

Collaborations and Contestations in Publicly Engaged Anthropologies: An Exposition

Olaf Zenker

Department for Anthropology and Philosophy, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Halle, Germany
olaf.zenker@ethnologie.uni-halle.de

Asta Vonderau

Department for Anthropology and Philosophy, Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Halle, Germany
asta.vonderau@ethnologie.uni-halle.de

Received: 11 September 2023 | Accepted: 16 October 2023 |
Published online: 7 November 2023

Abstract

Collaborations and contestations have always been present in collaborative research, and many case studies illustrate related conundrums. Yet, we argue that the concrete challenges emerging within dynamics of collaborations and contestations deserve much more focused attention, especially in contexts of publicly engaged anthropological work. This essay introduces a special issue of seven highly diverse contributions that are all animated by, and oriented towards, this common concern. Against the backdrop of situating this *problematique* within broader developments in increasingly diverse anthropologies of recent decades, we discuss the different contributions in light of their specific insights regarding collaborations and contestations. Based on these fine-grained case studies, we draw four transversal conclusions that we see as relevant also for publicly engaged anthropologies beyond the individual contributions that are assembled here.

Keywords

collaboration – contestation – neoliberal academia – emergence – empathy – sympathy – distance

Anthropology Is Not What It Used to Be

As the new millennium proceeds, it is increasingly clear that anthropology is no longer what it used to be – methodologically,¹ conceptually² and politically.³ This overall transformation of the discipline has been shaped by various developments that are intertwined in multiple ways. Louise Lamphere characterizes this disciplinary trajectory, and especially the transformation of ethnography as both fieldwork practice and a mode of representation, in terms of a shorthand shift “[f]rom Malinowski’s tent to the practice of collaborative/activist anthropology,”⁴ which she relates to four major innovations: first, increasingly acknowledging the historical, political and economic contexts of fieldwork (especially colonialism); second, finding all kinds of diversity in experiences and voices in the field (rather than homogenized “cultures”); third, moving towards more dialogic and polyphonic modalities of ethnographic representation; and fourth, stressing reflexivity regarding the researcher’s own positionality in the field. This, Lamphere asserts, has made possible critical engagements through *collaborations* with research subjects as equal partners, on the one hand, and a renewed interest in *anthropological activism and advocacy*, on the other. Seen in this light, Lamphere notes a “convergence of applied, practicing, and public anthropology in the 21st century.”⁵

1 Faubion, J.D., and Marcus, G.E., eds. (2009). *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be*. Cornell University Press.

2 Boyer, D., Faubion, J.D., and Marcus, G.E., eds. (2015). *Theory Can be More Than It Used to Be: Learning Anthropology’s Methods in a Time of Transition*. Cornell University Press.

3 Borofsky, R. (2011). *Why a Public Anthropology?* Center for a Public Anthropology; Borofsky, R. (2019): *An Anthropology of Anthropology: Is It Time to Shift Paradigms?* Center for a Public Anthropology; Low, S., and Merry, S.E. (2010). Engaged Anthropology: Diversity and Dilemmas: An Introduction to Supplement 2. *Current Anthropology* 51(S2): S203–S226.

4 Lamphere, L. (2018). The Transformation of Ethnography: From Malinowski’s Tent to the Practice of Collaborative/Activist Anthropology. *Human Organization* 77(1): 64–76.

5 Lamphere, L. (2004). The Convergence of Applied, Practicing, and Public Anthropology in the 21st Century. *Human Organization* 63(4): 431–443.

As many observers⁶ have noted, various strands within different varieties of (world) anthropologies⁷ have contributed to these emergent trends since at least the 1970s, building on, and expanding, a long history of applied and action anthropology.⁸ These have included various attempts at reinventing anthropologies in light of previous complicities with colonialism and other oppressive regimes;⁹ neo-Marxist critiques of the capitalist world-system;¹⁰ feminist interventions and innovations within anthropology and ethnographic practice;¹¹ participatory approaches emergent in contexts of the Global South (especially Latin America);¹² poststructuralist and postcolonial/decolonial critiques of Western-centric epistemologies;¹³ ethnographic studies focusing

-
- 6 E.g. Boyer, D., and Marcus, G.E. (2020). Introduction. In: D. Boyer and G.E. Marcus, eds., *Collaborative Anthropology Today: A Collection of Exceptions*. Cornell University Press, pp. 1–21; Lamphere (2018); Lassiter, L. (2005a). Collaborative Ethnography and Public Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 46(1): 83–106; Lassiter, L. (2005b). *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*. University of Chicago Press.
- 7 Ribeiro, G.L., and Escobar, A., eds. (2006). *World Anthropologies: Disciplinary Transformations within Systems of Power*. Routledge.
- 8 Bennett, J.W. (1996). Applied and Action Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 37(S1): S23–53.
- 9 E.g. Asad, T., ed. (1973). *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*. Ithaca Press; Hymes, D.H., ed. (1972). *Reinventing Anthropology*. Pantheon. For related developments in European and non-European Social and Cultural Anthropology see Bendix, R. and Welz, G. (1999). Introduction: “Cultural Brokerage” and “Public Folklore” within a German and American Field of Discourse. *Journal of Folklore Research* 36(2/3): 111–125; Fischer, H. (1990): *Völkerkunde im Nationalsozialismus*. Reimer; Hauschildt, T., ed., (1995): *Lebenslust und Fremdenfurcht: Ethnologie im Dritten Reich*. Suhrkamp; Kramer, D. (1970). Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Volkskunde. Wem nützt Volkskunde? *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* 66(1/2): 1–16.
- 10 E.g. Wallerstein, I.M. (1974). *The Modern World-System*. Academic Press; Wolf, E.R. (1982). *Europe and the People without History*. University of California Press.
- 11 E.g. Abu-Lughod, L. (1990). Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography? *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 5: 7–27; Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575–599; Stacey, J. (1988). Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography? *Women's Studies International Forum* 11(1): 2–27.
- 12 See Rappaport, J. (2008). Beyond Participant Observation: Collaborative Ethnography as Theoretical Innovation. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1: 1–31.
- 13 E.g. Bhabha, H. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. Routledge; Derrida, J. (1976). *Of Grammatology*. Johns Hopkins University Press; Dussel, E.D. (1985). *Philosophy of Liberation*. Orbis Books; Fanon, F. (1963). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin Books; Foucault, M. (1970). *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Tavistock Publications; Quijano, A. (2007). Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality. *Cultural Studies* 21(2–3): 168–178; Said, E., (1978). *Orientalism*. Pantheon; Spivak, G.C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? In: C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan, pp. 271–316.

on the practices and practicalities of emerging knowledge formations;¹⁴ as well as postmodern experimentations with the poetics and politics of ethnography in light of the *Writing Culture* debate.¹⁵ Developments such as these have ensured that anthropology as a discipline has considerably opened up and diversified since the 1990s and 2000s, ensuring that *public anthropology* and *collaboration* – the two notions we engage in the following – have emerged as key tropes and transformative practices for the anthropological project at large.¹⁶

