotion committees. It makes sense, then, that invitations to peer review appear to many as unwelcome inconveniences, since to acquiesce to requests to evaluate articles for journals, manuscripts for university presses, or grant proposals for research councils is to commit one's time to work other than one's own, perhaps at the cost of putting the latter out there in a timely fashion.

Nevertheless, I would still urge my peers and younger colleagues to *engage with others' work, and to do so with vigor, honesty, and judiciousness*. This can be brief: a thoughtful, well-informed one-sentence response in a blog, for example, or a paragraph sent to our learned society's list-serve. Certainly some of our engagements are 'lite', but like our meatier work, some can also be serious contributions to the integrity and shape of our disciplines, the state of knowledge, and the workings of academia. Part of this work is almost invisible, but even then it likely stimulates us, offers us a chance to flex and strengthen our intellectual muscle, and keeps us current. With some forms of engagement with peers, we also establish and maintain edifying, academic footings of relationships with colleagues in this fashion. (I'll return to the original inspiration for these *Conversations in the Lobby*, Steve Rubenstein, and note that he sustained long, substantive email exchanges with a number of his colleagues, exchanges that were unquestionably deep and scholarly *in their own right*.)¹ However, I'll admit that this is advice young colleagues must take with a grain of salt, since such work isn't always deemed 'sufficient' for tenure purposes or advancement in the academic ranks. Hence my sense that there is a need to push for more recognition at academic institutions of our reviewing and refereeing activities and other forms of engagement with peers' work.

This brings me to the complex matter of peer participation in performance review at universities, that is, when we are heads of departments, deans, members of performance review committees, and writers of letters of reference for tenure cases. It is usually a good thing, *if there is to be performance review of academics in the first place*, that it involve the participation of fellow scholars and not just a decision by a lone administrator. In this context, our deployment of our expert academic judgment is both an academic matter and an employment matter, with particularly direct consequences on the stability of employment and the salaries of the peers we evaluate. This makes reviewing peers, and being reviewed by peers, more problematic, and certainly the employment entailments distract from the formative aspect of reviews. In other contexts, we may want others to engage critically with our writing and teaching and to provide the kind of tough constructive feedback we can sink our teeth into, but in performance review we may resent such constructive criticism because it may lead to negative career decisions. (As an aside, I'll mention an AAA webinar where somebody mentioned that anthropologists were particularly tough as peer and performance reviewers, standing out as such when in multidisciplinary performance review committees. I would counsel performance reviewers, in line with the Canadian Association of University Teachers, that they focus not on whether colleagues 'excel' or 'exceed expectations', but rather, more simply, on whether they meet institutional standards.)

In the spirit of fostering recognition for scholars' engagements with peers, I would urge young (and old) colleagues to *take on at some point roles that allow them to influence their universities' processes for performance review*: in collective bargaining, performance review, and other such committees, and in bodies that work on due processes and standards for performance review. In such roles, they should *exhort the importance of scholars' role not only as producers of original knowledge*

based on their own original research, but also as contributors to others' production of knowledge. A morsel of language that one such committee I worked with proposed reads as follows:

Since evaluation by peers, or others as appropriate, is an integral aspect of scholarship, members need to publish or otherwise disseminate their work in ways that allow for a rigorous evaluation of its quality. (Hereinafter the term "dissemination" shall be used to refer to publication and all its professional equivalents.) Members' own participation in peer review processes shall also be recognized as a valued aspect of scholarship.

This was incorporated into our Faculty of Arts criteria document at the University of Regina, and as a result, those participating in performance review processes -- initial reviewers, performance review committees, and deans -- are bound by due process to recognize faculty members' participation in peer review. It is a humble but still substantive bit of language on which faculty members can stand and make a case that their engagement with peers' work does constitute *bona fide* performance of their duties. I would have liked stronger language, myself, expressing that the university and the Faculty of Arts recognized the value of a wider range of forms of engagement between peers. (A question relating to this, and that I have posed to colleagues, is whether an academic career could be built entirely on (high-quality) book reviews. I would say that it could.)

