Reflections on hermeneutics and translocality

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Arbeitspapier / working paper

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Abstract[1]

This paper reflects on the issues that were brought to the Roundtable on Hermeneutics and Translocality held at the ZMO in 2006. I review the successive ways in which I have drawn on the hermeneutic philosophical tradition as an anthropologist, emphasing the ethical dimension. Translocality heightens the hermeneutic problem but does not radically change it; it may entail recognizing that everything is always already pretranslated. In reflecting on the task and means of anthropology, I briefly juxtapose Gadamer's admirable deference or modesty to Ricoeur's dialectic of appropriation and distanciation and to what Cavell calls the arrogation of voice.

Hermeneutics and translocality

It is with a certain lack of confidence that I write in Germany about hermeneutics. Germany is the country in which hermeneutics has been most richly developed and debated and many of you undoubtedly know much more about the tradition than I. I am not a philosopher and have read none of the major works or authors of this tradition in any depth, and what I have read was some years ago. My goal, then, is not to offer an academic paper within this philosophical tradition, to further develop or critique it, but rather, to draw from it, to consider something of what it might offer to anthropology.

I draw on hermeneutics for three related reasons. First, I think it offers a good and close analogy of ethnographic practice and hence an interesting de-

scription of the anthropological project. Second, it provides hints on how to refine and improve that practice, possibly even a kind of »best practice« model for ethnography. Sometimes, however, it is the informed critique of hermeneutics that offers the analogy or the improvement (Crapanzano 1992). Third and most important, hermeneutics extends our comprehension of the human condition and hence of anthropological theorizing. Specifically, it directs us to non-reductive understandings of cultural phenomena and social practices. I call the third reason the most important because, while hermeneutics has made us more reflective about our own status and limits as cultural interpreters, in the end it is a deeper and broader understanding of social life, cultural worlds, and the human condition that constitutes the object of anthropological knowledge.

My acquaintance with hermeneutics has been gradual but relatively continuous, ever since I discovered in reading Clifford Geertz the possibility of finding my voice in anthropology.[2] In my first book, *Human Spirits: A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte* (1981), I began by drawing on Ricoeur (1971) and applying the text metaphor to the interpretation of spirit possession on the island of Mayotte. I tried to follow more or less Ricoeur's account in *Interpretation Theory* (1976) of a structuralist hermeneutics, moving from first understanding, through a structuralist decoding, toward a fuller comprehension. In my second book, *Knowledge and Practice in Mayotte: Local Discourses of Islam, Sorcery, and Spirit Possession* (1993), I drew somewhat on Gadamer (1985) and specifically the ideas of a tradition as an ongoing conversation and of

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1 This paper was written at the invitation of Kai Kresse and presented at the Roundtable on Hermeneutics and Translocality at the ZMO, Berlin, in September 2006. It has been very slightly updated for publication 5 years later.

2 This is a kind of paraphrase of Stanley Cavell's discovery of his voice through listening to John Austin (Cavell 1994).

understanding as grounded in conversation. Thus I portray inhabitants of Mayotte working within specific traditions of knowledge and the ongoing conversation among these traditions as it emerges in the diverse practices of people acting, variously, from the perspectives of Schutzian experts, well-informed citizens, and ordinary people on the path (Schutz 1964). (This dimension of the perspective or intention of the knower to his or her knowledge or action is important and generally neglected.) I also show the growth of my own understanding through conversation, specifically through the possibilities and constraints of being a student in conversation with practitioners about their specific actions and, to draw from the Manchester school (Evens and Handelman 2006), about and within specific cases.

By the time of my third book, *The Weight of the Past: Living with History in Mahajanga, Madagascar* (2002), I had understood that the hermeneutic tradition begins with Aristotle. I drew upon two of Aristotle's categories of human action, namely *poiesis*, or (creative) making, and *phronesis*, or (judicious) doing (practice). There is a third Aristotelian category, namely *theoria*, or contemplative reason, which I did not specifically address there but which I take to be the substance of what Kai Kresse means when he talks about an anthropology of philosophy (Kresse 2007). I think that poiesis, phronesis, and contemplative thought are closely intertwined, more dimensions or aspects of human engagement with the world than discrete kinds of activity. Thus the terms are abstractions from, or interpretations of, more holistic human activity, being in the world. Nevertheless, they do become objectified in specific cultural practices, genres, theories, and disciplines, such as academic philosophy itself. In any case, they clarify the alternative to reductionism. We can understand them in terms of what C. B. Macpherson (1973) called the human capacities, rather than utilities. This is to accept and expand Sahlins' (1976) opposition between culture and structure and what he calls (unfortunately) practical reason. Human beings exercise their capacities for creativity, ethical practice, and reasoning – they don't simply need, desire, calculate, compete, conquer, expropriate, submit, resist, etc.

