



Shocked, not Surprised

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The surest signal that we are having something akin to a #metoo moment in academia is when my social media accounts, email inbox, and phone go into a simultaneous meltdown with private messages.

In October last year a crowdsourced list naming sexual harassers in Indian academia was publicly posted on Facebook by a graduate student. Now known in South Asianist circles as, simply, [The List](#), it created something of an earthquake for it named some of the most powerful and famous Indian male academics ranging from established Professors to the 'rising stars'. In the immediate



aftermath of The List's posting, several South Asianist colleagues and friends told me - through confessional conversations and private messages on Twitter, Facebook, Email, and Whatsapp as well as in person at a large South Asia conference in Madison, Wisconsin - that they already knew of so-and-so's predatory behaviour; that most of the names were unsurprising to them.

There has been an uncanny mimicking of a similar series of discussions in the immediate aftermath of the HAU exposes, starting with David Graeber's apology of an [apology](#) but particularly after the two separate [letters](#) from former employees of HAU. Once again, my phone and computer went ablaze, this time from my Cambridge and anthropology worlds, with messages that said "but of course we knew it", "it is finally out in the open", "oh - I had the same terrible experience," and "how very unsurprising", and so on.

What The List and #hautalk share, then, is this characteristic of being simultaneously unsurprising ("we always already knew this") and yet shocking ("OMG - can you believe this shit?!").

Ethnographically, this quality of revelations that do not surprise yet do shock, is worth exploring further. In the first, if we all already knew of these murky goings-on then why are we shocked? My proposition is that this doublethink emerges from, firstly, deeper questions of how we piece together legitimised evidence of malpractice within the academy and, secondly, from how networks of powerful individuals and elite universities collude to sustain disciplinary notions of prestige and success.

What counts as evidence?

How do we build up evidence of abuse and misconduct - be it financial, emotional, or sexual in nature - within the academy? The List was swiftly denounced by [leading feminists from India](#), based largely in Delhi, on account of its anonymous nature and "lack of answerability." Instead, they claimed, "due process" should be followed which is "fair and just." The List and this knee-jerk critique led to a



whole series of [discussions](#) on how one proves sexual harassment and the institutionalised structures that need to be strengthened, if not devised in the original, in order to deal with it.

With HAU, the allegations and defences are still unfolding - again with a swiftness and largely through blog posts and tweets. The damning anonymised letters by employees of HAU as well as further [testimonies](#) by journal authors, and others on social media, have been countered by a "[leaked](#)" email that hints at a conspiracy against the journal, what the [first letter](#) from the HAU Board of Trustees somewhat grandiloquently described as "recent destabilizing efforts."

The Cambridge anthropology whisper networks had for long discussed and wondered about HAU and its editor-in-chief. We heard occasional rumours of misconduct including one incident of physical assault, though never with the graphic details and depth that the letters by HAU staff and other testimonies have outlined. And, yet, all of us - myself included - remained silent. For a discipline that has built up substantive bodies of knowledge by trading on gossip, rumour, hearsay, and whispers in the dark and has drawn deeply on the concept of the public/open secret, this silence is deafening.

Our collective complicit silence can be analysed through many means, as the [introduction](#) to this forum on Allegra Lab makes clear. I am personally intrigued by how this silence shows a reluctance on the part of "[us](#)" anthropologists to be ethnographic enough when it comes to our own quotidian and institutionalised practices. What is thick description if not the recurring narratives we hear from several people over a long period of deep hanging out? Ethnographic truths, though always partial, emerge from a practice of listening to our interlocutors and observing-absorbing words, actions, affective dispositions over time. As anthropology and other disciplines begin to take social media more seriously, surely we can study all that is currently unfolding under the hashtag of hautalk on AnthroTwitter as ethnographic matter. If nothing else, the quest for full evidence that has ensued on allegations made via The List or equally anonymous letters from former/present employees of HAU shows that we are willing - in our roles as



ethnographers – to build up serious texts on the backs of rumour, gossip, chitchat, urban legends, accusations, and reputations out “there” in “our field-sites”. However, once “back home” to the academy then we demand a more bureaucratically rationalised, legally proscribed, technocratically transparent process with the soothing paraphernalia of independent inquiries, scrutiny of documents, investigative committees and reports, and ritualised auditory performances.

