

A “Middle Voice” from the South: A Response to Sharon Traweek’s 2020 Bernal Lecture

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Abstract

In the 2020 Prague Virtual Conference of the Society for Social Studies of Science (4S), Sharon Traweek was awarded the society’s John D. Bernal Prize jointly with Langdon Winner. The Bernal Prize is awarded annually to individuals who have made distinguished contributions to the field of STS. Prize recipients include founders of the field of STS, along with outstanding scholars who have devoted their careers to the understanding of the social dimensions of science and technology. This is a reflection on Traweek’s work on epistemic authority in relation to Kaleidos—Center for Interdisciplinary Ethnography in Ecuador.

Keywords

Bernal prize; Kaleidos; interdisciplinary ethnography; epistemic authority

Introduction

Understanding how academic infrastructures operate on the ground, how they change over time, and how they unfold in different historical, geographical and politico-economic realities has been a lifelong effort in Sharon Traweek’s work. In her Bernal lecture, she invites us to explore *certainty* as a core characteristic behind academic (and non-academic) institutions, but one she questions from “the margins” in order to

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unsettle it, to disrupt it, and to offer ways for “staying with its trouble” ([Haraway 2016](#)). We welcome Traweek’s approach for thinking about the construction of academic spaces in places like Ecuador, where the Kaleidos—Center for Interdisciplinary Ethnography would not have been possible without the work of people like Sharon Traweek and the many generations of STSers she has influenced. In this short response to her Bernal Lecture, we would like to tell a story about how the STS spirit of collaboration and experimentation that Traweek speaks about helped us engage local and regional certainties regarding the production of knowledge in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

Not without some merit, Latin American scholars feel that their US and European colleagues often disregard our theoretical production. This sentiment informs critiques of the current politics of academic citation in flagship disciplinary and interdisciplinary journals and how theoretical postulates are constructed ([Pérez-Bustos 2017](#); [Lyons et al. 2017](#); [Harding 2016](#)). The traditional narrative includes a number of valid points such as the ocean of perfunctory quotations and references where Latin American scholars are often crammed into long citation parentheses meant to provide *background* context. However, this narrative also mobilizes a series of certainties about “epistemic authority” that are problematic; for instance, the common idea that Latin America should always produce theory instead of importing concepts from the global North ([Cusicanqui 2012](#)). In this view, “dependency theory” works as both, an example of a golden age of epistemic production in the region, and the rationale behind our current import-substitution hermeneutic horizon.

At Kaleidos, we are debating whether or not this approach to academic research and writing is the best way to move forward, or if it is rather a nostalgic epistemic project that “undermines knowledge making.” Who produces knowledge, how we do it, and what kinds of resources are necessary in that production are questions Traweek has explored throughout her academic career. In Ecuador, these questions are increasingly getting traction, but they are not yet a central subject matter in the field of Latin American STS. This is partly because our research focus on policy is much needed, and partly because these questions destabilize “epistemic privilege,” which, as Traweek rightly points out, “can be a dangerous game with a lot at risk . . . [because] privilege usually is protected fiercely.” With this in mind, inspired by Sharon Traweek’s career and work as well as other STSers, we built Kaleidos. Like Traweek, we investigate epistemic authority, but we do not perform it. We are politically committed to a kind of knowledge making that embraces uncertainty, complexity, and curiosity embodied in the wise and ethical “middle voice” that Traweek has taught us ([Traweek 2020](#)).

Kaleidos is an experimental research infrastructure created in April 2018 at the University of Cuenca with initial support from FLACSO-Ecuador. It was built as an academic space where disciplinary boundaries would be loosely defined and where collaborations between academics, civil society, government institutions or private actors could take place in an effort to respond to local pressing problems connected to global issues, such as climate change, gender violence, carceral systems, or the Covid-19 pandemic. Even if the main methodological approach is through the lens of ethnography, Kaleidos combines anthropological, science and technology studies (STS), and feminist and postcolonial approaches to knowledge making. Building an STS-inspired academic space in the global South like Kaleidos must, in our view, question what constitutes interesting topics, innovative methodologies, and new modes of