“Public anthropology” became popular in the late 1990s as a catch-phrase for an understanding of anthropology’s capacity, and duty, to effectively address problems beyond the discipline through various outputs and interventions.¹⁷ Joining forces with previous and contemporaneous attempts variously referred to as “applied,” “action,” “participatory,” “activist,” “advocacy” or “engaged anthropology,”¹⁸ the label “public anthropology” arguably communicates succinctly the desire to practice anthropology as if it matters, and in such ways that it potentially does matter, also for various publics beyond the academy. These publics may, and usually do, include our research partners and interlocutors, typically leading to a situation, in which collaborative research converges with public anthropology (but not always – see below). However, there are many more publics beyond those encountered during fieldwork that potentially deserve to be engaged and actively crafted in order to put anthropology to more-than-academic use. Publics addressed and engaged by

-
- 14 Mol, A. (2002). *The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice*. Duke University Press; Fortun, K. (2001). *Advocacy after Bhopal. Environmentalism, Disaster, New Global Orders*. University of Chicago Press; Verran, H. (2013). Engagements Between Disparate Knowledge Traditions: Toward Doing Difference Generatively and in Good Faith. In L. Green, ed., *Contested Ecologies. Dialogues in the South on Nature and Knowledge*. HSRP Press, pp. 141–161.
- 15 Clifford, J., and Marcus, G.E., eds. (1986): *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. University of California Press; Marcus, G.E., and Fischer, M.M.J. (1986). *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*. University of Chicago Press; Zenker, O., and Kumoll, K., eds. (2010). *Beyond Writing Culture: Current Intersections of Epistemologies and Representational Practices*. Berghahn Books.
- 16 Boyer and Marcus (2020), 7; Lassiter (2005a), 89–94.
- 17 Borofsky, R., and De Lauri, A. (2019). Public Anthropology in Changing Times. *Public Anthropologist* 1: 3–19, 3–4. See also Borofsky (2011) and (2019).
- 18 Bennett (1996); Eriksen, T.H. (2006). Engaging Anthropology: The Case for a Public Presence. Berg; Hale, C.R. (2006). Activist Research vs. Cultural Critique: Indigenous Land Rights and the Contradictions of Politically Engaged Anthropology. *Cultural Anthropology* 21: 96–120; Kirsch, S. (2018). *Engaged Anthropology: Politics Beyond the Text*. University of California Press; Low and Merry (2010); Rappaport (2008).

anthropologists may, moreover, vary and change throughout the various phases (conceptualization, fieldwork, dissemination) of any research endeavour, and they may (partly) be overlapping and dynamic in terms of duration as well as in relation to each other. While collaborative research and public anthropology may thus overlap, there are also collaborative partnerships that do “not forefront the kinds of overtly activist and political collaborations that have become so salient to anthropology over the past decade”¹⁹ and, conversely, not all publicly engaged anthropologies necessarily utilize collaborative methodologies.²⁰

As Setha Low and Sally Engle Merry demonstrate, there are many different forms of publicly engaged anthropologies which they discuss in terms of a typology ranging from (1) concrete sharing and support (during fieldwork and beyond), via public engagements through (2) teaching and public education, (3) social critique, (4) collaboration, (5) advocacy, to (6) activist research (characterized by dual loyalties to academic research as well as a political struggle) as, ultimately, the most comprehensive form. While their types “collaboration” and, partly, “advocacy” evoke the above-mentioned intersection between public anthropology and collaboration, the modality of “activist research,” featuring its own political commitments that may be aligned to, but also possibly go against the goals and convictions of research subjects, also points to the potential for *contestations* that we discuss below as an empirically variable, but ultimately inevitable part of collaborative research.

“Collaboration,” in the broadest sense, refers to the conscious attempt to engage others, usually in working contexts, in a less hierarchical and ideally equal manner so that they are treated (more) as ends in themselves and not (or at least: less) as means to ulterior goals, such as knowledge production. In research contexts, this may include collaborations with other anthropologists in group projects as well as trans- and cross-disciplinary research practices,²¹ both of which used to be more common before the individualistic model of field research became the professional norm.²² Although institutionalized career paths in academic anthropology still produce strong incentives for solo-authored accounts of individual fieldwork, the discipline has experienced a recent resurgence of interest in collaborative research as part of the pluralizing trends and perspectives alluded to above. Ironically, “collaboration” has even

19 Boyer and Marcus (2020), 3.

20 Foley, D. and Valenzuela, A. (2005). Critical Ethnography: The Politics of Collaboration. In: N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln, eds., *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications, pp. 217–234.

21 E.g. Hastrup, K. (2018). Collaborative Moments: Expanding the Anthropological Field through Cross-Disciplinary Practice. *Ethnos* 83(2): 316–334.

22 Boyer and Marcus (2020), 4.

turned into a buzzword and symbolic capital of neoliberal academia, especially regarding third-party funding, typically evoking quantified measures of “outreach” and “social impact” and promoting unidirectional “knowledge transfer” – despite the fact that the temporal and financial resources needed to actually collaborate in meaningful ways have persistently decreased. Thus, how to publicly engage in meaningful collaboration beyond neoliberal audit cultures of “collaboration” constitutes a persistent challenge (more on this below).²³

Apart from working together with other academics, collaborative anthropologies of recent decades have, of course, assembled multiple other partners, including artists, designers, journalists, politicians and officials, practitioners and professionals of all kinds and colours, and, most importantly, numerous other members of (the) public(s) that anthropologists encounter during and beyond their fieldwork. While ethnography is, by definition, collaborative, some anthropologists – such as Luke Lassiter – have refocused collaborative ethnography as an approach that “*deliberately and explicitly* emphasizes collaboration at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it – from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and, especially, through the writing process.”²⁴ Lassiter offers various collaborative strategies, through which research subjects may profoundly make an ethnography collaborative, mobilizing them through different forms of reading, commenting, editing or co-writing.²⁵ By contrast, Dominic Boyer and George Marcus’ recent collection assembles a more diverse and open-ended set of collaborations beyond a primary focus on co-authored texts, showcasing collaborative re-analyses of previous solo projects; collaborative work towards new platforms and channels for managing, sharing or communicating data and knowledge; diverse para-ethnographic partnerships; collaborative practices through arts or temporal ateliers; as well as collaborations with social movements in the time-honoured key of activist anthropology.²⁶

Within the contemporary collaboratory of anthropology, the conventional ethnographer-informant relation is typically seen as being decentred. Such decentring is (at least) partly related to a critical revision of human-centred perspectives in anthropology and a turn towards relational approaches, as well as conceptualizations of ethnographic research fields in terms of networks and assemblages. These developments are particularly expressed in

23 Borofsky and De Lauri (2019); Strathern, M., ed. (2000). *Audit Cultures: Anthropological Studies in Accountability, Ethics and the Academy*. Routledge.

