Introduction: The Symbolic Capital of Ignorance
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Ignorance can take many forms—including ideologically inspired false consciousness, the innocence of blank slates, and the inability to comprehend some information. These forms of ignorance, along with others, share certain attributes. Ignorance frequently has been held as an innocent starting point, a temporary beginning state for journeys into sophisticated conceptualizations. Ignorance is often taken to be static, projected onto others as the first step in constructing stereotypes or in offering aid. Whether as a point of departure or a static projection, these ignorances entail a particular relationship between the self and the other in which only one half of that relationship is framed as knowing. As a result, analysts examine how knowledge transmission creates unequal relationships but tend to discuss ignorance only in limited terms — as an attribute one group assumes others possess in order to create boundaries that benefit the defining group.

This collection takes issue with this limited perspective on ignorance by examining ignorance as part of a social process — asking when people actively construct, claim and maintain ignorance for themselves. The authors all investigate how ignorance enables people to gain beneficial positions within relations of power. We ask: when is ignorance constructed on the ground and under what conditions? How do the ways people construct and project ignorance shape different patterns of knowledge transmission? By raising these questions, the contributors to this special issue call into question the standard relationship between knowledge and ignorance, taking not knowing to be as much a social construct as knowing. Our focus on ignorance allows us to take a new approach to two familiar anthropological questions: what cultural knowledge does one need to belong to a group, and how does one acquire this knowledge?

As its starting point, an anthropology of ignorance requires a focus on the interplay between cultural epistemologies and social organization. As Barth pointed out in his 1975 ethnography of the Papua New Guinean Bakataman, the link between knowledge and power is as dependent on the social construction of not knowing as it is on a group’s social organization. While Barth focused primarily on the techniques by which various elders gained symbolic capital by attributing ignorance to other Bakataman, we examine how people claim ignorance for themselves in order to temper potentially hazardous allegiances. Our special issue carries Barth’s insight into postcolonial settings, investigating how people manage the interplay of contradictory ways of knowing by strategically evoking certain ignorances.

Barth has argued that anthropologists should pay attention to how cultural epistemologies serve as “a major modality of culture” (1995:66). He suggests that: using knowledge (referring to what people employ to interpret and act on the world: feelings as well as thoughts, embodied skills as well as taxonomies and other verbal models) as our prototype for culture allows us to construct rather different models of culture and invites an imagery less vulnerable to the constructions on which disempowering discourses build” (1995: 66). Barth is positing that a focus on knowledge places anthropologists in a productive relationship vis-à-vis the ways in which others invoke and think through the culture concept. In a similar vein, our emphasis on ignorance enables us to ask questions
of cultural identity that reveal precisely how much knowledge is shared across hierarchies and through time.

**Ignorance, Cultural Identity, and Hybridity**

Questioning how ignorance is constructed has proven to be an evocative first step for understanding the hybridities at the core of cultural identities. Traditionally, the epistemological question scholars have asked when analyzing cultural identities is: what does one need to know to have a specific communal identity? Social thinkers such as Bourdieu (1990), Giddens (1986), and Sahlins (1985) have interpreted this as a question of how a cohesive and intricate cultural logic is continually recreated in practice. By looking at ignorance, we explore how cultural transmission can be erratic or incomplete or insufficient, thereby motivating people to use ignorance strategically in many circumstances. Each author in this collection analyses how people in their field sites evoke ignorance to fashion communal identities. In these articles, identity is predicated on people’s ability to demonstrate particular cultural knowledges, despite the fact that these knowledges are often partial. As Strathern elegantly describes:

> This ignorance is not of the unknowable: it is of what has been dropped from the repertoire, the intervening particles that once completed what is now left. In order to retain a sense of multiplicity and proportional enlargement, they must break the remaining “small” unit down into “smaller” units … The important thing is that the gaps are preserved. They do not see themselves as recreating what they think is missing, but only what they know. It is as if they knew that by insisting on that absence they create their own creativity (1991: 98).

