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Special Section Introduction: Labours of Collaboration

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Notes on Collaboration: Nayantara

This is for real! I guess I'm going to have to share these spaces.

Then a bit further down on the page, a name and few details hastily scribbled:

Gabriela, PhD Student, Med Anthro, Geneva, Swiss, English only!

There were no other fieldnotes on that page for that day. Looking back on that page in my diary, I still distinctly remember the conversation in mid-2014, when I was told by my primary investigator (PI) that I would have a PhD student join me in 'my' clinics and she would do research alongside me for her dissertation. I was not too excited at this prospect; I felt incredibly uncomfortable and vulnerable. I had known that this was going to happen at some point. I was well aware that I was being territorial and insecure, because, even when I had accepted



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my role as a post-doctoral research fellow on the large European Research Council (ERC) grant, Dr Aditya Bharadwaj (PI on the project) had explained that different people would be joining the team – including other researchers doing their Masters, PhDs, or even a post-doctoral research project.

As the reality of this new graduate student, who would shadow me in the various clinics where I had been building relationships and collecting data over the past year, drew near, I became progressively uncomfortable. My time in these clinics had been hard negotiated. It had taken considerable labour to get access to certain spaces, and now I had to prepare to share it. What if this student made my participants uncomfortable? What if she said or did something that could jeopardize the research project? What if she saw things differently, *very differently*, from the way I saw them in these clinics? Would my analysis then be invalid? She did not speak Hindi or Marathi – would I have to act as a translator and also cultural interlocuter? I was being asked to collaborate with another researcher, something I had never done before and had read very little about.

While there is a rich history of anthropologists studying people and *their* collaborations in science labs (Rabinow 1996; Rajan 2006; Traweek 1988), or collaborating with research participants (Mintz 1960, 1989; Rappaport 2008), I had not read enough about the changing nature of ethnographic research in which two researchers shared the same space. The one example I was aware of, and worried about, was Margaret Mead's field sites being visited by Derek Freeman and how he (re)analysed what she saw, heard, and experienced (Jarvie 2013; Rappaport 1986). I worried that what I had worked to understand over the past year about stem cell research and therapies would be scrutinized and my own ethnographic practice put to the test.

My fears were unfounded.

A day into our 'collaborative research,' we became friends. A week into our research together, we discovered the joy of sipping coconut water and chatting about the day during long taxi rides back to our hotel. Three years since our time together in the field, Gabriela and I are now close: we talk often, or as often as possible with time zones and writing commitments, and are writing a piece together on ethnographic collaborations.

My fears about potentially ruined field relationships were unfounded, but my ethnographic practice was definitely impacted – for the better, I think. Sharing this space forced me to not be complacent in my participant observations, encouraged me to work on days when I felt lazy, allowed me to feel less lonely in the clinics, and, above all, it created an opportunity for a friendship that will last a long time. Once you share a field site full of so much grief, hope, loss, and love, as we had in the stem cell clinics and research facilities in India, you are connected not only for the duration of the project or the writing, but for much longer, beyond a static project end date. Since then, I have had a chance to write collaboratively with my PI (Appleton and Bharadwaj 2017a; 2017b) on this research project and am working with Gabriela on a piece about the changing nature of ethnographic

collaboration. In learning to collaborate in the field site *differently*, my ethnography has been shaped for the better.

That initial anxiety around sharing the ethnographic space also directed my reading to focus on collaboration and ethnography. Around that time, I had read Himika Bhattacharya's review and engagement on 'New Critical Collaborative Ethnography' (2008). It is a rich review of her own Indian immigrant researcher positionality, engaging with and grounded in the understanding of collaborative ethnography as a practice emerging when researchers work with (not on) communities. I read her work as a site for starting a conversation on collaboration that is more than between researcher and non-researcher – rather, a commentary on people working together towards a common goal. She writes:

[...] I would like to reiterate that the new critical collaborative ethnography stands out as a particularly useful method for ethnographers who are invested in grounding their scholarship in processes of social change through collaboration with the *people whom they work with* (Bhattacharya 2008: 319).