24 Lassiter (2005b), 16 (original emphasis).

25 Lassiter (2005a), 94–96.

26 Boyer and Marcus (2020), 8–18.

specific anthropological research fields, such as multi-species anthropology or anthropology of knowledge and technology. In collaborative ethnography, as propagated by Lassiter and others, ethnographers closely develop projects with their interlocutors, potentially even refraining from studying something of interest to anthropological theory if it is not of equal concern to all collaborators.²⁷ In Douglas Holmes and George Marcus' "para-ethnography," fieldwork equally proceeds no longer as it did before, given that ethnographers encounter reflexive subjects whose "cultures of expertise" more and more resemble or become indistinguishable from that of ethnographers themselves. Classic ethnography, they argue, is not really needed in these "para-sites," but rather an openness towards aligning separate, but closely related analytical endeavours.²⁸ Whether or not collaboration is meant to establish both common project goals and the shared means to achieve them (as in Lassiter's collaborative ethnography), is seen as creating para-sites as re-functioned ethnographic spaces for joint reflection and irritation (as Holmes and Marcus suggest), or is conceived as a temporary "co-laboration," in which shared epistemic work may explicitly serve different goals, including the further development of anthropological theory as an end in itself.²⁹ collaborative anthropology always seems to profoundly transform ethnographic practice, emphasizing – or rather: curating – much more prominently its performative dimensions in addition to its multimodally expanded representational ones.

The transformations induced by collaborations in anthropology are often conceived as based on ethnographers' willingness to "surrender the interpretive

27 See Lassiter (2005), 84, quoting the report of the American Anthropological Association's (2002) "El Dorado Task Force" along these lines.

28 Holmes, D. and Marcus, G.E. (2005). Cultures of Expertise and the Management of Globalization: Toward the Re-Functioning of Ethnography. In: A. Ong and S.J. Collier, eds., *Global Assemblages: Technology, Politics, and Ethics as Anthropological Problems*, Blackwell, pp. 235–252; Holmes, D. and Marcus, G.E. (2006). Fast Capitalism: Para-Ethnography and the Rise of the Symbolic Analyst. In: M.S. Fisher and G. Downey, eds., *Frontiers of Capital*, Duke University Press, pp. 33–56; Holmes, D. and Marcus, G.E. (2008). Collaboration Today and the Re-Imagination of the Classic Scene of Fieldwork Encounter. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1: 81–101.

29 For "co-laboration" see Niewöhner, J. (2019). Situierete Modellierung: Ethnographische Ko-Laboration in der Mensch-Umwelt-Forschung. In: S. Groth and C. Ritter, eds., *Zusammen arbeiten: Praktiken der Koordination und Kooperation in kollaborativen Prozessen*, transcript, pp. 23–50. For a similar argument that "[b]ettering anthropology may not be part of our interlocutors' agenda but should always be part of our own relatively autonomous agenda" see Briones, C. (2016–2017). Research through Collaborative Relationships: A Middle Ground for Reciprocal Transformations and Translations? *Collaborative Anthropologies* 9(1–2): 32–39, 38.

authority they have historically assumed,”³⁰ thus decentring the classic research process and, thereby, democratizing social science. In other words, collaborations might appear as necessarily entailing agreement, complicity and even collusion, feeding “suspicions of collaboration” that disagreements might be eschewed and academic standards of knowledge production be compromised.³¹ However, as Lassiter points out, collaboration always works across (some) difference, requiring constant negotiations and a “joint intellectual effort” to deal with disagreements and differences, dialectically strengthening the foundations upon which collaborative projects are built and sustained – a process he sees as animated by a “force of difference.”³²

That such anthropological relationships are always “partial collaborations,” as Claudia Briones puts it³³ – conjoining relational and relative collaborations *and* contestations – follows from the complexities, heterogeneities and ambiguities that thrive in fieldwork settings: given the multitude of positions and perspectives that people inhabit in the field and the various goals they pursue, “it is not always clear, how and with whom we can unlearn the privileges that we have as researchers;”³⁴ insufficient prior knowledge of “local communities” (whatever their contours) may also lead to practical mistakes foreclosing future collaboration;³⁵ the specificities of the field – for instance, studying an anarchist (dis)organization – may present challenges to an institutional consent process;³⁶ wanting to induce “voluntary” participation on the side of our collaborators may, paradoxically, lead to moments of refusal;³⁷ and incommensurable inequalities within collaborating collectives

30 Hinson, G. (2000). *Fire in My Bones: Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 324.

31 Lassiter, L. (2008). *When We Disagree: On Engaging the Force of Difference in Collaborative, Reciprocal, and Participatory Approaches*. Paper presented at the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, California, 19–23 November, 2.

32 Lassiter (2008), 2–4.

33 Briones (2016–2017), 36.

34 Briones (2016–2017), 36.

35 E.g. Dolson, M.S. (2013). Reflections *through* Reflexivity: Why My Collaborative Research Project in Arctic Labrador Did Not Work. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 6: 201–236.

36 E.g. Fessenden, S.G. (2019). Drawing the Contours of Ethnography: Ethnographic Refusal and Anarchistic Consent in Fieldwork and Writing. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 11(2): 92–109.

37 E.g. Kilian, C. (2017). “I Would Prefer Not To:” Dilemmas in Collaboration. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 10(1): 95–123; Mack, A.C. and Newberry, J. (2020). Brown Paper Chronicles: Refusal and the Limits of Collaborative Design Work with Indigenous Youth. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 13(1): 77–108.

– academic or otherwise – may cause contestations around the division of labour, co-authorship and community engagement.³⁸

Complex dynamics of collaboration and contestation can also be sensed in subtle differences in tone and attitude within the different para-ethnographic settings that Holmes and Marcus discuss in their “updated manifesto” for collaborative imperatives.³⁹ The two examples they offer differ markedly in the ways, in which they – as ethnographers – allow themselves to become irritated and learn from their “epistemic partners.” In the case of research with central bankers, they are much more willing to align their ethnography with the experimental ways, in which the personnel of central banks translate “thin” technocratic representations into idioms persuasive to the public, thereby yielding “thick” performative outcomes.⁴⁰ By contrast, the para-ethnography with contemporary fascists in Europe reveals an uncanny resemblance between classic anthropological deliberations of cultural relativism and the “illiberal anthropology” within fascism insisting on radical cultural incommensurability. The cultural “expertise” of fascist activists within this para-ethnographic “alignment in extremis” – as Holmes and Marcus call it – forces anthropologists to profoundly reconfigure their questions, key concepts and analytic approaches.⁴¹ Thus, something different is going on in this second para-ethnographic setting: rather than directly learning from their epistemic partners (as with central bankers), Holmes and Marcus use fascist para-sites primarily as a mirror revealing what might have been problematic all along with anthropology’s relativistic critique of liberalism – that is, with anthropology’s own “postliberalism.”⁴²

In sum, collaborations and contestations have always been present in collaborative research, and many case studies illustrate related conundrums.

