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Confessions of an Anthropological Poser

David Delgado Shorter

Forgive me father for I have sinned: it has been seventeen years since I began studying anthropology.

In 1992, I met the governor of Yoem Pueblo, Felipe Molina, and we began our friendship that continues today. A year after meeting, I proposed to him a plan of study that would help me correct some of the misrepresentations in the ethnographic record. After thinking about my plans, he invited me to his mother's home to discuss the plan with her and him together. He then talked about a colloquialism in his tribe, translated as "putting something in someone else's hands." He talked about the ways that elders end formal speeches and dancers end rituals, often saying, "We now put this in your hands." The intention, he said, was that the listener understands all that is at stake in the work of cultural continuity, and the words literally bring the listener to a moment of transition: Here, right now, you now have something in your hands. How will you act accordingly? After expressing the Yoeme meaning of the phrase, his mother cleared my plate and coffee cup, and he said he thought my interest in clarifying the ethnographic record was valid and important, that he felt I was coming from a good space in my interests, and that he was putting it in my hands.

I assume that many non-Natives who work with Native communities have similar stories, tales of the moment they were invited or welcomed as a

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person and a scholar into their field communities. I hope I am right in that assumption. Because something so important was put in my hands, I have proceeded to act in certain ways within the pueblo that maintain my right relations with people. That way of being, too much to detail here, has led to more than seventeen years of continued conversation with families in Yoeme pueblos in Mexico and Arizona. This fine line of maintaining right relations is what I found relevant to discuss today, in particular, the ways I have failed to be a good anthropologist according to commonplace scholarly expectations. Something about tenure, perhaps, or having a new book out, leads me to feel a bit liberated. Since one of my next projects explores the use of “fragments” as a particular writing strategy for life histories, I want to share a series of short fragments that evidence, perhaps more than one should, the ways I have drawn the line around my work. About the ways I have not done what one “should” in this profession. Perhaps we can together draw some lessons about how to work collaboratively and effectively as Natives, scholars, and Native scholars.

WORKING WITHIN VERSUS CHANGING STRUCTURES

Just days after Felipe put “it in my hands,” I realize I have a graduate project and that the golden moment of graduate education has come: I have found “my people and place,” an ethnographic necessity. I, of course, need a committee, and I know I must build it with as many Native studies scholars as possible. I am referred to a professor who works with an indigenous tribe. I tell him in the hallway how excited I am to have a project in a tribe and ask him for any advice about fieldwork with Native communities since I would be leaving soon for my first extended stay in the pueblo. He tells me how great it is that I have secured a field site and tells me that I have only one thing to remember: “Do and say whatever you need to get the information you need for your thesis.” I am to this day sure he was dead serious. I did not work with him. Although, like many students, I needed to form a committee, I did do so in a way that was structurally difficult but remains a learning lesson: I petitioned the university to allow Felipe Molina, as a tribal official, to be one of the three required committee members. I wanted a Yoeme person to have signatory power over whether my MA thesis was good. I did this again for my PhD, at the University of California, Santa Cruz, when, because they required all committee members to have a PhD, I had Octaviana Trujillo, the first Yoeme woman to receive a PhD, to be available by phone for that qualifying exam. These were not easy steps, and they sometimes forced my non-Native advisers and university administrators to grumble about the extra work.

