

Notes from the Field: When Are You Not An Anthropologist?

Saffo Papantonopoulou
School of Anthropology, University of Arizona

A friend, who is pursuing a PhD in a social science other than anthropology, once asked me, “When are you not an anthropologist?” She asked in all seriousness and with the understanding that the question probably does not have an answer. I felt that the question spoke to an important tension within the field of anthropology, especially when we talk about the question of “anthropology at home” (Peirano 1998)—whatever “home” is. Unlike other, less reflexive disciplines such as philosophy or political science, which generally remain in the realm of abstraction, anthropology of the post-Writing Culture variety thrives on constant reflection on the part of the anthropologist about herself and the world around her. Distinguishing between when she is functioning in the realm of theory, and when she is simply interacting with the world around her, becomes incredibly blurry and uncertain.

In 1971, Louis Althusser coined the concept of “interpellation,” writing that:

I shall then suggest that ideology “acts” or “functions” in such a way that it “recruits” subjects among the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: “Hey, you there!” (1971 174, *Italics in original*).

While much of Althusser’s quintessentially structuralist foundation has been critique—most notably, the notion of capital or the state as singular, monolithic entities (See Ap-

padurai 1996, Sunder Rajan 2006)—the notion of an individual's interpellation into ideology, and into a subject position, remains compelling. I want to think, then, about what my own interpellation into the subject position of "the anthropologist" has looked like and what it means to think of interpellation as something that happens over various temporalities—that of life narrative, career trajectory, and even historical time.

Click. "So they finally let him out ... They arrested him because they thought he was a suspicious person. Then it was explained that where his village was, it became a military base. And that's why he was arrested. He was trying to go there." I managed to get my recorder out and start recording mid-sentence while my mother began telling the story of the Mikrasiate husband of her childhood teacher in Athens who was arrested trying to visit his home village in what is now Turkey."

For Christmas of 2012 I got my mother a copy of Penelope Papailias' (2005) ethnography, *Genres of Recollection*, which, to my delight, she decided to start actually reading. I was planning to interview my mother for a publication and I decided it would be interesting to discuss this book as part of the interview. But sometimes the stories would simply come out, as in the above quote, as my mother and I were having a casual conversation, and I would rush to grab my recorder in time to document her story. From my previous work as an oral historian I knew that stories are usually told best the first time. I didn't want to risk missing this one. I had heard this story many times as a child, but this was the first time I was recording it. And, in fact, it was the first time I heard it *as an anthropologist*.

During the course of our interview, many questions arose for me—about the subject position of "the anthropologist" and "the informant," about the relationship between history and memory, and about the relationship between

life narrative and career trajectory. Our conversations would shift back and forth from stories of others' experiences, to my mother's difficult life, to something we had read in a history book, to geopolitics and the EU, to Greek history and Papailias' book, and back again. The chapter we focused on, and the one which she had read in its entirety, was Chapter Three: "Witness to Witnessing: Records of Research at an Archive of Refugee Testimony." This chapter takes an ethnographic account of the Center for Asia Minor Studies, a research center funded by a wealthy Greek woman living in France, which undertook oral history interviews of *Mikrasiates*—those refugees living in Greece who had been displaced from Anatolia by the population exchange between Greece and Turkey in the 1920s. My mother is not Mikrasiate but is Greek from Egypt. She arrived in Athens in 1957, a refugee of the Suez Crisis. While a sizable portion of the population of Athens by that time was Mikrasiate, the population of Greek refugees from Egypt was, by contrast, much smaller. What they shared, however, was a sense of non-belonging—something Papailias writes about in the case of Mikrasiates—and my mother told me that, while she lived in a Mikrasiate neighborhood, she never interacted much with Greeks from Greece.