investigating ([Reid and Traweek 2000](#)). We have purposely sought alternative ways to carry out studies of scientific knowledge and technological innovation that bring renewed eyes to the social sciences in the region, and offer an up-and-coming generation of academics tools for imagining research, critical thinking, and what anthropological theory might mean and contribute to society. This, of course, is not a conversation in a vacuum. Like many of our colleagues around the world, our work is imbued with collaborative practices and infrastructural innovations taking place in academia. Inspired in these experiments, we join a growing cohort of scholars questioning how to approach knowledge *certainties*. And we ask, how are those certainties constructed in the twenty-first century? What questions do they raise? What possibilities do they open up and which ones do they close down? As Traweek proposes in her lecture, these issues need historical, temporal, and geographical positioning. Thus, we recognize the need for a committed local understanding of the knowledge needed in our own surroundings, but the ways in which we approach these issues through our own research projects—be these (dis)ability, elderly nutrition, air pollution, financialization, violent deaths and prison violence, the construction of national datasets, or the Covid-19 response—can take multiple forms. Inspired by Traweek and others' works, we find interdisciplinarity, collaborative work, transnational STS perspectives, and ethnographic experimentations to be key elements in this academic reconfiguration. In doing so, we seek to follow Traweek's proposal “to make knowledge every day . . . with curiosity, determination, commitment, diligence, and passion, alongside many others engaged in the same process.” We provide here one key example from our work: EthnoData.

Ethnographic Experiments

EthnoData is a digital infrastructure that combines ethnographic research with data analysis ([Kaleidos, Center for Interdisciplinary Ethnography 2020](#)). It also experiments with curatorial spaces, podcasts, short documentaries, and games in order to “follow the data” ([Sands et al. 2012, 1](#)) through multiple experimental formats. Our main goal is to allow users to access a variety of theorizations and stories around violent deaths, femicides, and missing people in Ecuador. In EthnoData, we challenge and critically reflect on the ways in which we design, share, organize, select, access, produce, curate, communicate, and collaborate in digital spaces that accumulate vast amounts of information. The platform offers different datasets, including official statistics, curated images, essays, interviews, a legal repository, and other forms of ethnographic material. By bringing a critical perspective into the production of this data, we have shaken voices of authority and many certainties held by security institutions like the National Police or the Attorney General's Office (Fiscalía), as well as those of civil society organizations producing important alternative accounts of violence in the country. We have done this *unsettling* of authority in conversation with civil servants who work at these institutions, activists, and an interdisciplinary group of academics. What has been, perhaps, most rewarding is to know that by building a digital platform that asks the very questions Traweek points us to, we have opened up a collaborative, interdisciplinary and open field for discussing violence. The process has not been free of frictions or the odd conflict, but the need for new perspectives, points of view, and as we like to call them, *kaleidoscopic approaches to data* has only enhanced our collective ability to “follow the data.”

Interdisciplinarity

Interdisciplinarity is a widely circulated term, if not always a widely circulated practice. When practiced, as often as not, it stands for the conflictual meeting of disciplines in colloquia, conferences, and even programs that clash and then go their separate ways, reaffirmed in their disciplinary identities and the prerogatives of their respective research and pedagogical traditions . . . Interdisciplinarity interests us here only to the very degree it interrupts business as usual, allows new objects of study to emerge, furnishes new resources for scholarship, and asks new questions not only of practitioners of science, technology, and medicine but also of those researchers who claim to study them ([Reid and Traweek 2000, 7](#)).

When we imagined Kaleidos with our co-founder Israel Idrovo, and with Kim Fortun, Joe Dumit, Liz Roberts, Hugo Benavides, Steve Cox and Pedro Cantero, and later on in designing EthnoData, we knew these academic spaces needed to cut across old divides. There are many good reasons for staying within a disciplinary field of inquiry, but in our context interdisciplinarity allowed us, as Traweek explains, to open new avenues for experimenting and making room, for thinking about local issues in ways that even we had not thought about before. With Kaleidos, one of our intentions was to build a space where we did not know how things would unfold methodologically or epistemologically, or what kinds of outputs could be produced. We were purposefully moving away from certainty, from an “embodied voice of authority” and following a practice Traweek has detailed, shared, and lived by. We welcomed these shifts and deviations to find new angles to think about a problem, despite the risk of the occasional crisis or the chances for rejection of the unknown. Still, the beginning of a research adventure always brings with it a sense of what might be possible, and interdisciplinarity for us was part and parcel of that kaleidoscopic outlook on academic research. Kaleidos and its different projects—like EthnoData—would not have been possible without multiple forms of collaboration and a networked support and inspiration that have contributed to imagining new ways of doing STS in Ecuador. But what does that look like on the ground?