Latterly I have begun to consider how the sort of Aristotelian picture developed by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958), namely a picture that includes labor, distinguished from creative work or poiesis, and that highlights action rather than practice, might help round out an anthropological view, or at least my view. With partial reference to hermeneutics, but at least equally to so-called ordinary language philosophy, I have been thinking about how to conceptualize human action, not only the heroic or historically significant acts that the Greeks, Marx, and Arendt variously valorize, but everyday acts, like promising or winking (Lambek 2010). Whereas Charles Taylor (1989) sees the ordi-

nary as a feature of modernity and the bourgeoisie – a value to be contrasted to previous aristocratic or feudal values – one can see the »ordinary« as central to all times and places, in contrast to the metaphysical, etc. A question that arises is how the acceptance and acknowledgement – in a word, the commitment – entailed in taking up an action or performing a ritual articulates with the continuous judgment and exercise of the virtues necessary for or simply characteristic of ongoing social interaction. This is an ethical question, but also one that will surely play out differently in distinct social and cultural milieux and that may become especially problematic when translocality is pronounced.

My prior ethnographic encounters are relevant here insofar as I have been inspired to think about the ethics of action and, more specifically, to follow Stanley Cavell, about how we acknowledge acts as *ours*, in part by the genre of spirit possession and the practices and acts of specific spirit mediums and other healers. In other words, the ethnographic and hermeneutic encounter with spirit possession has pushed me to pursue certain questions of philosophy (Lambek 1998, 2003). I take this as an instance of what might be meant more broadly by the productive conversation between distinct cultural traditions.

The Aristotelian/hermeneutic tradition may be faulted for being excessively optimistic or idealistic (and, as taken up in modern philosophy and anthropology, overly romantic). Not only does it not generally overcome, or perhaps even seriously consider, the severe differences of power, status, and capacity characteristic of the present world, but it needs to incorporate, as Bruce Janz (2009) and the African philosophers like Achille Mbembe (2001) he cites note, both a recognition of violence and what Ricoeur memorably called the hermeneutics of suspicion. In the confessional essay I circulated to the Roundtable (Lambek 1997), I depicted a kind of Freudian or Freud-inspired hermeneutics of suspicion of the hermeneutic encounter itself, in which human passions, such as anxiety, ambivalence, competitiveness, and idealization, no less than locally and translocally construed fields of power, have their part even in the mutual desire for understanding. There are dialogical encounters constituted by a tension between affinity and the anxieties of influence, in which transference and counter-transference must surely play their part and in which participants may be speaking at cross-purposes or at least not to the reciprocal ideal Gadamer desires. But the reason I pre-circulated that paper was mainly that it speaks to the kind of uneasiness about locality – about place and space, to take the terms Janz borrows from Mudimbe, who borrows them from de Certeau – that is emblematic of the postmodern era and that is figured in the concept of translocality as articulated by Bromber and Hamzah (2005). Translocality is, in the first in-

stance, experienced and articulated by ourselves as intellectuals or philosophers, in Kresse's sense, and in the very possibility that Mudimbe can read de Certeau while Janz can read Mudimbe, and I can receive electronically from Germany Janz's essay, written, perhaps, in Florida, and then travel myself to speak about it in Berlin.