I think often of the two anonymous reviewers of a book manuscript I submitted to the University of Toronto Press. It would be my hope that at their institutions, performance reviewers somehow acknowledged this pair's work on my manuscript. After all, to come up with their insights and suggestions, these peers must have been disciplined and energetic. They must have spent the equivalent of at least one work week of exclusive dedication to this task. They had to have read the manuscript with thoroughness and sharp attention, and to deploy a great deal of previous background knowledge about anthropology, about my regional specialization, about current trends, and about writing and editing. They were manifestly capable of examining a text close up, with an eye for detail, and yet were experienced and intelligent enough to develop a general sense of the text's layout as a whole. Because they could do this, they were able to catch on to weaknesses in the text. However, they were also creative, making the extra effort of couching their critical insights as practical recommendations for improvement. They combined gentleness and diplomacy with a manifest commitment to pinpoint weaknesses and strengths explicitly. I admit that for them to make their work in this regard available to a tenure or promotion committee offers some challenges--such as for example that of maintaining my confidentiality--but I still hope somebody at their institution caught on to the quality of their work and gave it some recognition. (I'd also hope their reviewers bore in mind that by engaging with my manuscript this pair were furthermore keeping themselves current and the scholarship in their discipline significant.)

In the cover letters and documentation that I submitted as part of my own tenure and promotion applications, I underscored that I made it a point to engage vigorously with my peers, in the forms of confidential or blind reviews of manuscripts, grant applications, and tenure and promotion applications, of book reviews, and just as importantly, of rigorous email conversations with colleagues. I submitted as part of these applications printouts of several such conversations, and pointed in no uncertain terms to the value and high scholarly quality of these academic exchanges. I also mentored colleagues to address this in their own tenure and promotion packages. Doing so was not risk-free; performance review committees at my university have featured among their members people with very different, and sometimes impatient, views of what kind of work merits or doesn't merit inclusion or consideration in a tenure or promotion package, and wary of insubstantial padding of resumes. The same is true at other institutions, I'm sure. Hence the importance of our reiterating, over our careers, that we value engagement with peers and are persuaded that it should be recognized as an essential part of our scholarly activities and responsibilities. Another way in which I belabored this was in my own capacities as head of my department and as anonymous referee for tenure cases at other universities, where I was consistently on the lookout for evidence of scholars' engagement with their peers, and celebrated it where it happened.

Making the case for the value of engagement with peers' work is not to serve ourselves selfishly, even if it may pay off individually; much more importantly, we will be working to

ensure that there is space and motivation for critical, formative, rigor-ensuring, nourishing conversations among us.

This paper was written for an audience of anthropologists focused on lowland South America, so let me finish with a relevant note about a Speech of Apprising (or myth) among People of the Centre (Colombian Amazon). They often insist that no person alone can ever achieve a big and truly fundamental task on their own. This need for others was also true for the creator deity, who was alone at first, and so was forced to dialogue with his own knee. He could create, but only with great difficulty, and then only poorly. Eventually, after much tripping up, he managed to create a proper interlocutor, and thereafter he became much more efficacious, and his creations worthier. People need other people, among other things as necessary partners in the ritual dialogues that ensure the world—and people's bodily health and thought processes—work as they should. As they say, no person can heal him or herself! Even a shaman needs others to reveal to him, in conversation, his true state of being, and to catch onto the true causes of his tribulations. That, there, is a good metaphor for our need as scholars to engage with others' work, and to have them engage with others.

Notes

¹Steve Rubenstein was remarkably generous in this regard, taking the time to read his peers' work and to comment at length on it. He vigorously sustained edifying conversations with a number of us, and refused to let these conversations fade away without issue. I certainly benefited from this, and I reciprocated. We read each other's manuscripts and held lengthy, substantive, reiterative email exchanges about them. I cherish the memory. It is particularly appropriate that I thank here a number of peers with whom I have also had rigorous, worthwhile, and sometimes long academic exchanges: anthropologists Ellen Basso, Janet Chernela, Daniela Peluso, Fuambai Ahmadu, Rick Shweder, Don Kulick, Anne Meneley, Beth Conklin, Amy McLachlan, Juan Echeverri, Michael Brown, Glenn Shepard, George Mentore, Fernando Santos-Granero, Suzanne Oakdale, Magnus Course, Robert Storrie, Anouska Komlosy, and Els Lagrou; my two dear historian friends, Sergio Mejia and Philip Charrier; my own dean, economist Rick Kleer; and mathematicians Antonio Vélez and Juan Diego Vélez. And whoever they might be, I would like to thank anonymous reviewers of my own work.