38 E.G. Aijazi, O., Amburgey, E., Limbu, B., Suji, M., Binks, J., Balaz-Munn, C., Rankin, K., and Shneiderman, S. (2021). The Ethnography of Collaboration: Navigating Power Relationships in Joint Research. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 13(2): 56–99.

39 Holmes, D.R., and Marcus, G.E. (2020). How Do We Collaborate? An Updated Manifesto. In: D. Boyer and G.E. Marcus, eds., *Collaborative Anthropology Today: A Collection of Exceptions*. Cornell University Press, pp. 22–39.

40 Holmes and Marcus (2020), 31–34.

41 Holmes and Marcus (2020), 34–35.

42 For an argument stressing the need to distinguish anthropology’s own postliberal critiques from harmful varieties propagated by right populists and the far right, and to explicitly theorize and justify that difference, see Zenker, O. (2021). Anthropology and the Postliberal Challenge – Contribution to the “Forum on the New Far Right.” *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie Sociale* 29(2): 370–372, and Zenker, O. (2021). *On the Postliberal Condition, or: Recursive Anthropology Beyond Alternative Facts and Nostalgic Positivism*. Paper presented at the “Culture|Power|Social Change” Seminar of the UCLA Department of Anthropology, 4 February.

Yet, we argue that the concrete challenges emerging within dynamics of collaborations and contestations, especially in contexts of publicly engaged anthropological work, deserve more attention. For this reason, Olaf Zenker and Asta Vonderau (Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg), together with Jacqueline Knörr and Carolin Görzig (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle), organized a workshop in January 2022, which put the epistemological, ethical, disciplinary and practical challenges resulting from such collaborative entanglements centre stage. The workshop invited critical reflections of the benefits of collaboration as well as the productive potentials of contestation, distance and detachment as ethical and methodological commitments in their own right.

The event simultaneously functioned as the opening workshop of the network “Public Anthropology,” funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG).⁴³ This network traces the highly diverse approaches and practices in the field of public anthropology in Germany and seeks to establish sustainable cooperative structures between European and non-European Social and Cultural Anthropology, in which scholars from both disciplines work together on social challenges based on their ethnographic expertise(s). Against this backdrop, the workshop engaged with collaborations and contestations *from a decidedly public-anthropological perspective*, producing this special issue as the first outcome of this collaborative network. In the following, we discuss the different contributions in light of their specific insights regarding collaborations and contestations, before drawing some transversal conclusions that we see as relevant also for publicly engaged anthropologies beyond the individual case studies assembled here.

Collaborations and Contestations: The Contributions

Judith Albrecht and Nasima Selim start off our conversation with a reflection of anthropology’s public role in the context of Germany’s so-called refugee crisis of 2015. During and after this “long summer of migration,”⁴⁴ when numbers of incoming refugee-migrants in Germany massively increased, related research projects also mushroomed everywhere. Yet many of them were not collaborative and often risked producing too little results. Under these

43 For more information on the network “Public Anthropology,” see <https://anthro-publics.de/en/>.

44 Hess, S., Kasperek, B., Kron, S., Rodatz, M., Schwertl, M., and Sontowski, S., eds. (2016): *Der lange Sommer der Migration: Grenzregime III*. Assoziation A.

circumstances, and trying to avoid such extractivist approaches, the working group “Engaged Anthropology” in Berlin initiated various collaborations among refugee newcomers, migrants, activists, and anthropologists. What began with an informal welcome concert in the museal space of *Lichtburgforum* in Berlin subsequently developed into repeated and expanding sets of collective creative and interdisciplinary activities forming an enduring multilingual and interdisciplinary multi-media project, “Encounter/Begegnung.” These activities have been inspired by ethnographic sensibilities and anthropological concepts such as reflexivity, multiple positionalities, multi-perspectivity, multilingualism and multidirectional translations. Yet they have moved beyond research collaborations (in a narrow sense) towards community building and forms of mutual learning that produced, among others, monthly blogs, a web series, printed multilingual magazines, workshops, exhibits, concerts as well as public space interventions. Building on examples from a collective book, which serves as a manual for how anthropological methods can be used for transcultural learning in schools and social work institutions, Albrecht and Selim urge us to conceive of “encounter” as a transformative method. This includes participating and sharing, active listening and emotional sensing, accepting and working through misunderstandings and conflicts, and documenting individual and collective stories for the emergence of new communities and forms of sociality. Engaging in “encounters,” the authors argue, is a way of doing publicly engaged anthropology that goes beyond and complements more research-oriented collaborations. Such engagement means learning from each other and enables more diverse ways of knowledge production and representation.

Hansjörg Dilger, Kristina Mashimi and Saloua Nyazy discuss a similar initiative in Berlin evolving out of the “refugee crisis” – namely their involvement in a collective of refugee women, university lecturers, former students, and activists called “Kollektiv Polylog.” However, Dilger, Mashimi and Nyazy give their discussion a different twist in focusing on the affective ambiguities that follow from temporalities, contradictions, and power asymmetries that are scripted into, and evolve within and beyond, neoliberal academia. The contribution equally draws on years of sustained collaboration that developed and transformed through various stages: it started off as a student-driven research seminar in close collaboration with the activist “International Women* Space (IWS),” focusing on emergency housing for refugees, which resulted in a book publication and the award of the Margherita von Brentano Prize for Gender Research by Freie Universität Berlin in 2017. Out of this, “Kollektiv Polylog” emerged, producing a multilingual book in 2019 with stories of flight and experiences of arriving in Germany, which has

been presented to different audiences through public readings by different members of the collective. Over the years, the participants varied and lately decreased in numbers, with some refugee women being busy with their lives or have become difficult to reach, while the majority of students also stopped being active.

While, overall, the spirit of collaboration has been sustained over the years, Dilger, Mashimi and Nyazy note that there have also been some feelings of disappointment and moments of contestations, which the authors relate to contradictions following from asymmetries of power and precarity within the collective. Importantly, the specificities of neoliberal academia have created conflicting demands and contradictions amongst university-based anthropologists at different career stages (affecting their job (in)security, time, funding, the division of labour etc.) as well as with communities and groups beyond. As the authors show, within neoliberal academia, “collaboration” is typically conceived in terms of fixed-term projects with clearly defined outputs and an efficient usage of financial and human resources, whereas meaningful collaboration for anthropologists and their interlocutors usually consists of building respectful relationships with open-ended outcomes. Dilger, Mashimi and Nyazy insist that real collaboration can only be sustained if the affective ambiguities ensuing from such contradictory neoliberal demands and desires are actively managed by all collaborators.