Following from Strathern’s point, we argue that often deliberate ignorance reframes the very categories and creativity that cultural identity is meant to represent. A common theme in this collection is how people invoke ignorance to control their particular configurations of hybrid identities. By hybrid identity we mean the array of categories, such as class, gender, ethnicity, or even kinship, that are frequently strategically chosen or imposed in particular social interactions. These categories are never isolated constructions—performing gender, for example, depends on how gender is defined in relationship to other performatively available categories. Hybrid identities, these fluid constellations of categories, are made visible by continually creating and dismantling social boundaries. For example, Raj shows how first generation Hindu refugees from the partition have a sense of Punjabi identity that once included a range of traits that transcend religious boundaries, whereas the third generation’s understandings of Punjabi identity have become specified as predominantly Sikh. Raj describes how patterns of knowledge transmission between the generations has created this ignorance among the third generation, reconfiguring the very meaning of being Punjabi. The authors of the other articles in this collection similarly address how ignorance can allow hybrid identities to appear as though they are singular (Gershon), can transform an interplay between political and gendered identities (Parnell), or can alter what counts as belonging (Scott). As the contributors demonstrate, how people use ignorance to build and cross social boundaries makes apparent the fundamental hybridity of identities.
These articles emerge out of ethnographically grounded concerns with postcolonial displacement. Simply because these displacements are all formed by colonialism’s aftermath does not mean that they are uniform — as Lavie and Swedenburg argue, “Displacement . . . is not experienced in precisely the same way across time and space, and does not unfold in a uniform fashion” (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996: 4). Our authors acknowledge this diversity; each examines how a particular postcolonial context shapes the displacements that their interlocutors experience. In each ethnographic site discussed here, this is a displacement whose point of departure is not necessarily autochthony but rather a belonging that does not preclude foreign origins. Michael Scott most directly addresses the tension between autochthonous and foreign belongings in examining the impact of colonial authorities’ relocation policies upon the Arosi of the Solomon Islands. Similarly, Phil Parnell examines how squatters in Manila evoke ignorance as a strategic response to land claims based on an amalgam of colonial and postcolonial laws. Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj addresses the long-term impact of dislocation caused by the British colonial retreat from India, interrogating the use of ignorance by refugee families and subsequent political implications. Ilana Gershon focuses on how migrants distinguish between Samoan and capitalist exchanges when they move to New Zealand and the United States. In each article, exploring how people evoke ignorance in responding to displacement gives insights into how people create postcolonial identities.

A corollary theme explored in this special issue is the relationship between strategic uses of ignorance and structural ignorances. In each of the articles, we find strategic ignorances when people were able to choose whether to make knowledge explicit or implicit. Strategic ignorance often allows people to sustain communal identities that are based on hierarchical tensions. This interplay is directly addressed in Gershon’s article “How to Know When Not to Know”. Gershon argues that Samoan migrants use strategic ignorance when relatives in New Zealand the United States request money from them for Samoan exchanges. Migrants, as she explains in detail, will often prevent other family members from knowing how much money they have at their disposal. In these moments, strategic ignorance allows migrants to control their financial resources when faced with the demands of being Samoan and sustaining a Samoan identity despite their families’ economic realities. Structural ignorances, on the other hand, have little to do with explicit, implicit or tacit knowledge. Instead, structural ignorances are the misrecognitions one must adopt to operate successfully within paradoxical situations created within social structures. Zizek describes this form of ignorance in his account of commodity fetishism: “So, on an everyday level, the individuals know very well that there are relations between people behind the relations between things. The problem is that in their social activity itself, in what they are doing, they are acting as if money, in its material reality, is the immediate embodiment of wealth as such” (Zizek 1989: 31). Gershon also provides an example of structural ignorance in her account of Samoan role fetishism, in which she describes how, to be Samoan, one must ignore the effort which goes into performing Samoan roles, such as chiefs or dutiful daughters. Gershon argues that the structural ignorances required by capitalism and Samoan exchanges are in conflict, compelling migrants to practice strategic ignorances when moving resources between capitalist and Samoan exchange.
systems. By distinguishing between structural and strategic ignorances, we are pointing to the different relationships ignorance has to structure and practice.

**Development, Memory, Concealment, and Ignorance**

To analyze ignorance is to be in dialogue with three literatures – critiques of development, analyses of memory and forgetting, and discussions of concealment and secrecy. Each of these addresses questions underlying the social construction of knowledge, whereby ignorance is the shadow term. As already noted, the emphasis in these accounts is principally on the relations of power implicated in how knowledge is constructed. From these perspectives, ignorance lies outside of the cultural epistemologies scholars analyze—knowledge is the marked, ignorance is the unmarked. As Luhmann says: “This kind of ignorance is not a marked space, it is first and foremost on the other side of knowing – another side that suggests the crossing of the boundary, thereby stimulating efforts to know more of one or another (signification-capable) aspect” (1998: 81). Luhmann delineates a crucial process by which these literatures subsume ignorance in their construction of cultural epistemologies. In each literature, scholars describe cultural epistemologies as requiring ignorance only inasmuch as the cultural systems of knowledge are attempting to forge order in contexts that are uncertain and hence disorderly. However, ignorance in each of these literatures is conceptually different. While the literatures are not parallel, as we will examine here, ignorance emerges implicitly as the unmarked in each literature as a result of their assumptions about the social construction of knowledge.