The challenge for us, the *hermeneutic* challenge if you will, is multi-faceted. First, and progressively, it is not to generalize from our own, privileged experience of translocality to that of others engaged in other, more constrained and exploitative spheres of circulation. For example, my situation is not equivalent to that of the African intellectuals given voice in Bruce Janz's text, whose knowledge was forged in a colonial and post-colonial context that, one could say, is by its very nature, translocal (e.g., through religious education). Second, and conservatively, the challenge is to consider how to balance the evident intellectual benefits of translocality with the healthy reproduction of traditions, i.e., how to resist that simultaneous flattening of place and time and intensification of movement that we experience everywhere. For both these reasons, I appreciate Bromber and Hamzah's singling out of excess. But third, the novelty of translocality should not be exaggerated any more than the polyphony of tradition should be overlooked. In *Knowledge and Practice* I tried to illustrate a polyphony of traditions consequent to regional translocality outside the Euro-American sphere and outside (in at least some readings of the term) »modernity«. In *The Weight of the Past*, I downplay it somewhat, but translocality is evident in such incidents as an encounter with a Saudi supplicant at the ancestral shrine in Mahajanga and polyphony in the continuing and complex articulation of ancestral tradition with Islam and with European modernity, a historical polyphony that I call a poiesis of history. The historical depth of this regional Indian Ocean translocality is something whose nature members of the ZMO have considerably explored.

Translocality in the anthropological vocabulary signifies that we are no longer trying to discern whole or bounded cultures, but traveling and intermingling repertoires. This has a number of implications, of which I will mention three.

First, contrary to what my circulated article may have implied, insofar as hermeneutics is not about understanding other people, qua psychological individuals, it is less relevant whether persons are mobile or translocal than that practices, genres, texts, discourses, and prejudices are. Writing, I would say, is an intrinsically translocal medium, as are successive innovations in the technology of communication. Of course, mobile persons often are the vehicles for translocal practices, for example where people from Mayotte perform Maulidas or spirit possession ceremonies in La Réunion or met-

ropolitan France. This is different from Tanzanian youth performing hip-hop in Tanzania (Weiss 2009), where the genre is translocal, but where, in a literal sense, the performers are not.

Second, translocality entails recognizing that an older portrait of hermeneutics as the meeting of autonomous traditions, as a confrontation between genuinely distant or absolutely foreign texts, must be supplanted by one of encountering what is always already encountered. The danger here is no longer exoticism or relativism, but the assumption that we already understand one another, that a common location or a common language implies a common or identical lived world, that our horizons coincide more closely than they do.

As Adam Ashforth reflects as he struggles to represent the discrepancies between what he and his South African subject, Madumo, understand by »witchcraft«, the problem is increasingly that »the terms we use are already translated from one language and culture to another and back again, over and over through generations. There is no pristine vocabulary of difference available to Madumo to describe his experiences with witchcraft that I could translate and then present to the world in terms familiar to the West; no language to make the words seem unique, or the effort of translation worthwhile. The words, like the worlds, are already pre-translated. And yet, there remains something radically and irreducibly different in his experience of these matters from mine...« (2000: 244).

Third, insofar as translocal parts no longer conjoin to form distinct wholes, the hermeneutic circle of part/whole relations is no longer self-evident. If the whole is something emergent and as yet unformed, then the part must be contingent; adjacent practices may have little relation to one another. On the other hand, if hermeneutics no longer comprehends part/whole relations directly, it must include comparison of performances or meanings in different locations. These then become the parts of some larger, as yet ungrasped, emergent or contested translocal »whole«, a whole that is so encompassing (is it »modernity«, is it the mind?) that it evades well-rounded comprehension.

Of course, the anthropological hermeneutic standpoint has always been at least partially translocal insofar as we sought insider perspectives without giving up our position as outsiders; we tried, first, for a kind of bilingual, bicultural understanding on the spot and, second, to mediate between the two languages or cultures on our return home. What is relatively new is the translocal position of our subjects or in some instances simply our recognition of their translocal or transcultural position (which was in many instances formed under colonialism and its aftermath). Hence the question becomes our interpretation of their context and practice of interpretation: our hermeneutic of their hermeneutic. Yet in *Knowledge and Practice* I pointed out

that hermeneutic practice in Mayotte was already one of juggling among incommensurable traditions; and indeed that »culture« itself – that is any single given tradition – is constituted in part from incommensurables, and thus that the hermeneutic problem, or rather hermeneutic practice, must be intrinsic to culture (much as, for Gadamer, it occurs within a single tradition). Therefore, the problem or practice of interpretation between cultures or traditions is not a radical departure from the problem or practice of interpretation within them or within or between places. Similarly, the translocality of one's own cultural building blocks is not new or special. The ongoing work of interpretation is what culture is.