Moving into the field of antiracist initiatives, Sabine Hess reflects on the implications for academic knowledge production of her ongoing collaborative project “Re/assembling Antiracisms,” reconstructing the diverse histories of multiple antiracisms in Germany as well as building an infrastructure for activist (self-)archiving. Hess notes a persistent double erasure in Germany regarding the existence of racisms and the various struggles against them: for a long time, racisms were publicly ignored and denied, with the consequence that antiracist struggles were equally confined to the margins and silenced in public discourse. This had the effect of highly fragmenting the political landscape of antiracisms and instilling a deep mistrust amongst antiracists towards official actors. While the collaborative project is, in part, meant to remedy this state of affairs, helping to transcend and bridge divisions within this highly sensitive field, the project has to consciously deal with these frictions in the first place. This situation thus requires a very conscious project design, which is further accentuated by the fact that antiracist actors are highly reflexive subjects with pronounced “activist expert cultures.” In this setting, anthropologists are not primarily needed in order to collaboratively generate new knowledge that was not there before and to help others finding their

voice; instead, their added value lies in building, taking care of and curating creative spaces and infrastructures of listening – something akin to Holmes and Marcus’ “para-sites” (see above) – in which differently situated, but already existing knowledges, multi-directional memories and experiences can be “co-articulated.”

Importantly, Hess also stresses the considerable constraints that neoliberal academia normally exerts on collaborative projects. For such projects to be successful, they need a lot of time for careful communication and trust-building as well as an openness towards potential outcomes, especially to those not fitting the standard templates of academic assessment (publications, outreach through linear knowledge transfer etc.). For Hess, the fact that this project of “re/assembling antiracisms,” so far, has been successful through its various project initiatives – ranging from networking and mapping to exhibitions and a highly transformative multiday assembly – is also due to the fact that, for the funding “Federal Agency for Civic Education,” producing conventional research output has explicitly been of secondary importance. Yet, Hess also raises an open-ended question: how can such “less academic” forms and formats of knowledge production be translated back into, and become fully acknowledged by, the university system?

What is the role of witnessing within publicly engaged anthropologies and what could it mean to witness collaboratively? Franziska Fay sets out to explore this question with regard to international initiatives for child protection in Zanzibar, Tanzania. She notes that, as with much of international development work, there is a lack of knowledge about the complex realities, in which child protection programmes actually play themselves out. Most of the time, it is simply assumed that “child protection” constructed through “good” discourses of human rights and global public health will automatically be beneficial in its practical consequences, thus occluding its negative effects. Aware of this shortcoming, the organization *Save the Children* accepted Fay’s offer to collaboratively work with them in order to ethnographically fill this knowledge gap. Yet Fay’s contribution to this special issue does not primarily chart such negative consequences of child protection. Instead, it offers a sustained reflection on what it means to collaboratively witness contested practices, such as corporal punishment, that require a moral response. Giving examples of “co-witnessing” (observing together from different stances), “inter-witnessing” (becoming a witness through reported events) and “messy witnessing” (receiving anonymous first-hand documents of deplorable acts via social media), Fay argues that witnessing has a “weight” that should be redistributed:

This idea of a re-distribution [...] is embedded in a sense of collaborative and shared responsibility for dealing with the quandaries of our time. I argue that thinking with witnessing anew can help us to see how collaboration, as one of anthropology's methodological and theoretical endeavours, is never only compassionate interaction on the part of the anthropologist. But that the responsibility of truth-telling, refusing and organizing may become more productive when shared and centered not solely on the anthropologist's power and capacity to do so. Thinking with collaborative witnessing more seriously, may help to decenter the powerful figure of the anthropologist as primary witness and allocate more potential political power with co-witnesses, who carry with us the weight of relational seeing and should hold center-stage in paths towards collaborative political action.⁴⁵

For Fay, collaborative witnessing of contested practices, then, primarily means making space for what our interlocutors in the field are witnessing and criticizing already and stepping back from considering ourselves to be the primary witnesses and critics. Such a move not only decentres the ethnographer's authority, but also promotes an understanding of responsibility as a collective and relational process.

The case studies discussed so far put strong emphasis on the need to give up the interpretive, moral and political authority that anthropology used to claim for itself – or at least to substantially share it with collaborative partners. To some extent, this seems to be preconditioned on the assumption that, despite some differences and potential frictions within the discussed collaborative projects, the biggest threats of contestations seem to lie *beyond* the circles of collaborators themselves – be it in the shape of an, at best, unwelcoming and, at worst, violently discriminatory culture towards refugee-migrants and racialized others or a culture of impunity towards practices harming children. Yet what to do within collaborative settings, in which the research subjects themselves are so diverse and pursue so many different and often antagonistic goals that numerous contestations profoundly characterize the field itself?

During her ethnographic research on tea plantations in Assam (India), Anna-Lena Wolf was confronted with such a heterogeneity among her interlocutors. Her collaborators not only differed regarding the question of whom they saw as being the most marginalized on plantations and beyond – and which categories to use to best capture their identities –, but also propagated very different and often opposed strategies for their (alleged) improvement. In such

45 Fay, this issue, 241.

situations, as Wolf points out, the conventional imperative to empower and support collaborating “informants” becomes elusive, as such a generalized call for action obscures the multiplicity of actors and their potentially conflicting ideas and goals. How to decide with whom to collaborate and whom to support under such circumstances thus turns into a crucial question for a publicly engaged anthropology. Wolf scrutinizes two recent anthropological engagements with closely related problems: Benjamin Teitelbaum’s plea for unconditional scholar-informant solidarity leads to an “immoral anthropology” and offers no additional criterion for internally choosing between conflicting collaborators; Tim Ingold’s appeal to “correspondence” equally remains indifferent to the question with whom to “correspond” more or less, given the plethora of potential collaborators. Against this backdrop, Wolf develops “ethical recursivity” as a possible answer to the question of whom to support, namely people who consistently apply their ethics in their own actions, thus acting in an ethically recursive way. While ethical recursivity may not exclude, in theory, inhumane ethics, Wolf contends that it does so in practice, given that what can be publicly declared as ethical principle is circumscribed in practice.

Luisa Schneider addresses a related conundrum, but offers a somewhat different solution. She equally notes that the methodological literature, privileging empathy, proximity and trust, tends to overlook the epistemological, ethical and practical challenges of discord during fieldwork. Yet, if one-dimensional pictures are to be avoided and the full spectrum of attitudes and emotions within the messy worlds that anthropologists encounter are to be captured, then contestations – not only amongst interlocutors, but also between collaborators and the anthropologist(s) – need to be reflexively interrogated and consciously managed. During her extended periods of collaborative fieldwork with houseless people in Leipzig (Germany), Schneider became involved with a highly diverse set of individuals. Apart from meeting people with commitments more closely aligned to her own positionality – as, among others, a white feminist woman in her early thirties, politically green, with a dislike for the violence inherent in the nation-state form – she also encountered individuals with whom she found it much more difficult to see eye to eye: people repeatedly making misogynist or racist statements, self-identified right-wing skinheads etc.