Scholars of development frequently describe how indigenous knowledge systems are overlooked in development workers’ attempts to make scientific knowledge the marked and “true” epistemology. As a consequence, development workers attribute ignorance to others when they are forming unequal boundaries between two knowledge systems, especially as workers try to discredit indigenous systems as superstition. Anthropologists’ focus has been how this boundary gets constructed when development workers attribute certain types of ignorance to local populations. In *Encountering Development*, Escobar argues:

> Development relies exclusively on one knowledge system, namely, the modern Western one. The dominance of this knowledge system has dictated the marginalization and disqualification of non-Western knowledge systems. In this latter knowledge system . . . researchers and activists might find alternative rationalities to guide social action away from economistic and reductionist ways of thinking (1995: 13).

As Escobar reveals, development practices depend upon viewing indigenous knowledge as ignorances which are disorderly and intractable.

When scholars analyze how ignorance is projected onto the indigenous people by development workers, they often have started from the question: why hasn’t development knowledge been effectively transformative? Phil Parnell’s article in this special issue argues that those confronting development policies often wield ignorance as an effective weapon. Ignorance becomes a vehicle for creating much needed time (see Parnell 1989) or helping to forge a strategic space of resistance (this collection). Yet when scholars analyzing development ask how ignorance is constructed, they frequently examine how
workers counterpoise Euro-American knowledge with indigenous knowledge; usually scholars focus on how development workers have projected ignorance onto indigenous people (see Hobart 1993). This approach often overlooks how indigenous people themselves construct ignorance. In addition, those adopting this view inevitably interpret ignorance as pejorative. An emerging analysis of development is beginning to critique this perspective, focusing in particular on ‘bureaucratic ignorance’ – how development workers themselves employ ignorance to manage the contradictions inherent in development policies (Webner 199: 59, 62-63). Quarles van Ufford describes this process succinctly: “Ignorance is a defensive construct against the false assumptions which, for cultural and political reasons, underpin development policy-making” (Quarles van Ufford 1993: 157). Contributors to this volume echo this idea in suggesting that people can wield a powerful and effective response to development epistemologies by claiming certain ways of not knowing.

In the literature on memory and forgetting, scholars for the most part have not distinguished between forgetting and ignorance. These scholars argue that forgetting becomes a foundational moment in the struggle to create communal identity (see Antze and Lambek 1996; Battaglia 1993; Boyarin 1991; Carsten 1995; Rappaport 1998; Taylor 1993). As Battaglia states:

> My argument is that collective forgetting, as a social mechanism of alienation, may generate not oblivion but an experience of sociality which takes the place of oblivion; that this productivity reveals, furthermore, a process of ideological inscription – specifically the performative inscription of a unitary perdurable social order . . . (Battaglia 1993: 430)

She points to a process by which forgetting enables ideologically powerful communal claims to subsume differing individual histories. Forgetting is a gateway mechanism for fashioning homogeneity, largely because people often aim to overcome difference when they create communal and cohesive identities. But forgetting is not solely a tool of those in power. Werbner points out that an active forgetting (which he terms anti-memory – 1998: 74) often enables the personal to impact on the national. He argues: “Anti-memory may serve the ends of the nation-building regime, of the state in the making, or it may become the defensive or subversive drive of subalterns asserting themselves against the state or its dominant elites” (Werbner 1998: 74). Analyzing forgetting has enabled scholars to explore the power relationships implicit in the ways social narratives intertwine people’s daily lives with nation-building projects and other communal identities.

A focus on ignorance forces one to ask about different types of absences than forgetting does. While scholars of memory and forgetting pay attention to the role knowledge transmission plays in forming cultural identities, they stress the role of knowledge and neglect transmission. They tend not to explore the culturally specific epistemological assumptions underlying how people construct and teach cultural identities. We propose that an analytical framework that includes ignorance would highlight ethnographic experiences which reveal how complex cultural knowledge transmission can be for people. To ask when forgetting and ignorance might diverge, as Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj does in her article, is to ask not only about how understanding the
past is constructed but also how these understandings are both hybrid and epistemological.