Thus, for anthropology, the hermeneutic whole has always been something of an idealized fiction. And it must be so for literary hermeneutics as well, insofar as, to cite Jonathan Culler's aphorism, »meaning is context-bound but context is boundless« (1982). Incidentally, the metaphor of culture as text was never about cultures as fixed, bounded objects (»texts«), but of »text-building« (Becker 1979).

If time permits I would like to further contrast the relations of anthropology, broadly conceived, to the work of intercultural philosophy or even to what Kresse calls the anthropology of philosophy or what Armin Geertz (2003) refers to as »ethnohermeneutics«.

As I noted above, contemplation should be seen in Aristotelian conjunction with poiesis and phronesis rather than, in Plato's terms, in opposition and superior to them and hence independent of them. My fieldwork has not entailed seeking out so-called sages or African equivalents to Western philosophers, though I have certainly gravitated to exemplary individuals and teachers. I have worked primarily by means of intense conversations within contexts of observed practice and the intention has been not so much to discover explicit philosophies as to uncover the underlying tradition and the repertoire of practices, the background of »prejudice« from which explicit ideas, creative projects, and practical judgments emerge. As hermeneutics is sometimes identified with dialogue, it is worth reflecting on Ricoeur's remark that, »Hermeneutics begins where dialogue ends« (1976: 32).[3] As distinct from philosophy, the

subject of anthropology is found less in individuated or abstracted theories than in collective traditions, worlds of thought and practice. In Gadamerian terms, what we are interested in are horizons of prejudice. And the goal is one of understanding the world of our informants (a word that suddenly seems more accurate than interlocutors) rather than of agreement or disputation, as must occur in serious conversation or academic philosophy.

I used to think (1991) that anthropology entailed following Gadamer's fine maxim:

Hermeneutic philosophy understands itself not as an absolute position but as a way of experience. It insists that there is no higher principle than holding oneself open in a conversation. But this means: Always recognize in advance the possible correctness, even the superiority of the conversation partner's position. Is this too little? Indeed, this seems to be the kind of integrity one can demand only of a professor of philosophy. And one should demand as much. (1985 [1977]: 189).

I now think that Ricoeur's dialectic of appropriation and »distanciation« better fits the picture. Unless we want to go native, so to speak, to argue as and with one of them, we do preserve some distance and therefore we stay at a remove from Gadamer's standard of serious responsiveness. Put another way, insofar as deep understanding remains within a certain frame of conversation, or fieldwork, as we move outside that frame, and intend to do so from the start, the integrity is compromised.

It is not a matter of whether specific persons we encounter in the field are or are not philosophers, but whether anthropology wishes to see them first through this lens rather than through another. If we take our research subjects seriously as philosophers, and ourselves too, then our job would be to debate them or to further promote, codify, or develop their ideas, as do the students, successors, and posthumous editors of Wittgenstein or Foucault. The anthropological conversation, as I understand

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3 In the work that I have begun in Switzerland, many practitioners wish nothing more than to give me an explicit rendition of some argument; such rationalization is quite different from my experience among Malagasy speakers on the island of Mayotte and in Madagascar. But the theories behind the arguments are either fairly inchoate or else prepackaged and my interest is less in listing them or responding to them individually, rehearsing, if you like, the various injunctions of homeopathy or alchemy (*spagyric*), than in unpacking the contextual relations and the set of concepts

and assumptions that underlie them, part of a tradition that, as I currently see it, has roots in Renaissance hermeticism. A second dimension of this research must have to do with the historical careers of competing traditions and specifically the way healing practices are increasingly colonized by state and other discursive processes of rationalization, regulation, and control (e.g. medical, insurance, and trade regimes), but, equally, constituted precisely in and through their resistance to such processes or at least the way they come to symbolize such resistance. But there is another interest, somewhat closer to philosophy, and certainly to hermeneutics, in the creativity and ethical character and acts of specific practitioners.

and practice it, is not primarily one of debate with or fully joining in with our subjects, though there are increasing challenges and invitations to do so and this is perhaps one of the effects of translocality. To re-metaphorize Geertz's image of reading over the shoulders of our subjects, it is as though we elicit or overhear conversation rather than taking a full role in it. I hope this is not a »denial of coevalness« (see Fabian 1983) but an ethical bracketing of practices.[4] And as I indicated, this does not preclude a certain kind of influence on our outlook, orientation, and theories as anthropologists (or more simply, as persons).