For several years now, my mother has often responded to my inquiries with, "well, you are the anthropologist," or, "well, you are the historian," or (even worse), "well, you are the expert," when I ask her questions about Greece or Egypt. It is a bizarre feeling, indeed, to be an "expert" on something my mother lived through. Several layers of temporality are interwoven here: historical time, life narrative, and career trajectory. I cannot separate my life trajectory from the fact that I am pursuing a graduate degree in anthropology and I cannot separate my mother's narrative about her life in Egypt before the war from everything that has happened to her since. It is precisely from the imperialist point of view of the (fictionally) transcendent, all-knowing academic subject—the "view from

nowhere" (Nagel 1989) that has typified both history and anthropology— that I am able to know so many things about the former Ottoman Empire. But how much of this is the interpellation into the subject position of "the expert" and how much of it is just growing up? *Children grow up and end up surpassing their parents in certain respect, I tell myself. Is this part of being an academic or is it just part of being my mother's daughter?* In this moment, am I heir to the imperialist project of Franz Boas or am I heir to my mother's experience? Furthermore, is this an example of "the idea of a knowledge of Time which is superior knowledge [that] has become an integral part of anthropology's intellectual equipment"? (Fabian 1983: 10). Am I, as Fabian might argue, no longer coeval with my own mother? And if this project is in fact auto-ethnographic, am I no longer coeval with myself?

In his ethnography, *Vita*, Joao Biehl writes about a single woman, Catarina, remarking that: "The world Catarina recalled was familiar to me. [Like her,] I had grown up in Novo Hamburgo. My family had also migrated from a rural area to that city to look for a new and better life. ... Catarina made me return to the world of my beginnings, made me puzzle over what had determined her destiny, so different from mine" (Biehl 2005: 7). Although my background is very different from Biehl and Catarina's, interviewing my mother raised some similar questions. I had to "return" to a certain world in interviewing my mother. I have, after all, known her my entire life. Unlike a "typical" anthropologist, I did not meet my "informant" in "the field": in a both literal and discursive space in which the two of us were already produced as subjects—"the anthropologist" and "the informant." Many of the questions I asked her were ones I had asked her many times before. The narratives with which I was presented were ones that had already produced me as a subject, years before I even heard the word "anthropology." In turn, I had also helped produce these narratives. My mother has followed, over the

years, my academic progress. And the work I do and the kinds of questions I have asked have, in turn, formulated and reformulated her own narratives. Furthermore, I was often taken aback at moments in which I, myself, appeared as a character in these narratives. I was both the interviewer and a character in the story. But did I recognize myself in the character that appeared in her story?

My knowledge and passion about understanding history and colonialism, which I partially inherited from her, have, in turn, over the years, inflected the very narrative which she tells about her own life. Her story, and her life trajectory, as it unfolded in historical time, tells the story of the production of the Greek-Egyptian subject position, and my learning this, over the course of my life, represent a kind of interpellation whereby I inherit a certain relationship to that subjectivity. The ethnographic encounter—and the subject positions of “the anthropologist” and “the informant”—appear very late in this process, and the interview material produced as a result just barely scrapes the surface.

As a kid I was always asking my mother annoying questions about her life. For example, I clearly remember times when my mother would speak about the “Greeks” in Egypt, and I would demand, “But what made them Greek? What does it mean to be Greek?” Long before I ever heard the word “anthropology,” I felt myself constantly trying to upset these categorizations—trying to take them apart to figure out what they were made of. If part of the project of anthropology is, in the Boasian tradition, to make “the familiar strange, the exotic quotidian,” by “pos[ing] its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders” (Clifford and Marcus 1986: 2), then I suppose I was always an anthropologist—although I never would have been legible as one had I not eventually pursued a degree in Anthropology. At the time, I was just a diasporic child who asked lots of annoying questions.

As an anthropologist I have managed to build a career

out of continuing to ask annoying questions. And I have been particularly struck by the fact that over the years my mother has begun to interrogate some of these questions herself. As we both grow older, and our relationship shifts, we have managed to build a new kind of relationship with each other. And, along the way, I became an “expert.” Not only that, but I have found that my critical, political interventions have found their way into her life narrative. Trying to pin down who I am in the world, in relationship to her life narrative, feels like trying to pinpoint a moving target. Furthermore, I feel that the tone of our conversation has shifted. Perhaps my questions have gotten less annoying as I find myself in the role of a researcher who has ethical obligations towards her informant. Or perhaps academia has alienated me from my own family.

Me: How did your family feel about Nasser?

Her: Oh my parents did not like him at all! They thought that he was responsible for everything. And all the Greek Egyptians thought so.

Me: What makes you feel different?

Her: Because I've been exposed to news and newspapers [by] people from outside their world... and I heard other opinions, which they didn't.

Me: Can you explain?