Unlike the literature on memory and forgetting, ethnographic accounts of secrecy and concealment directly address certain epistemological anxieties emerging from social hierarchies. These analysts ask specifically how people use secret knowledge to gain symbolic capital and produce hierarchical relations (see Barth 1975; Bercovitch 1995, 1998; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Lattas 1998; Wagner 1984). The scholars analyze rites of passage or witchcraft, examining sites where tensions surrounding control of knowledge coalesce. In accounts of initiation, anthropologists have devoted their ethnographic imagination to detailing the power relationships that emerge as people conceal knowledge within ritual contexts. In anthropological discussions of sorcery and witchcraft since Evans-Pritchard (1976), two strains have emerged. In the first strain, scholars analyze discussions of witchcraft to gain insights into how people explain and attempt to manage misfortune (see Whyte 1997). In the second strain, anthropologists investigate how divination and sorcery can serve as political responses to upheavals created by the political hazards of postcolonialism (Comaroff 1999; Geschiere 1997; West 2001). In each case, the underlying concern is how people negotiate the allocation of power by alluding to or withholding occult knowledge in contexts where these forms of knowledge have long local histories.

While the literature on concealing and secrecy has been very influential, we are departing from some scholarly tendencies in this literature. Firstly, we are not focusing on ritual or segregated moments of knowledge transmission. Instead, our authors are asking how ignorance plays a crucial role in structuring everyday life. Secondly, we are not questioning the rationality of ignorance as a means to explain natural phenomena or social conflict. On the contrary, we are interrogating how the social construction of ignorance often resolves or refigures conflicts by allowing people to sidestep explanations and awkward understandings. Thirdly, we are taking a stand on an emerging debate in this literature concerning the ways in which occult knowledge is a local response to the hazards of modernity. The debate concerns whether to interpret concealment and witchcraft as local resistances to global forces, or to view these responses as “retooling cultural familiar technologies as new means for new ends” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999: 284). Along with Jean and John Comaroff (1999: 294-295), we are arguing against treating the epistemological assumptions people deploy as indicative of their pre-colonial cultural logic fighting to remain intact. As in our response to development literature, we are not invoking ignorance as a starting point for grasping how two separate epistemologies enter into dialogue with each other. We are examining the inverse: how people sometimes employ ignorance to create boundaries anew so that they can operate as though there are two (or more) systems.

Ignorance in the Field, Fielding Ignorance

The impetus for studying ignorance derives from our individual ethnographic experiences and, specifically, from the political consciousness of our interlocutors in the field. For our interlocutors, ignorance was neither innocent nor pejorative – it was strategic. People could be both sophisticated and articulate when using ignorance strategically, and ignorance could be a central aspect they themselves analyze as they seek to interpret
other people’s motivations. In this special issue, we begin by acknowledging that not knowing can be strategic as we explore what analyses of ignorance can contribute to an anthropology of knowledge.

In his article “The Innovations of Violent Days: Ignorance and the Regendering of Power in the Philippines”, Philip C. Parnell explores why women from a squatter’s movement in Manila chose passive resistance in response to the Philippine government’s plans to demolish parts of their squatter settlement. The Philippine government deployed the Marines to quell these squatters’ demonstration. Parnell shows how these women had to re-position themselves in relation to everyday cultural knowledge in order to protest despite the Marines’ threat of violence. The women put aside their understandings of how the Marines were likely to respond to resistance, which turned out to be a successful stance, both in the short term and in the long term. In the incident’s aftermath, the women were able to re-configure their cultural capital when negotiating with government officials allowing them to transcend gendered limitations. The strategic ignorance Parnell addresses is a twofold one. By choosing to act as political agents, disregarding their familial networks, the women also juxtapose previously separated gendered categories. Their judicious use of ignorance enables the women to move beyond limiting boundaries, becoming new types of political actors.

Dhooleka Sarhadi Raj continues with our project of examining the role of ignorance and displacement in the processes of identification. Raj’s site of inquiry is families, specifically the Punjabi Hindus who moved to New Delhi in India from areas ceded to Pakistan after the British retreat in 1947. In “Ignorance, Forgetting, and Family Nostalgia: Partition, the Nation State, and Refugees in Delhi”, she discusses the unintended consequences by which forgetting in the first generation of refugees becomes strategic ignorance in the next. She highlights the intersection between family histories and national histories, exploring how the refugee families’ intimate responses to the trauma of partition colluded with politically motivated official representations. For example, refugee families can present themselves as non-controversial citizens of Delhi because of the ways in which their transient and short-term reactions to partition as an immediate crisis are remembered retrospectively as permanent and planned. She posits that personal silences about partition become translated into public silences which, during the year of the 50th anniversary of national Independence, were used by the Hindu Right. In distinguishing ignorance from forgetting, Raj addresses the wider theme of the epistemology underlying identity construction.