Rather than prioritizing collaborators with whom she experienced a sympathetic closeness, Schneider took the decision to spend an equal amount of time with people she found challenging to collaborate with in order to work against her own biases. At the same time, she consciously crafted an attitude of “empathetic distance,” through which she remained empathetic in interactions – that is: understanding the feelings of others based on her own experiences

with similar feelings – while setting clear boundaries through consciously confronting differences and agreeing to disagree. This allowed her to stay in collaboration with her interlocutors and to foreground many of their interests through various media outlets and engagements with practitioners. Yet, as Schneider emphasizes, this collaborative mode required committing to a long-term and time-intensive process and, for this to become possible: resisting the pressures for rapid research outcomes within neoliberal academia.

While Schneider could maintain an empathetic distance allowing her to manage contestations and, thus, to keep collaborating with people she did not (necessarily) like,⁴⁶ this turned out not to be an option for our last contributor, Marion Näser-Lather. The difficult experiences in her project REVERSE,⁴⁷ which dealt with “anti-genderist argumentations in academic contexts” in Germany made her painfully aware of the fact that the decision whether to collaborate with or to contest interlocutors is profoundly shaped by the anthropologist’s positioning and being positioned by others. While self-identifying as a genderfluid German middle-class, left-wing woman and cultural anthropologist working on gender issues, Näser-Lather wanted to keep an openness – akin to Schneider’s empathetic distance – towards and thereby collaboratively work with both German academics who criticize gender studies and with gender studies researchers (regarding the impact of such criticism on them). To this end she planned to conduct discourse analyses of critical texts, theme-centred interviews and participant observation.

However, collaborations turned out to be near impossible with gender studies critics and also surprisingly difficult with gender studies researchers. Anti-genderist scholars were aware of, and opposed to, the project right from the start, of which they learnt through the press release announcing the project. This opposition quickly hardened into a pronounced contestation even leading to a lawsuit against Näser-Lather (which she won); under these circumstances, her own opposition also deepened so that she increasingly shifted from empathetic distance to an “instrumental understanding” of gender studies criticism in order to be in a better position to debunk it in the mode of a publicly engaged anthropology. Ironically, her attempt to keep an empathetic, and thus also critical, distance towards gender studies also alienated some collaborators within that field who were not willing to collaborate in a joint information campaign because they feared negative implications of such a controversial

46 See Bangstad, S. (2017). Doing Fieldwork among People We Don't (Necessarily) Like. *Anthropology News*, <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/AN.584>.

47 REVERSE: kRisE der geschlechterVERhältnisE? / Crisis of Gender Relations? Anti-Feminism as a Crisis Phenomenon with a Potential to Divide Society.

research endeavour or saw themselves in the role of peer reviewers rather than collaborators.

Looking back at these disappointing experiences dominated by contestations rather than aspired collaborations, Näser-Lather identifies seven dimensions of positionality that played a profound role in how this project ultimately evolved: (1) being (relatively) situated within or outside the context under study; (2) having similar or rather different values (relatively speaking); (3) taking a morally relativistic or universalistic stance; (4) tending towards observation or also to intervention; (5) advancing an ethics of conviction or of responsibility; (6) power differentials between researcher and researched (their relative hegemony vs. subalternity); and (7) the temporal dimension in which all these dynamics play themselves out over the course of a project. Näser-Lather's case thus powerfully illustrates how collaborations can turn into contestations beyond repair due to the researchers' own decision for "researching against," as well as because of being positioned by others in a complex field of conflict. Her project demonstrates that situations might emerge in which scholars have to choose between collaborations, on the one hand, and publicly engaged anthropologies, on the other.

Towards Publicly Engaged Anthropologies: An Exposition

Anthropology in the 21st century has changed profoundly, having pluralized in multiple ways and having established both empowering collaborations with various research partners and a desire for public engagements beyond the academy as hallmarks of an esteemed disciplinary practice. At the same time, not only the discipline has transformed, but also the world(s) which it engages at shifting scales: multiple forms of injustice and inequality – material, economic, social, political, cultural, ecological – have become visible and, often, more salient; mobility is becoming more urgent and, simultaneously, more restricted within highly unequal refugee-migration regimes; a "double polarization" of both social and cultural relationships takes hold in more and more places, in which a downwardly mobile majority increasingly pits itself in populist terms as an "ethno-national folk" against both "its" cosmopolitan ruling class and a "dangerous class" often composed of immigrants and their offspring;⁴⁸ pandemics have resurfaced as serious global threats across vastly unequal geographies of health; and "just transitions" towards "post-carbon

48 Friedman, K.E., and Friedman, J. (2008). *Modernities, Class, and the Contradictions of Globalization. The Anthropology of Global Systems*. Altamira Press.

democracies” become more and more urgent within anthropocenic horizons of a rapidly approaching climate crisis.⁴⁹

Against the backdrop of such multiple challenges, there is an accelerated need for concerted efforts at global scales and with planetary dimensions.⁵⁰ At the same time, the political is becoming ever more pluralistic, fragmented and hard to assemble within more comprehensive – let alone: universal – frameworks for action. Under these conditions, publicly engaged anthropologies capable of mobilizing pluriversal collaborations while sufficiently keeping contestations at bay have a role to play.

The contributions assembled in this special issue, while constituting only a small sample, deal with a surprising diversity of cases, constellations and conundrums of collaborations and contestations within differently situated public anthropologies. As is the case with the “collection of exceptions” presented in Boyer and Marcus’ recent *Collaborative Anthropology Today*, they defy easy “efforts to unify them under a common concept, sign, or thematic.”⁵¹ Having said that, in light of the specific insights gained from the discussion of the individual contributions, we would like to end with four tentative transversal observations that, to our mind, might have some broader relevance for collaborations and contestations in publicly engaged anthropologies beyond our case studies.

The first observation can be phrased as the problem of how to engage in *collaborations beyond “collaborations” within neoliberal academia*. Several contributions explicitly discuss the ambivalently-constraining conditions prevailing, to varying degrees, within neoliberal academies today. On the one hand, “collaboration” has turned into a symbolic currency and marker of scientific success, a badge of honour attesting to the quality of research (to the extent that it signals inter- or transdisciplinary “collaboration”) and to its relevance (to the extent that it guarantees “outreach,” “social impact” or “knowledge transfer” activities). Within the self-referential logics of neoliberal “collaboration” as the operating ethos of universities (but also NGOs, corporations etc.), this buzzword not only vouches for the high standards of projects already accomplished, but also promises successful future research,

49 Abram S., Bresciani C., Lu H., K. Müller K., Vonderau, A. (2023). Contested Futures of/ with Energy Generation. In: S. Abram, K. Waltoorp, N. Ortar, S. Pink, eds., *Energy Futures. Anthropocene Challenges, Emerging Technologies and Everyday Life*. De Gruyter, pp. 71–124; Zenker, O. and Wolf, A.-L. (forthcoming). Towards a New Anthropology of Justice in the Anthropocene: Anthropological (Re)turns. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie | Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology*.