Of course, anthropologists of all kinds of topics and not merely of philosophy do sometimes progress by means of portraits of exemplary and ordinary individuals and I have found myself doing so. But whereas the philosopher strives to decontextualize the ideas, so as to universalize them, the anthropologist's task is one of contextualization. Alton Becker long ago elaborated a minimum of four kinds of contextual relations that have to be described when studying a text, relations he called coherence, invention, intentionality, and reference (1979). Coherence refers to the relations of units within a text; invention to the relations of a text to other texts, particularly those in the same genre; intentionality to the relations of creators and audience of the text; and reference to relations to nonliterary events outside the text (cf. Lambek 1981: 8).[5] Becker deployed the text metaphor to approach text-building performances of Javanese shadow puppetry; I extended it to performances of spirit possession in Mayotte, but I think his elaboration of contextual constraints and relations could be applied more broadly to a variety of practices and genres and, indeed, to the ordinary acts and utterances of persons. In contextualizing a conversation, then, one would like to explore and compare these sets of relations as they pertain, differentially, to each party. I would add that the act of translating the sense of the text, fully comprehending it, entails exploring also the repertoire of philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic concepts offered by the anthropologist's or translator's own tradition or by the tradition of the intended reader, in addition to the tradition of the author or the world of the text itself. This is necessary in order to do justice to the text and performance, to mirror its complexity with a translation (or interpretation) of equivalent force and quality. Thus the understan-

ding of the other occurs by means of a double move of contextualizing the foreign text in its tradition while simultaneously engaging in a hermeneutic interrogation of one's own tradition to find words and concepts rich and subtle enough to articulate the new. It is through this painstaking method that we achieve, if we do, what Gadamer calls a fusion of horizons between the conversation partners, or at least, from the perspective of the anthropologist alone, Ricoeur's dialectic of distanciation and appropriation.

To contextualize entails understanding what the other is saying and doing, and this understanding begins through conversation. But this is conversation of a particular and uneven kind (Crapanzano 1992), in which the anthropologist defers to the speech of the subject (while the subject may be less interested in the speech of the anthropologist). Listening to others in this fashion entails deference. It behooves what I have called the shift *From Method to Modesty* (1991) and that I take to summarize one of Gadamer's key contributions, as the citation above indicates. But I would add now that modesty is perhaps only half the picture. It goes along with what Stanley Cavell (1994) calls »the arrogation of voice«. Arrogation means undue claim; arrogation is closely related to arrogance. The arrogance of the anthropologist is threefold: First, to have the temerity to displace or precede the voice of the other. Second, to practice an internal structural analysis and an external hermeneutics of suspicion on the speech or text produced by other voices and actors. And third, and this like philosophy, the arrogation to act as the voice of humanity, to speak as one who has seen and done much outside home or the ordinary and who can thereby abstract from ordinary or local experience or generalize from more than one case, who can draw on the history of comparison, generalization, abstraction, argument, and empirical documentation that constitutes the anthropological (or philosophical) tradition, who can speak, if you like, as the exemplary voice of enlightened, cosmopolitan translocality. Whatever its pretensions, however, the translocality of the anthropological tradition remains a »trans« of »across«, not a »trans« of »above« or »beyond«; it too is a product of horizon clearing, an extending rather than a transcending.

With regard to the first arrogation, representing the voice of the other, caution is certainly in order, and ethical judgment, but in the end, what else can we do but acknowledge our act? So-called »collaborative anthropology« is a nice idea but it is usually riddled with problems and self-deceptions of its own. Either our collaborators become anthropologists, in which case they too are engaged in arrogating voices, or they remain de facto our subjects, their voices arrogated – and the more so to the degree we refuse to acknowledge the situa-

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4 It should also be clear that the relationship of anthropologist to informant holds, no matter where each of them lives or comes from.