Michael W. Scott explores anxieties revolving around land claims in his research on a Solomon Islands village. In “Ignorance is Cosmos: Knowledge is Chaos”, Scott discusses how the tension surrounding land claims among the Arosi has created a situation in which people publicly express an ignorance of genealogical claims which they can describe privately in detail. The Arosi refuse to acknowledge openly their ancestral rights to land, claiming instead that all the villagers are newcomers. Privately, they believe in detailed and irreconcilable claims. They realize that other villagers consider their own conflicting claims to be more legitimate and, as a result, remain silent to avoid strife. Ethnographers of the Solomon Islands have discussed how these societies find it productive to think of sociality as intertwined modalities of stability and dissolution. These modalities are typically anthropomorphized in two distinct leadership styles – chief and warrior. Scott argues that among the Arosi, modalities of stability and
dissolution are not played out through warfare, but rather in terms of knowledge transmission. The Arosi believe that dissolution, or entropy, is a general force which people, particularly skilled chiefs, must prevent. Scott describes how articulating one’s personal understanding of genealogical order creates conflict and dissolution among the Arosi, while strategically not knowing one’s own ancestors sustains a fragile peace. By asking about public ignorances, Scott intervenes in ethnographic controversies in the Solomon Islands, reframing well-established anthropological dichotomies in terms of Arosi’s own ontological and epistemological frameworks.

In the concluding article, “How to Know When Not to Know”, Ilana Gershon explores how people use forms of ignorance to maintain boundaries between exchange systems. She examines how migrants to New Zealand and the United States move objects and money out of what they perceive to be a capitalist exchange system and into Samoan exchange networks. Gershon focuses in particular on the moments when family members ask each other for money and food to help preserve their family’s reputation in Samoan exchanges. She argues that it is not in the exchange itself but in the moment of elicitation that capitalism and Samoan exchanges are demarcated as separate. According to Gershon, Samoans invoke ignorance at several moments when eliciting resources in response to various logical conundrums. In this case study, people use ignorance strategically to create and sustain boundaries between capitalism and Samoan exchanges and between being “Western” and being Samoan.

Conclusion

Examining strategic ignorance forms a very particular dilemma for ethnographers. In fieldwork situations, researchers are constantly struggling to discover whether the information they are gleaning (or the lack thereof) is learned because they are outsiders or because they are observing how knowledge circulates (cf Bercovitch 1995). This dilemma is particularly acute when strategic ignorance, with the interplay of explicit and implicit knowledge, is at stake. In each of the articles, the authors also explore their own role as information gatherers in contexts where who know what and why is crucial. This self-reflexive move enables the contributors to place their epistemological stances on par with their interlocutors in the field. We are taking seriously Barth’s appeal to:

…. Engage more intimately in the field situation with the ideas of other people, not as exemplars of culture, but for their insights into life. Some anthropologists have been strangely resistant to letting ‘native concepts’ illuminate our own understanding and have preferred to merely let it provide the meat of our ‘data’. We need to practice a greater humility (1995: 66).

Barth’s call invites anthropologists “to engage more intimately” and equally with people’s own epistemological assumptions. In this special issue, contributors are turning to one element of how knowledge is constructed by taking on board how silences and implicit knowledges are understood by our interlocutors in the field.

This methodological approach forces a re-examination of analyses based on underlying forms of social consciousness. Such analyses require anthropologists to study
people as having knowledge that they themselves are not conscious of possessing. The job of the anthropologist becomes deciphering cultural knowledge by dividing people’s understandings into categories of what people can and can not say. Barth’s methodological commitments requires anthropologists to move away from studies that, as Bourdieu proposes, divide social discourses into statements that can potentially be debated or “the pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world” (1980: 68). This division has translated into a claim that “it is because agents never know completely what they are doing that what they do has more sense than they know” (Bourdieu 1980: 69). This assertion put the analyst in a privileged position vis-à-vis people on the ground and ensures that people remain, in Barth’s words, “exemplars of culture”. Instead, we argue that to understand the construction of knowledge involves both paying attention to gradations of implicitness and people’s own epistemological understandings.

These papers taken together raise evocative questions about the construction of knowledge by examining different types of ignorance, focusing in particular on strategic and structural ignorance, active concealment, and deliberately maintained ignorance. The particular forms of ignorance the authors focus on reflect the epistemological assumptions of people in their field sites, and are by no means comprehensive. Other constructions knowledge also entail other cultivated ignorances. We are concluding by suggesting that ignorance can be good to think with as a starting point to understanding how people construct knowledge. We are calling for nuanced accounts of the differences between what people know, what they claim to know and not know, and what is not known.