Her: Well I read more about the good things Nasser did for his country and I read about Egyptian thinking that finally Nasser got rid of the British and terminated the colonial powers in Egypt. So, I read more about that. And that's why I think he did a good thing for his country.

Papailias remarks that, “even though my inquiry has been informed by a vibrant interdisciplinary discussion on cultural memory, I thus have to admit that I am not quite ready to give up on history” (2005: 5). Her book, thus, weaves together historical narrative, historiographic critique, and an anthro-

pology of cultural memory. This raises some methodological concerns as the questions of when, exactly, to read an archive-as-source and when to read an archive-as-subject (Stoler 2002) remains unresolved. This echoes questions within the history and anthropology of science, as Bruno Latour (1987) draws distinction between reading something as “fact” and reading something as “artifact.” This is a serious methodological question for those working on the borders between history and anthropology: when we weave together narratives about past events with present-day controversies over meaning-making in the past, our historiographic narratives often inadvertently take a side in the debates in the present. Deciding when to narrate past events and when to bracket the past often involves difficult decisions on the part of the ethnographer. For example, when narratives my mother told me growing-up about the past turned out to be “wrong” or “incomplete” according to the historiographic literature, this does not change the fact that the narratives themselves exist as ethnographic objects. They remain “truths” about how historical memory is passed on from generation to generation.

I do not have an answer to my friend’s initial question, but I can say that, in interviewing my mother about her past, I felt the subject position of the anthropologist of memory and the oral historian interweaving—as an anthropology of memory would focus on questions of memory as something existing in the present, while the oral historian would read the interview as “primary source” about a past event. To put it simply, my interview is the story of how Greeks lived in Nasser-era Egypt and how Greek-Egyptians lived in postwar Greece just as much as it is the story of a war refugee living in the US and the role memory plays in her life today. Furthermore, it is about myself, and as such, it could be called autoethnographic. My mother’s narrative that I grew up with, unlike most Greek-Egyptians, was that she left Egypt because the imperialist powers invaded, not because Nasser “kicked out” the

Greeks. After she left Egypt with her family their boat stopped in Cyprus, where a friend was waiting to meet them. Cyprus, however, at this point was a British colony faced with an armed uprising by Greek nationalists, led in part by Archbishop Makarios, and the British were not letting any Greeks off the boat. She continued on to Greece, where my mother, having lost everything, would become a communist— and would be inspired by Tito in Yugoslavia. Tito in Yugoslavia, Makarios in Cyprus, and Nasser in Egypt were all part of the non-aligned movement, and I think it is safe to say that her experience in Cyprus and Greece had something to do with how she ended up reading “other opinions” about Nasser. On the subject of “incomplete” narratives, however, imagine my surprise as an adult when I learned that Nasser had, in fact, persecuted communists in Egypt! This historical fact, along with the perspectives of Turkish Cypriots, never entered the narrative. The past and the present are inseparably woven together, sometimes in complex and contradictory ways.

In Chapter Two, “Collection of Sources: Local Historiography and the Possession of the Past,” Papailias examines the complex relationship between “amateur” historians and academic historians in the Greek city of Volos. She recounts an event called “Local History/National History,” which brought together amateur and professional historians. The event turned into an attack by academic historians, in which one professor “decried the characteristic ‘pathologies’ of locally produced scholarship, noting that such writing rarely ‘obeyed’ disciplinary methods and could never piece-by-piece add up to an adequate vision of national history” (Papailias 2005: 43). Papailias remarks that local writers felt attacked, and often responded with “I am not a historian” (ibid: 46). While remarking that there is certainly a strong social distinction between the worlds of academic and amateur historians, Papailias points out that:

Yet, despite the apparent clarity with which historians and 'nonhistorians' distinguish themselves from each other, the subjects and sources of amateur and academic historiography and the political orientation and social background of its authors, in fact, involve points of contact that defy a radical separation of their practices and the implied top-down model of how historical questions and methods change (ibid: 46).

While the social, and material worlds of various academic and non-academic subject positions are clearly demarcated, the performative space of what it is to *think like an expert* always involves a certain form of mystification. I have not been able to answer my friend's question, and I don't suspect I ever will. But I will continue to question what it means to be interpellated into a certain disciplined and disciplinary subject position— "the anthropologist" — and what, if anything, it means to think like one.

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