5 Behind this lies Roman Jakobson's distinction (1960) among speaker, hearer, message, code, contact, and context – referring, respectively, to the emotive, conative, poetic, meta-linguistic, phatic, and referential functions of communication.

tion, portray them as co-authors, and the like.[6] To soften this picture somewhat, one may say that the ethnographer qua writer is engaged in the orchestration of voices; some do come through relatively clear and true, but at the behest of the orchestrator (composer, conductor). How different the genre of ethnography is in this respect from that of the novel, whose polyphony Bakhtin (1981) describes well, I cannot say here, but I would suggest that an answer might begin by following something like Becker's lines of contextualization as well as consideration of ethical judgment. That the novel is an organic cultural product reminds us that orchestration is not the prerogative of the anthropologist nor is arrogation of voice unique to academia. One way to understand spirit possession itself is as a genre or language game for the arrogation and orchestration of voice. Is this philosophy or anthropology? How *should* we locate it?

The anthropologist doesn't just learn something new, add to his or her repertoire of practice and knowledge, as the migrant might, or simply code switch, as the bilingual or bicultural person might (*is* »bicultural« a real condition or useful category?), but has to be able to *report back* – to an audience of students, colleagues, readers, who are not bicultural and who have not assimilated the other into the self, who haven't »been there«, whose translocality does not map onto that of the ethnographer. Anthropology thus transcends the single conversation; as Crapanzano (1992) reminds us, Hermes is a messenger. Moreover, the task of the anthropologist is not merely to translate or mediate, but to contribute to a body of work that grows from multiple ethnographic studies of the widest possible range of culture and society. So it isn't simply or exclusively a matter of accounting for or recounting the others in their own terms, as an ordinary conversation (or a lecture) might be, but of orchestrating voices (or texts) from one set of conversations with distinctively other voices (texts) from other conversations, conversations and texts that fit together less easily when not simply paired but combined in complex structures. This is how the tradition of anthropology itself is composed; in the end, the anthropological conversation, now more obviously a metaphor for self-constituting interpretation, takes place between successive layers of that tradition, i.e., it is ideally what Janz, after Gadamer, refers to as an »effective-history… [entailing] the recognition that all present theory is implicated by its own history…«

Too great a self-consciousness about voice can also take us off track. Let me reprise Ricoeur's con-

cluding paragraphs of *Interpretation Theory*, where he reviews three misconceptions in Romanticist hermeneutics' conceptualization of appropriation. What is to be understood and appropriated, affirms Ricoeur, is not the intention of the author of the text, nor the understanding of the original addressee, nor yet the understanding of any given reader.

What has to be appropriated is the meaning of the text itself, conceived in a dynamic way as the direction of thought opened up by the text. In other words, what has to be appropriated is nothing other than the power of disclosing a world that constitutes the reference of the text. In this way we are as far from the Romanticist ideal [an ideal that continues to remain a lure today] of coinciding with a foreign psyche. If we may be said to coincide with anything, it is not the inner life of another ego, but the disclosure of a possible way of looking at things, which is the genuine referential power of the text. (Ricoeur 1976: 92)

The job of the reader is not to project herself into the text, to reduce it to the limitations of her understanding. »The reader rather is enlarged in his capacity of self-projection by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself. Appropriation, in this way, ceases to appear as a kind of possession, as a way of taking hold of things; instead it implies a moment of dispossession of the egoistic and narcissistic ego… In this self-understanding, I would oppose the self, which proceeds from the understanding of the text, to the ego, which claims to precede it. It is the text, with its universal power of world disclosure, which gives a self to the ego« (Ricoeur 1976: 94-5).

In other words (and to inflate the point), interpretation is less an act in which the interpreter remains in control than a kind of passion in which we submit to the power of the text, are opened up by it. It is less possession *of* the text than possession *by* it (hence, rather like spirit possession itself). As Stanley Cavell might say, it is the text that reads us. Interpretation expands the potential of the text (or the world of the text) rather than closing it down or reducing it to some fixed meaning, content, or structure. Of course, this too is but an ideal (in the sense both of ideal type and ideal goal), rather abstracted from dialogue and struggle, and perhaps an indication of a kind of privileged space of protection within which the text can do its work.

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6 As an extreme example, I note the text of Roy Willis (1999) in which it is announced on the title page (but not on the cover) that it is co-authored, but in which one eventually finds a passage in which Willis fires one of the ostensible co-authors.

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