50 Chakrabarty, D. (2021). *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*. The University of Chicago Press.

51 Boyer and Marcus (2020), 3.

especially in the rhetoric of funding applications. On the other hand, the ways in which academic work and funding are institutionalized in neoliberal academia offer little indication that provisions for additional resources are made even with regard to this superficial form of “collaboration.” To the contrary, within fixed-term projects with clearly defined outputs and quantifiable measures (such as citation indices), expectations regarding “collaboration” are often simply added on top of the existing workload.

As the contributions in this issue show, this problem is tightly related to practical and analytical questions of research temporality. Our authors argue that having and taking time for collaborations and contestations in the field represents one of the most important and valuable aspects of ethnographic research. However, reflecting on current methodological debates, which critically revise the classical models of long-term fieldwork and urge for methodological innovations,⁵² they do not conceptualize temporality merely in terms of researchers’ enduring physical presence, but rather as an effort for long-term commitments in the field and to the field (Albrecht and Selim; Dilger, Mashimi and Nyazy; Hess; Wolf; Schneider). An understanding of ethnographic research time as commitment and relation highlights additional important temporal aspects of ethnographic research, which anthropologists are struggling for within neoliberal academia. Besides trying to create conditions for long-term research, it seems to be equally important to not fully subordinate to linear temporalities of funding schemes or academic standards, but to maintain the diversity of paces and rhythms as inherent in ethnographic work: such as, for instance, having the option for slowing research down and to stop, look back, or to change direction. Thus, understanding time as relation not only acknowledges research temporalities, and the diversity of rhythms and paces within which all actors in the field are entangled; it also allows asking how those temporalities relate and how they shape each other. Several papers in this issue (Fay; Wolf; Schneider) impressively demonstrate how such non-linear research allows more intensive engagement (collaborations and contestations) with the actual diversity of positionalities and relations in the field – dwelling on the question of *what is there*, instead of urging for clearly definable outreach, innovation and transformation. Accordingly, referring to Ssorin-Chaikov’s modes of temporal relatedness,⁵³ it could be said that working under neoliberal conditions, publicly engaged anthropologists strive to protect their research projects from temporalities of linear change, understood as a relation of rupture, that is, “temporal dynamics when one

52 Günel G., Varma, S., Eatanabe C. (2020). A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography. *Cultural Anthropology* <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>.

53 Ssorin-Chaikov, N. (2017). *Two Lenins: A Brief Anthropology of Time*. HAU books, 9–11.

temporal framework changes to another and renders it completely untrue,” and to enhance exchange, that, according to Ssorin-Chaikov, is a temporal relation where each temporality is a source for the other, but does not transform it or itself completely.⁵⁴ The question of how to engage in meaningful and open-ended collaborations built on trustful relationships under these conditions without succumbing to a mere tokenism of neoliberal “collaboration” is thus a profound challenge for publicly engaged anthropologies.⁵⁵

The second observation relates to possible differences in emphasis, if not a tension, between *creating a space for new emergence vs. co-articulating what is “already there.”* Within the, by now, classic modality of collaborative ethnography, as propagated, for instance, by Lassiter and others, an animating concern consists in conceptualizing the themes, objectives and methods of a project and putting it into practice, including the eventual (multimodal) representation of its results, through collaboration from, ideally, beginning to end. While relevant ideas and practices, evidently, always already exist *somewhere* – being dispersed among the different collaborative partners – the idea behind such collaboration typically is that there is a need to collect and collectively produce new insights and analyses which would not be there without the collaborative project. Usually, this also entails the idea that the collaboration itself performatively creates new dynamics, helps people to find their voice, and thereby creates spaces for new emergence. Seen in this light, several of our case studies – such as both collaborative collectives around refugee newcomers in Berlin (Albrecht and Selim; Dilger, Mashimi and Nyazy) as well as the project collaboratively exploring questions of justice on Assam tea plantations (Wolf) arguably tend towards such an ideal.

In other collaborative settings – prototypically those discussed by Holmes and Marcus in terms of “para-ethnography” and “para-sites” – the emergence of something new is evidently desired as well. Yet this newness seems to unfold on a meta-level. In other words, the role of the anthropologist consists to a much lesser extent in orchestrating the joint production of data and knowledge. To the contrary, a strong perception prevails that, as Joanne Rappaport puts it, in such settings all is “already there;”⁵⁶ or, in Holmes and Marcus’ rendition of “epistemic partners:” “our subjects are themselves fully capable of doing superb ethnography in their own idioms.”⁵⁷ Thus, as Hess puts it in her contribution to this special issue, the anthropologist is needed more as a curator, helping

54 *ibid.*, 9.

55 See also Borofsky and De Lauri (2019), 7–13; Holmes and Marcus (2020), 27.

56 Rappaport, J. (2016–2017). Rethinking the Meaning of Research in Collaborative Relationships. *Collaborative Anthropologies* 9(1–2): 1–31, 1.

57 Holmes and Marcus (2020), 26.

to create infrastructures through which what is “already there” can be co-articulated and listened to. While there is, of course, also a strong element of this dynamic within the above-mentioned refugee and justice projects, it is much more pronounced, for instance, in attempts to re/assemble antiracisms in Germany (Hess). Moreover, shifting the emphasis from an understanding of the anthropologist as the primary driving force of knowledge production towards a much more distributed epistemic weight based on realizing what is “already there” is at the heart of Fay’s argument about witnessing harmful treatments of children in Zanzibar.

Yet these are fluidly related matters of emphasis that prevail and shift between different points and in diverse sites also of single collaborative projects. Thus, Schneider speaks of situations, in which a truly new interest in, and related new knowledge about, “what is” the case for rough sleepers in Leipzig does emerge through her research. At the same time, there are also moments, in which epistemic partners jointly decide on how to publicly co-articulate what is “already there.” Last but not least, Näser-Lather’s collaborative tribulations also seem to be animated by a stronger desire to collaboratively engage in a new emergence of knowledge about anti-genderist critique, while being increasingly confined to merely articulating, on her own rather than jointly, what is “already there.”

This is closely related to a third observation that takes cognizance of a sliding scale through which researchers position themselves, and are positioned, vis-à-vis their interlocutors, ranging *from sympathetic closeness, via empathetic distance to instrumental understanding*. Several contributions describe nuanced engagements between anthropologists and their collaborators, who – despite all their differences and contestations that prevail and indeed require collective attending – still seem to be sufficiently aligned in terms of their fundamental attitudes and values to mutually experience each other as sharing (sufficient) sympathetic closeness. Both collaborative projects engaging refugee newcomers, migrants, activists, lecturers and students come to mind as do the re/assembled activist expert cultures of antiracists in Germany.