The idea of how ethnographic practice is shaped by co-researching (same site, topic, space, and with the same people) has been little explored. As ethnographic research under the umbrella of 'qualitative data' gains traction, the idea of 'teams' of ethnographers collaborating is something we cannot continue to ignore. This was one of the motivations for starting a conversation in *Commoning Ethnography* about the changing nature(s) and sites of ethnographic practice.

The form of collaboration that I experienced with Gabriela, as a co-researcher in shared medical spaces, but with a different positionality and subjective bearing on what we saw, read, heard, felt, and wrote about, has emerged in relation to the demands placed on researchers to manage large, multi-researcher grants. Sometimes these teams are necessitated as part of the process of anthropologists working in collaboration with scholars in the hard sciences. In other instances, teams of local and non-local scholars are working together. Essentially, in this other form of ethnographic collaboration, two or more ethnographers work in the same space, co-creating (on multiple levels) ethnographic data and ethnographies. In many ways, I saw that it can change the nature of ethnography itself, but what I still struggle through is whether that change is good, bad, essential, or important to common the ethnographic practice and imagine it anew.

Notes on Collaboration: Lorena

I have just finished teaching my undergraduate course, 'Anthropology for Liberation', for the second time. One of the assignment options was for a small group of students to participate in a collaborative, service-learning style, ethnographic research project with me and representatives from Victoria University of Wellington's Student Association (VUWSA). This assignment replaced the 'Indigenous View of Wellington' assignment that some students struggled with

when I first taught this course (see Gibson 2017). I designed this new project in collaboration with Tamatha Paul, 2019 VUWSA President, before the course commenced, and obtained ethics approval from Victoria University of Wellington's Human Ethics Committee for the ethnographic fieldwork involved. Pedagogically, my goals were: 1) to give students the opportunity to learn by undertaking a practical research project that would benefit VUWSA as well as the students; and 2) to create a 'community that commons' (Gibson-Graham et al. 2016: 202) through collaborative ethnographic research inspired by Harrison (2010), Lassiter (2005a), and Smith (2012).

Five students applied to join me on this project, none of whom knew each other at the outset. Throughout the trimester we experienced many of the frustrations and joys that accompany collaborative ethnographic research, from figuring out how we would work together (and how to resolve conflict), to navigating the inevitable change in research focus, and negotiating the form and content of the final research project. The students presented a paper based on this research, entitled 'Salient Relationships: Addressing Barriers to Kaupapa Māori within Victoria University's Student Magazine', at the November 2019 conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand (ASAA/NZ). We are also planning a co-authored journal article drawing on this research.

This collaborative project has been a highlight of my teaching career thus far. It has also reminded me that I have always been drawn to collaborative ethnographic research and writing. Group meetings with my students invoked vivid memories of my own experiences as an undergraduate anthropology student taking part in collaborative research projects in the late 1990s, and as a team member at a research consulting firm in the late 2000s. Watching my students speak so confidently at the ASAA/NZ conference reminded me of my first conference paper: a presentation about Hip-Hop in Aotearoa, designed and delivered in collaboration with a fellow graduate student and two members of Palmerston North's Hip-Hop community. Figuring out how to co-author the final report for VUWSA brought to mind similar conversations I have had in other writing collaborations (e.g. Farrelly et al. 2017; Gibson and Fabish 2017; Ramaswamy, Gibson, and Venkateswar 2010), as well as how difficult it can be to collaborate with research participants in the writing stage for various reasons.

Most ethnographers work collaboratively in the field, and some extend the collaborative ethos into all aspects of knowledge production, including authorship (see Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019). Ethnographic collaboration is not easy, and one of our goals in this special section is to draw attention to the labour that it requires – sometimes fruitful, sometimes frustrating, but always generative.

