

Critique of Anthropology

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Critique of Anthropology 2012 32: 66

DOI: 10.1177/0308275X11430873d

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Opposing the motion: Gillian Evans

This time last week, in a damp studio in autumnal south-east London, I invented a relation. Today, for the purposes of illustration, I bring that relation to your attention and explain, thereby, what I find fascinating about relations and also why, fun as it is, it is *not* the task of anthropology to invent relations.

Welcoming Madeleine, a classically trained viola player, to his studio, Sola, jazz musician and Afro-Cuban percussionist, sits down to his drums, which cluster in the middle of the sparse, brick building, lit by the pale light of the last afternoon of British summer time. Sola establishes a rhythm on three congas: *tumbao*, *conga* and *quinto*.¹ Sola is accomplished in composition, but does not read music and is a little in awe of and curious about Madeleine's more conventional technical competence. Madeleine, who is accustomed to reading and interpreting music from a sheet, thrills to and worries about the challenge of improvisation. What if the relation I hope to invent fails? A sense of friendly nervousness fills the air. Sola says, reassuringly, as if it doesn't matter, 'it might not work' and this makes me think: what is it for a relation to fail?

Getting her bearings on an unfamiliar space, Madeleine removes her viola from its case and sits opposite Sola, poised to play. Beats bubble gently from the congas, inviting Madeleine to respond. She wants to dance immediately and laughs with delight. She waits and feels, with trepidation, what might be possible.²

Madeleine has a good ear. She quickly realizes that each of Sola's congas is tuned to a particular and complementary note. She tries to attune herself to the notes the congas are singing and enters tentatively into conversation. Struggling to find the right notes, however, Madeleine has to explain to Sola what she is trying to do and together they stop playing for a moment and mutually adjust the tuning of their instruments until they are in the same key.

Excited by the discovery of each other that commensurability between congas and viola makes possible, Sola and Madeleine relax into the common measure that musical notes allow for. Melodically, then, Madeleine searches to understand, to feel the form of the rhythm Sola establishes and, more easily finding the tempo as the second measure of proportion, she is able to discover confidence in the tone of her own offering.

The result is something amazing: for a moment the pleasure of live music fills the air, an ephemeral, existing-only-briefly kind of a thing – a disruption of the sound waves. Live music is a strange phenomenon: an acoustic entity – a fragile, highly specific kind of materiality. Here, it is both the symbol and emerging effect of the bringing together and the holding together of dissimilar parts, diverse entities, heterogeneous elements – congas and viola – Madeleine and Sola. Like all relations, this is an experiment in exchange. The success of the relation depends not only on the commensurability forged, in the moment of exchange, between viola and congas, but also on the prior expertise, the skilful forging of the relation Sola, as a percussionist, has made over a period

of years between himself and his drums and which Madeleine has developed with her viola.

Evidence of the adaptation his body must make to the material qualities of the conga as a particular kind of instrument, painful calluses have developed on the underside of the joints of Sola's hands. Guitar players develop the same thing on the tips of their fingers. Soft flesh must toughen up in specific ways to perform wonders with the hard materials of life. When Madeleine hasn't played her viola for a while she becomes aware of the subtlety of adjustments her body has had to make to skilfully manipulate both the bow and strings of her instrument and she feels pain in muscles she never knew she had developed in her hands and arms. Sola says he can tell how good a conga player is just by the way he adjusts his body to the drums before he starts playing and even more so, by how a *conguero* lays his hands on the drum's skin, preparing to play.

For the *conguero*, then, a mutually specifying relation is created, in practice, between what it is to be embodied as human and what it is to be embodied as conga. Subject and object are revealed, in this light, as inseparable entities, but we retain the categorical distinction between them because the *conguero* is a living being and, through his bodily actions, he is conscious of being alive. By bringing himself into relation with it, the *conguero* enlivens his conga and perhaps also enters, thereby, into relations with entities of other kinds. Who is to say that Cuban gods or Yoruba ancestors aren't listening too, or that Madeleine is not reaching for the perfect expression of the divine through her viola? Through the forging of this relation between drummer and drums, the state of being of *conguero* and the state of being of congas are transformed in the moment of play and what it is to play well speaks to a long history of Afro-Cuban drumming which the *conguero* embodies as he masters his craft.

The relation is, then, as much the means for making music, as it is a technique for self-alteration in and through the material stuff of the world. This always has emotional consequence. When Sola is feeling down, for example, the only way he can change his mood is by playing his drums, and the way he tunes his drums at any time is a reflection of his mood. When Madeleine plays her viola, which is not typically a solo instrument, she is either a member of an orchestra or a quartet and the technique for self-transformation she experiences, through her viola practice, is more obviously an intersubjective pleasure and, therefore, the means for having an effect on the state of being of others too. Hence, the joy of making music and the capacity of musicians to enthrall their audiences, to enrap-ture them, a facility which increases in proportion to the successful crafting of the relation between musicians, a relation which multiplies as it alters listeners' emo-tive states of being too.