As the most [recent letter](#) signed by 82 anthropologists who are past and present members of the editorial board of HAU notes, “These are serious accusations, which must be thoroughly investigated. *To the extent that they are verified*, those responsible must be called to account” (emphasis mine).

But what rituals of verification is the editorial board seeking that can produce further evidence of misconduct and financial malpractice than what is already in the public domain?

The question to pose here is the one that Marilyn Strathern – ironically, a signatory of this statement – had so sharply noted with regard to [audit cultures](#): “Only certain social practices take a form which will convince, one which will persuade those to whom accountability is to be rendered – whether it is ‘the government’ or the taxpayer/public – that accountability has indeed been rendered. Only certain operations will count (2000: 1-2).” The question with accusations of malpractice within the academy – be they through The List or the HAU letters – is what operations can be made to count as convincing enough when the nature of evidence is testimonial in nature and narrative-driven, rather than one that can be bureaucratically and technocratically accounted for?

The comparative method

Might comparisons help us with this thorny question of finding fully-verifiable evidence of misconduct? Let me offer two brief thoughts on this. The first is drawn from my own ethnographic work on transparency, accountability, and anti-



corruption practices in India and the second is more specific to the very culture of anthropology as institutionalised practice as evidenced in the functioning of high-prestige, metric-busting journals like HAU.

What we are seeing in several calls for HAU to make its functioning transparent and accountable to the wider anthropological community is similar, in many ways, to the demands being put on the Indian state to make its quotidian bureaucratic labour visible for all to behold and to judge.

As with the case of HAU, this increasingly angry demand, stems from allegations of fraud, corruption, and general abuse of power. My [work](#) makes me deeply sceptical of the impact of Indian reforms to make-transparent and render-accountable for the ethnographic research shows clearly that they have *ended up obscuring much more than they are revealing*. In lieu of opening-up the state's inner recesses for all to behold and, thus, check malpractices or inefficiencies, these supposed reforms have merely created an additional material, papery official reality that falsely attests to the expending of state labour. In the process, substantive welfare work has been effectively stymied with bureaucrats spending all their time and energy on the production of material testaments of transparent governance.

All this is not to say that we don't demand to know how HAU was being governed and (mis)managed for all these years. As [Ilana Gershon's](#) perceptive opening post shows, there is a lot we can understand by looking at both the bureaucracy and technology at play within the journal. Rather, it is to caution against the generic demand for "verification", "transparency and accountability", and "audit" that are being made by several forums that are not merely discounting the hard evidence that is already in the public domain, but also can end up undermining the radical potentiality of the current #hautalk moment that is - at long last - allowing us to speak certain truths freely.

A comparison with The List is, again, instructive here. The List was illuminating not for the names it put out, but due to the [new and genuinely surprising](#)



conversations it led to; conversations that have hitherto only taken place in hushed tones, if even that. Women I have known for years opened-up for the very first time with accounts of sexual harassment that they have experienced; others of the ways in which turning down advances has affected their careers and lives. Ever since it was first posted in October 2017, discussions on The List has dominated all my meetings with South Asianists. Unfortunately, though, this long overdue conversation seems to have stalled beyond cocktail party conversations due to an impasse it ultimately arrived upon. Crudely speaking, an unbridgeable division was set up between those who stressed and advocated for “due process” in terms of institutionalised committees and guidelines to be followed, and those who wished to privilege and place belief in the testimonies of the victims of sexual assault and harassment.

Papering over Haugate

There is a danger that the HAU implosion – or explosion, depending on how you see it – can meet a similar fate as The List. I can see hints of it descending merely into a story of a bromance gone spectacularly sour: the ushering in of an era of “Graeber Vs. da Col” as opposed to the “da Col hearts Graeber” dynamic that underlay the first issue of HAU with their macho manifesto of “ethnographic theory”. When not centred on the personalities of the two squabbling boys, there is a discussion of structural imbalance. A rockstar anarchist and LSE Professor with a twitter following of 72K in a spat with a perennial grad student albeit the most famous one Cambridge anthropology has ever produced. Some are also defending da Col saying he might be difficult at times, but is being unfairly targeted. Most of these defences of the person at the centre of the storm reference their own relationships with him to claim them to be overall warm and positive. Once again, this is a question of the evidence one chooses to believe in – one’s own very personal relationship with someone who stands accused of serious misdemeanours, or the varying forms of testimonies of others. Anthropologically, this is also a question we have long studied under structure and agency debates: is there something structurally wrong with the journal or publishing/anthropology



world OR is this about individualised problem agent/s.