The different witnesses of child abuse in Zanzibar that Fay discusses also seem to be sufficiently close in terms of their underlying values opposing the harmful treatment of children. But within her presented material – especially in her opening vignette – one can already sense a less pronounced sympathetic closeness, and the potential for more value-based discontent and disagreement. As with the cases of highly divergent actors related to Assam tea plantations and houseless individuals in Leipzig, these settings increasingly require to find, and constantly uphold, a balance in empathetic distance between remaining empathetic to, ideally, all interlocutors in order to advance

better understanding, and staying true to one's own commitments and values and making these clear.

Our authors' (re)discovery of (empathetic) distance in the field and their questioning of sympathy as alleged precondition for anthropological knowledge production resonates with recent calls for broadening anthropological understandings of (field) relations. Marilyn Strathern admits, among others, that empathy, proximity and trust were, for too long, seen as the self-evident basis of anthropological research, while mistrust, antipathy or refusal were neglected as a failure or absence of relations.⁵⁸ Echoing Ilana van Wyk's critique of the "unwritten acceptance [...] that anthropologists should be naturally sympathetic to people they research,"⁵⁹ Agnieszka Pasięka, in her research on far-right movements, equally questions the still wide-spread acceptance of dislike as caused by misunderstanding or ethnocentrism, urging anthropologists to denaturalize the assumed link between sympathetic proximity or "liking" and attempting to understand.⁶⁰ Elaine Gan and Anna Tsing observe against the backdrop of their multi-species ethnographies, that such a naturalized and positively connoted understanding of relations also concerns other social and even natural sciences, which, as they argue, for a long time have taken the relatedness of things for granted, merely wondering from time to time why things sometimes would not hold together.⁶¹ In the current condition, characterized by social and ecological crises and political conflicts, as those authors highlight, it is especially important to acknowledge that even relationships based on negative emotions, or relationships that cut themselves, still are relations, and to investigate them as politically and ethically valuable projects (as David Graeber argues with regard to what he calls "culture as creative refusal").⁶²

In line with such perspectives, the contributions in this special issue show that keeping distance is thus not necessarily about cutting off long-standing relationships. Rather it means redefining those relations by de-essentializing

58 Strathern, M. (2015). Detaching and Situating Knowledge: Comment. In: Candera M., Cook, J., Trundle, C., Yarrow, T., eds. *Detachment: Essays on the Limits of Relational Thinking*. Manchester University Press, pp. 256–264; Strathern, M. (2020). *Relations: An Anthropological Account*. Durham University Press.

59 Van Wyk, I. (2013). Beyond Ethical Imperatives in South African Anthropology: Morally Repugnant and Unlikeable Subjects. *Anthropology Southern Africa* 36 (1–2): 68–79.

60 Pasięka, A. (2019). Anthropology of the Far Right. What if We Like the "Unlikable" Others? *Anthropology Today* 35(1): 3–6, 3.

61 Gan, E., Tsing A. (2018). How Things Hold: A Diagram of Coordination in a Satoyama Forest. *Social Analysis* 62(4): 102–145.

62 Graeber, D. (2013). Culture as Creative Refusal. *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 31(2): 1–19.

them without setting sympathy or equalness as its common ground, thus blurring boundaries between “proximity” (familiarity) on the one hand and “distance” (aligned with otherness) on the other. Such reconfiguring of the field makes different modes of knowledge production possible, such as engaging with differences and frictions as analytically valuable and turning them into epistemic moments or starting points for publicly engaged collaborations and contestations.

Emphasizing distance and “negative relations” is thus not necessarily a concern only for so-called “dark anthropologies,” but rather important also for “anthropologies of the good,”⁶³ as Sherry Ortner calls them – that is, research projects which aim to move beyond issues of structural violence and dispossession by taking into account individual agency, and by looking for the “arts of living on a damaged planet,”⁶⁴ thus opening up spaces for hope. Publicly engaged anthropologies are in need of such reassembling of relations, as it allows communication and engagement with various (even less likable) actors and their experience and knowledges, without a priori incarcerating them in certain moral or political positionalities. Accordingly, (re-)rediscovering distance is not necessarily a pessimistic move, but can be aligned with hope⁶⁵ as it keeps the ethnographic gaze open not only for the diversity of the actual, but also for possible worlds.

Sympathetic closeness and empathetic distance thus capture the range within which collaborations within publicly engaged anthropologies can be more or less realized – with an increasing probability of being confronted with contestations in the field the more one moves towards empathetic distance. In other words, these stances circumscribe the realm, in which collaborating across difference through repeatedly mobilizing the “force of difference” and “joint intellectual efforts” (to use Lassiter’s expressions) might still be feasible. This changes, when fieldwork relations turn so antagonistic – as in the case of Näser-Lather’s project – that these contestations can no longer be contained within an agonistic micro-politics of collaborative research.⁶⁶ Empathetic distance becomes less and less a viable option, ultimately turning into what Näser-Lather calls “instrumental understanding:” better knowledge about

63 Ortner, S. (2016). Dark Anthropology and Its Others: Theory Since the Eighties. *HAU. Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 6(1): 47–73.

64 Tsing, A., Svanson, H., Gan, E., Bubandt, N., (2017). *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. University of Minnesota Press.

65 Stengers, I. (2005). The Cosmopolitical Proposal. In: Latour B., and Weibel, P., eds. *Making Things Public*. MIT Press, pp. 994–1003.

66 For the distinction between antagonism and agonism see Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the Political*. Routledge, 20–21.

the other is used within contestations that no longer also aspire to empower the other within remnant collaborations, but rather uses such knowledge to “research against.”

This leaves us with our fourth and last observation that we formulate as a provocative open question: *when in conflict, should publicly engaged anthropologies take precedence over collaborative ambitions?* Evidently, we started off with the presumption, quite common within contemporary anthropology, that aspirations for collaborative and activist research easily go hand in hand. In fact, Lamphere’s shorthand for the transformation of ethnography quoted at the very beginning – “[f]rom Malinowski’s tent to the practice of collaborative/activist anthropology” – unproblematically conjoins both ideals with an inconspicuous slash. All contributors to this special issue also make clear that they aspire to achieve collaborative research *within* publicly engaged anthropologies – and most demonstrate how they managed, more or less, to do so, while preventing contestations to gain the upper hand.

However, as especially Wolf, Schneider, and Näser-Lather make clear, collaboration, as such, may offer only insufficient guidance when contemplating how to practically navigate the complex field of publicly engaged anthropologies. In cases of conflict between collaborative ambitions and the desire to advance more-than-academic anthropologies, all three authors, to differing extents, seemed to sacrifice collaborative empowerments rather than their own ethical and political commitments. Be that as it may – we leave the task of answering our question to the reader, while ending with Claudia Briones’ note of caution:

The reversal of historical asymmetries may require from us that we not give up our own agency and determination to give the last word vis-à-vis disagreements among our interlocutors – this being a very dangerous, unpredictable, and uncomfortable ledge to navigate.⁶⁷

67 Briones (2016–2017), 36.