THE MIND IS A TERRIBLE THING TO OVERESTIMATE

In the second year of fieldwork, a tribal elder approached me and told me that she had heard about me, that I was working with other elders, and that she wanted to tell me what she learned when she went to college. She proceeded to tell me that one of the things she thought was really confusing about college is that they expected her to know everything about something, to read everything that was ever written about it, to become an “expert,” so to speak. I agreed that these steps seemed to be the case in graduate study. She asked me if I hoped to be an expert on Yoeme people. I responded that I wanted to know a lot but not everything, to know something about much of Yoeme ways of life, but not about all ways of life. I told her, “I think it would be impossible even for a Yoeme, much less a non-Yoeme, to know everything about their culture, history, and language.” She nodded silently and asked if I expected to read everything ever written about the Yoeme. I said, “Yes, I do think that’s part of my job.” She asked if I had read any Carlos Castaneda yet. I told her that I had not, which was the truth. She said, “Good. Don’t read a word of what he wrote until your first book is finished.” I will not go on here, but you can imagine how it must have been for more than a decade when all anyone asks you about your work is what you think of Carlos Castaneda, and all I could say was that I had not read him. The looks from senior scholars and colleagues were of disbelief and judgment: reading everything is the bare minimum! How odd for an academic to say, “I don’t need that in my head as I figure my own things out.” How odd not to try to read everything.

BROTHER, CAN YOU SPARE AN INVITATION?

When asked to give a talk today, I was immediately honored. Since the topic was on collaboration, I thought it appropriate to ask if I can bring my primary tribal collaborator to copresent with me. The respectful response from our organizers was that the structure of the event and the panel did not allow for that sort of copresentation. I am not criticizing our organizers; I want to emphasize that. My point is that I asked, and I do believe they considered the request seriously. We should keep asking about such copresences if we are serious about collaboration, in the real sense. To not ask, to not at least attempt to bring nonacademic Native voices to these types of events and other meetings, we are directly responsible for the divide of us and them: us taking knowledge from a people and a place and distributing it here where we are at. The divide is not Native and non-Native, it is about respecting the knowledge bearers enough to invite them, pay for them, listen to them in our spaces. Such invitations help deconstruct my “expert” status and their location as from where we extract data.

LIFE IS NOT A LABORATORY

Accordingly, my fourth and last fragment is the most important. Although years after I developed my own way about it, we see it published in Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (1999). I went to the tribe with a particular question in mind: how do geographic spaces provide Yoeme people with access to cosmic dimensionality? That was 1992. My MA thesis looked a little like that. My PhD changed again. My book is even more different than the dissertation. The reasons why my focus and scope changed are because the community helped me refocus what I could do productively. So although any university human subjects/institutional review board application will say otherwise (and although we professors will insist that you have a testable hypothesis), collaboration means collaborating not just on how to go about doing your work but also on what your work is at all. I had to think about what theory and method were from a Yoeme perspective, not try to fit Yoeme perspective into my ready-made methods and theories. The result is that my fieldwork looked a lot like hanging out with family. Not completely, but enough from a Yoeme perspective for them to know I would come back and my labor will contribute to the health and vitality of the community. I do not write about secret societies though I learned much about and from them. I do not write about women's work because, as I understand it, that it is not my place to do so in Yoeme conceptions of gender divisions. I have only published what a Yoeme male academic would have if he wanted to someday return "home" without offending others. This is difficult work because like reading everything, an objective, nonreciprocal, laboratory-like environment assumes that all knowledge is valuable, and a good observer will observe and report everything affecting the hypothesis or theory being tested. In my relations, however, I do not want to know everything. I do not hope to say all that I do know.

I will close this confession by admitting that I have not been the most perfect scholar. I often bother organizers of conferences and publishers by asking more of them than they are used to, because I think working with tribal people requires more: more attention to words, issues of colonization, issues of representation, and issues of intersubjectivity not objectivity. Many of my listeners and readers will think, "But of course." But I believe we would be none the worse for reminding ourselves and our students that a way can be made in this corporate institution, in fact must be made, to proceed assuming that all people make knowledge differently, and so making it together requires structural changes to our very notion of scholarship and, of course, what counts as "science" as well as a scientific method.

Last, I want to end where most of my talks begin: a deep thank you. UCLA was, for many of us trained in the late 1980s and 1990s, the place one

wanted to be doing Native studies. Along with the Newberry Library, landing a gig with or getting a piece picked up by a UCLA publication meant you were in the conversation. I am honored to be here, not just speaking but now as faculty. To those who did the heavy lifting for so long, both in and out of this room, and to those on whose land we now sit, and to all my relations, *Lios em choikoe* (Thank you).