On Collaboration

Both of us draw on our experiences of labours of collaboration above. While these are just two examples of the different collaborations we have undertaken over the years – as anthropologists, academics, parents, friends, musicians, community gardeners, yoga practitioners, and as people in complex multiple everyday entanglements between self and community – we use the above examples to bring

focus to the work that collaboration and collaborative labours enable and dissuade, in light of our own ethnographic practice. Although different in character, ethics, and political aims, these forms of ethnographic collaboration raise important questions about processes of knowledge production. For this special section, we sought papers that critically engage with what contemporary ethnographic collaborations look like and how they alter, or have the potential to alter, the inherent power dynamics of ethnographic research.

The four pieces in this section are innovative collaborations at various levels, ranging from anthropologists collaborating with communities to collaborative presentations as a way to subvert hierarchies and Euro-centric modes of being with/in academia. These papers engage with the relationship between collaboration and commoning, some explicitly and others implicitly, as ways to shape knowledge production and practice for a much more egalitarian ethnographic engagement within and beyond the academy. In this special section of Volume 2 of *Commoning Ethnography*, we share four papers that engage with the changing nature of ethnographic collaboration on multiple levels.

In the first article, ‘NGO-Research Collaborations and Conflicts’, legal anthropologist Amanda Reinke takes us inside the potentials and pitfalls of doing collaborative work with/for NGOs. She highlights how NGOs’ expectations have to be negotiated through the entire process of a collaborative enterprise. Reinke crafts a vivid image of the advantages and problems inherent in being involved in different capacities in the same space – as a researcher studying the NGO space, as a pro bono worker helping with *their* projects – and touches on a different sort of ethnographic refusal where the researcher themselves says no to an expectation placed on them because of their own position as academic and researcher working with/in the NGO space.

Jennifer Lanterman and Sarah Blithe, in a similar vein, highlight the immense benefits of doing collaborative work within academia but across disciplinary boundaries. In the fourth article in this special section, ‘The Benefits, Challenges, and Disincentives of Interdisciplinary Collaboration’, they discuss how the deeply entrenched systems do not recognize or support this form of working together for better scholarship. However, they also identify collaborative labour as a way to push back against the neoliberal university and governance by metrics.

It is this pushback that is taken up by a collective of scholars – Beudelaine Pierre, Naimah Petigny, and Richa Nagar – in ‘Embodied Translations: Decolonizing Methodologies of Knowing and Being’, where they upend the academic expectation around knowledge production and sharing. Sima Shakhsari, in introducing their performance piece, writes:

The collaborators skilfully embody a form of politics grounded in social justice and solidarity through affective, corporeal, and epistemic refusal, while being aware of the risks of appropriation and complicity as scholar/activists in U.S. academia (this volume).

Through this performance we see that collaborations at different stages of the intellectual project are inherently valuable in shaping how we participate in

knowledge production within the academy. In interesting and perhaps difficult ways, collaborative performances allow us to refuse singular expectations of the academic spaces and presentations most of us are asked to occupy. Collaborative work offers freedom in a sense from one limiting framework, and opens up potentials for new engagements, learnings, giving(s), and sharing(s).

Indeed, this learning, giving, and sharing of power and control in the research process is made visible so beautifully in Rachael Fabish's article, 'Pākehā working with Māori – Activists and Academics'. Fabish draws on research in Wellington's (Aotearoa New Zealand) anarchist community to complicate and unsettle how collaborative work between Pākehā and Māori is understood. In this very delicate writing she takes us on a journey and holds the door open for us to continue traveling and discovering beyond her research project. She draws attention to the tensions involved in working across difference, and also to the potential ways that non-Indigenous researchers and ethnographers can listen to and learn from Indigenous people. This includes learning to sit with discomfort and relinquishing power as an important way of being in Indigenous spaces.