In the studio, I share with Sola and Madeleine a sense of excitement, a change in the atmosphere, because, when the moment of commensurability between congas and viola and, therefore, between Madeleine and Sola, is achieved, I attest to and experience this as being music and not just noise. As the inventor here, I am mediator, boundary worker, instrumental myself, party to the relation and witness

to the existence of the acoustic object as it emerges. In this moment, the relation suddenly becomes something other than itself, something that, in the moment of its generative achievement, transcends the mechanics of its production. As soon as the process of exchange stops, however, the music disintegrates, its seemingly intangible elusiveness part of its rare quality.

The somewhat mysterious, hard-to-get-hold-of, fleeting quality of the acoustic object, as a relational, emerging effect, draws our attention to the problem of object permanence. If newly made objects substantiate the relations of which they are the emerging product, then the relative permanence of the object's existence must depend on the stabilization of the relations, which produce it. The sense of the object existing in-itself – that is, independently of ongoing human action – requires, therefore, secondary devices for artificially fixing the object's emergence, minimizing the risk of its disintegration and, at the same time, cutting the network which connects it to the history of the living exchanges which substantiate it. Recording equipment would, for example, allow us to literally capture and thus control and gain ownership over the sound which Madeleine and Sola are crafting. Hence, the fierce contestation which preoccupies musicians fighting for copyrights.

A focus on things that more easily disintegrate and more obviously exist in a fragile state of becoming, allows us to wonder whether those things that we take to be to immutable, permanent in their existence and obvious in their reality, such as skyscrapers or scientific facts, are just as much the outcome of what relations make possible, which is the connecting and binding together of heterogeneous materials. If so, then the focus of curiosity becomes duration itself. How is stabilization and continuity achieved in the specific shapes or constellations of relations that orchestrate reality? The invention of new things forces us to ask not only how it is that what we take to be given in the order of things, endures over time and comes, thereby, to have historical force, but also how reconfigurations of relations lead to transformation and change as much as decay and destruction.

To invent is, then, to bring into being a new thing – something that did not exist before. To study the process of invention – the coming into reality of a thing – is, therefore, to gain a vantage point from which to explore fascinating questions about existence: what is it for a thing to exist and how can we, as humans, know about it? What kinds or categories of things are in existence and what is the difference between the being of things and the sense in which humans exist? Is there a hierarchy of categories of what exists in the world or is the structure of reality less predictable in its organisation? These are philosophical questions pertaining specifically to ontology – the study of the categories of what exists in the world and epistemology – the study of the conditions for the possibility of human knowledge. While philosophy addresses the problems of existence through rational argument and conceptual innovation, anthropology – the study of human kinds – or categories of humans – proceeds through empirical, ethnographic observation and experience, entering into critical debate with philosophy by asking specifically: what is it to be human? To answer this question the task of anthropology is *not* to invent relations, but to accommodate to, to co-create and to

explain thereby (in words and concepts that can never do justice to the lived experience), the historically specific form of relations among collectively distinctive kinds of persons.

Notes

1. During the live debate Sola began playing his congas here.
2. During the live debate a three-minute improvisation took place between Sola and Madeleine. To listen to the sound recording please visit: <http://coa.sagepub.com>. Also see <http://www.cresc.ac.uk/people/dr-gillian-evans>

The discussion

Peter Wade, Manchester: Gillian, I enjoyed your talk and the musical performance was daring and good but could you relate what you did to the theme of the actual motion and what James was saying. Can you try and make some links there because I didn't get them?

Gillian Evans: What I wanted to do was invent a relation in order to show that that is not what anthropologists are doing. In order to understand the historical forms that relations take among collectively distinctive kinds of people, we have to enter into relations of co-creation with those people in order to be able to then explain those relations. But that's not the same as bringing relations into being anew, for the first time. The relations anthropologists study exist historically and are continuously emerging.

Karen Sykes, Manchester: Gillian, could you reflect upon your relationship, *as an anthropologist*, to the performance that you provided here for us today?

Gillian Evans: Yes. To invent a relation and have so much fun with it in the way that the two musicians and I did today and to feel instrumental – as mediator – to the creation of that relation, allowed me to reflect on why it is so difficult to be an anthropologist. The flesh and bloodness of it is *incredible* – words and the concepts do no justice whatsoever to the experience of what it is like to enter into relations with people. And the bringing into relation of myself, as an anthropologist, to the historically specific form of the amazing relations that other people are already making, to enter in as a co-creator of that process is *so* difficult. And to not only enter into the field as a co-creator, but then to try to do the whole process any justice in words and concepts that matter to anybody or explain anything adequately: I learned how hard anthropology is by doing this.

Becky Bloom, UCL: I notice that relations and connections were used in all four talks almost interchangeably. My question to all four speakers is why is this so?

Casper Bruun Jensen: I think I probably was guilty of conflating connections and relations. I think Morten didn't and, if I understand correctly, the problem is that connections tend to sound too literal. It makes you think of the most instrumental version of actor-network theory, where you literally trace how one actor is