Collaborative Work and Transnational STS

Thinking about particle physicists in Japan and how they generate knowledge, the spaces for that knowledge, and the attractiveness of a life as physicist, Traweek ([2005, 360–61](#)) asserts that learning is “an everyday process with multiple, accumulated experiential strategies for knowing, often in the company of others using different ways of knowing” and adds the need to “see the person embedded in a web of social relations.” Nonetheless, achieving transnational forms of collaboration, weaving those webs of social relations, is challenging at multiple levels. From the physical built infrastructures in which we study and research, to the geopolitical and economic realities of each locality, to epistemic genealogies that permeate our knowledge; all are in conversation, debate, and friction. In the context of Ecuador, and for Kaleidos in particular, this has meant moving across universities, negotiating physical and epistemological spaces within different departments—from philosophy and history, to urban studies and anthropology, and then to engineering and medical schools. Methodological approaches and pedagogical aspirations changed from one place to the other and Kaleidos had to find ways to ‘fit’ within established narratives of what engineering or medicine is, but also bring renewed possibilities for imagining an *otherwise* in the making. In her long experience with transnational forms of collaboration, Traweek proposes to carefully assess the many scales, dimensions and hierarchies in which we produce knowledge with the intention of bringing a critical eye to how we generate scientific claims in different geographies. Traweek has brought a critical view and unique

ability for shifting things up-side-down to all her research projects; inquiring how things might be otherwise, how something that seems *certain* can be questioned in order to provide a different viewpoint not only for her readers but also for her interlocutors. In our own research contexts, we have tried to follow on her footsteps, carefully pondering our own local contexts in close conversation with other experimental spaces and formats for communicating. One key example is the work behind the Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography (PECE).

From the urban planning of Tsukuba University ([Traweek 1995](#)) to her collaboration in the digital infrastructure of PECE, Traweek examines how thinking transnationally means resisting easy interpretations or conclusions and, at each turn, introduces new analytical questions accounting for those trans-national-cultural-historical frameworks. As Kim and Mike Fortun ([2015, 366](#)), the architects behind PECE, explain, “The need for social science and humanities insights—particularly anthropological and ethnographic insight—is clear and pressing, offering ways to understand and change how problems are identified, conceived, addressed, or discounted. Experimental work that brings new problems, concepts, and political possibilities into play is critical. So is the infrastructural work on which those experiments depend, and which is itself a form of experimentation.” Like PECE, Kaleidos is inspired by Traweek’s work and her approach to academic infrastructures—be these digital or physical—inviting us to investigate their “faultlines,” by asking “what else is going on” behind the usual spaces of knowledge production, methodologies, pedagogies, modes of inquiry, and research questions ([Traweek 2000, 23](#)). Kaleidos practices Traweek’s teachings not only for thinking how to continue to build this academic space, but in approaching each new project with a self-reflexive, critical, and generous eye.

Throughout her career, Traweek’s professional experience in social and cultural studies of science and technologies has been based on a desire to understand how different webs of social relations make knowledge possible. Her teachings have given us the tools for breaking open the categories of “expertise,” and in doing so unravel the potential for asking different questions, and in turn, illuminate new understandings that make other knowledges possible. As ethnographers we embrace “the margins” that Traweek opens and follows, where we can remain “intrigued by how similarly various kinds of privilege (epistemic, national, gender, class, race, etc.) are performed and enforced, intersectionally and necessarily, in different places around the world” ([Traweek 2020](#)). This means staying attuned to multiple dynamics occurring at the breaking points, the gray areas, the uncertain spaces. Despite the many difficulties that academics phase in building new spaces for academic research, we see our place-in-the-making—Kaleidos—as one small effort to open up new avenues for experimenting, thinking, collaborating, and imagining STS in the global souths. In this, we thank Sharon Traweek, among others, for courageously stepping into the unknown with a keen sense of humor, a brilliant mind, and a kind heart.

Author Biographies

Jorge Núñez is director and cofounder of the Center for Interdisciplinary Ethnography—Kaleidos, Ecuador and a scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. As an anthropologist, he is interested in financial speculation and the carceral state. His geographical areas of specialization are

Southern Europe and Latin America. He has conducted ethnographic research on everyday financialization in Spain and mass incarceration in Ecuador. He is also the lead designer of the digital platform EthnoData.

Maka Suarez works in the fields of economic and medical anthropology. She is assistant professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Oslo, and is currently a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. She cofounded the Center for Interdisciplinary Ethnography—Kaleidos in Ecuador. She is working on her book manuscript based on her first ethnography, an account of predatory financial inclusion of Ecuadorian migrant households into financial capitalism through subprime mortgage loans and unsecured employment in Spain. Her most recent collaborative research project examines the impacts of Covid-19 transnationally with a focus on front line workers and low-income families in rural areas in southern Ecuador.

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