Overall, these four contributions offer insights into the work involved in collaboration. They are simultaneously humble and generous. They are stories we need to know about and think with if we are serious about collaborative ethnography. We thank our authors for their time, commitment, and labour.

These pieces have also been improved by feedback from a generous review by Professor Joanne Rappaport, who we would also like to thank. While many good points were made for each of the pieces, she was very clear about asking for more stories from each of the authors. She wrote:

I think that, in the end, what I want out of these papers is more of a narrative: how they came together, under what conditions, how they negotiated what they would do, how it worked out, how they changed as researchers and as human beings. If we have the stories, as readers we can begin to make some of the connections ourselves, we can begin to think through how all of these varied examples of collaboration are speaking to common concerns (Rappaport 2019. Feedback for Authors in Personal Correspondence).

We asked our authors for more stories. We asked ourselves for more stories. We understand the value of stories for our readers, as important locations from where collaborative ethnographic labours can be understood, appreciated, and critiqued. To know collaborative work, then, is to know how to *listen*, attentively and with an ear to the nuance of how daily practices are shaped through various negotiations. Collaborative ethnography takes a lot of work, but it creates stories for potential ways to shape a new ethnography.

In this Introduction, we have foregrounded the potential inherent in collaborative practices in commoning within the human sphere. There is, of course, a particular erasure undertaken in talking about collaborative practices without engaging with multispecies collaboration. Within and beyond anthropology, there is a rich emerging literature that draws on, and propels further,

multispecies ethnographic engagements, opening the door for future collaborations and projects of commoning between human and non-human actors (see Appleton 2018; Dow 2016; Govindrajan 2018; Parreñas 2018; Tsing 2015; Weston 2017). A truly collaborative multispecies engagement would require us to take seriously the call to uncommon as a way to forward the progressive hopes hinged on commoning. We welcome conversations that extend these entanglements in more-than-human directions.

Notes on *Our Collaboration*: Nayantara and Lorena

In conversations within our collective, we see and experience the ways that an explicitly collaborative ethnography has gained significant purchase within the field over the past few decades (Lassiter 2005a, 2005b, 2008). For different sorts of scholars, this project has taken different forms and has had different kinds of politics. It foregrounds relationships in the field and new kinds of ethnographic production: films, artworks, exhibitions, and, often, traditional written texts. Although ethnography has long been a collaborative research method (J. Rappaport 2008), the inherent collaborations within ethnographic work were not always acknowledged as such, nor given the central billing that new collaborative projects often emphasise. In this way, such new projects often aim to undo (or at least unpack) the kinds of uneven knowledge hierarchies that have been foundational to ethnographic research since its outset. They also appear to offer new grounds for activist research (Hale 2008) and opportunities for decolonizing ethnography (Alonso Bejarano et al. 2019).

While we both have experienced and participated in various collaborative projects over the years, this journal and special section are a result of our most recent collaborative labours. It has been a pleasure to work closely with one another over emails and also in person over many a cuppa. Our sense and commitment to working collaboratively took extra time and energy sometimes, as we did not make any decisions unilaterally – be it accepting an article, deciding on reviewers, or the final design and layout of issues. To check-in constantly, to make sure each decision was supported, and also wait patiently while one of us could not work or respond in the same time frame, encouraged us to learn patience and to slow down for unplanned breaks.

Collaborative labour for us has been slow and deliberate, and sometimes did seem cumbersome. Individually we could *do* things in our own timeframes and without needing consultations. Yet, in our attempt to create slow scholarship, to build community, and upend academic individualist achievement-based hierarchies, we have found that it is collaborative work that serves as an anathema to the anxieties of contemporary academic space. In this project, we have lived our politics and not just written about them.

We see collaborative labour, in and beyond the various stages of ethnographic practice, as precisely what academia and its well-placed academics need in order to check their privilege and egos. To common their ideas, knowledge, practices, and collectively build beyond the individual may be the way forward for a truly progressive academia and ethnography. Or so is our collective hope.

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