To my mind, it is never just about either structure or agency but, as in this case, a torrid combination of both.

The difficult personality or alpha males locking horns narratives are perhaps not as problematic as the liberal tokens of outrage that are now beginning to be churned out. The letter signed by past and present editorial board members is an excellent example of such a posture. It makes bland condemnatory noises and expresses a suitable level of moral outrage and implies innocent astonishment at the situation, but then immediately follows it up with demands for evidence and rituals of verification. Such a statement does the labour of exculpating the editorial members, but not the more vital work of pushing for radical reforms and a more critical apprehension of how this situation was allowed to develop in the first place.

Furthermore, we need to be aware – as anthropologists if nothing else – that there is a danger that supposedly official investigations might open-up the space to obfuscate the facts through a clever technocratic performance of depoliticised auditory expertise.

The most [recent statement](#) by the board of trustees claiming it will “review all the documentation” that was provided by the “previous Interim Board” and with its un-anthropological snipe at social media, is an excellent example of how bureaucratic audits can take the sting out of the most serious of charges and neutralise the momentum for reform.

Just as the task of the HAU trustees is to protect the journal, the task before the rest of the anthropological world is to dig deeper as [Zoe Todd](#) and [Elizabeth C Dunn](#) have so brilliantly done. As Todd notes, what is encouraging about this moment is that people are finally speaking up. As such, #hautalk has inaugurated a series of much-needed conversations on [open access](#) (see also Jason Baird



Jackson's [post](#)) decolonisation of anthropology, citational practices, the ethics and [politics of voluntary labour](#) by [precarious](#) grad students and early career researchers, the forms of labour that are required to maintain a journal, and cultural appropriation. The razor-sharp schooling of HAU on decolonisation by the [Mahi Tahi](#) steering committee is another brilliant instance of the political potentiality of #hautalk.

Inadvertently, the anodyne letter by the editorial board has ended up revealing a core reason for why and how HAU became so successful – in terms of prestige and impact indices – so quickly. The names of the signatories and their institutional affiliations demonstrate in glorious technicolour what the former [Treasurer](#) of HAU describes as “power resulting from the perception of public support.” The journal and its entrepreneurial Editor-in-Chief had marshalled together a large number of anthropologists from an astonishingly small number of elite Euro-American institutions who became invested in the project of keeping it alive. The politics of inclusion and exclusion, elitism, mate-ism, whiteness, and academic hierarchy that the institutional affiliations of past and present editorial board members signals requires another blog post – if not full-fledged conference – altogether. I should, once again, state upfront my own complicity in this. I have published one article in HAU in 2015 and was due to have another essay published in the next issue of HAU (I have since withdrawn that piece). Having spent the last decade studying and working at Cambridge – former and present members of which preponderate the editorial board membership – such forms of collaboration with HAU had become an aspirational norm. This attraction to the journal grew not out of any inherent value in its content but, rather due to the fact that everyone else from the same narrow club of elite Euro-American anthropology departments that you belong to or, perhaps more accurately, *desired to belong to*, were doing the very same.

My submission, in brief, is that the recent revelations from The List and #hautalk have been largely unsurprising because we always-already-sort-of knew about widespread sexual harassment, misconduct, and corruption. Yet, these revelations shock. The shock comes from the fact that they have revealed that which we



would rather remain unsaid; the revelations give disturbing – and probably not publicly available – details and via a medium – Facebook/Twitter/Blogs – that spreads like wildfire and open up further conversations and comments that, at least in the moment, disallow the issue from being brushed under the carpet. In other words, what is shocking about accusations of malpractices in academia is not that they take place (“we all know that”) but that we all know that and continue to act as if we don’t know that till the point – such as with #hautalk – when we can no longer pretend we do not *really* know; that we don’t have the evidence to support these allegations; and when we can no longer deny our own complicity in shoring up the invisibilised networks of power and academic prestige that allow for such abuse to be tolerated in the first place.