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Collaborative Work in the
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The Author Is Dead, Long Live Co-Authors!

Collaborative Work in the Humanities

Table of Contents

Isabel Bredenbröker, Katerina Suverina & Andrei Zavadski Introduction. The Author Is Dead, Long Live Co-Authors! Collaborative Work in the Humanities	5
Juhayna Hilles From Vision to Reality: Gyorgy Kepes and the Ethic of Collaboration	13
Elisabeth Luggauer & Ferdinand Fieldwork on Six Legs: Ethnography as Multispecies Experimental Collaboration	40
Moses März Mapping Collaborators Dance. An Artistic Research Inquiry into the Decolonial Potentialities of the Surrealist Archive	64
Katie Grant & Maxwell Hyett Collaborative Nuance: Citation, Difference, and the Friendship of Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy	82
Elly Selby That Which Withers in the Age of Digital Production: Towards a New Model of Authorship	96
Sela K. Adjei & Douglas J. Falen Promises and Challenges of Collaborative Teaching: Crossing Cultural and Academic Boundaries	112
Isabel Bredenbröker & Tajinder Kaur Dis_ability, Ethnographic Methods, and Collaborations over Distance: Intersectional Complications	128
Christina Bell & Gina Levitan There Are Some Things Just Not Worth Doing Alone: A Reflection on Peer Mentorship among Librarians That Centers the Whole Person	146

Jonas Tinius**159**

Schuchardt K and Spieker I (eds) (2024) Performanzen & Praktiken. Kollaborative Formate in Wissenschaft und Kunst. Leipzig, Leipziger Universitätsverlag. ISBN: 978-3-96023-610-8

Tatiana Smorodina**165**

Donovan V (2025) Life in Spite of Everything: Tales from the Ukrainian East. London, Daunt Books Publishing. ISBN: 978-1-91709-214-2

Editorial

Introduction. The Author Is Dead, Long Live Co-Authors! Collaborative Work in the Humanities

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Introduction. The Author Is Dead, Long Live Co-Authors! Collaborative Work in the Humanities

Isabel Bredenbröcker, Katerina Suverina & Andrei Zavadski

Proclaiming the death of the author, Roland Barthes (1967) certainly did not mean to imply that this would mark the birth of collaborative work in the humanities. His argument was that the meaning of a work of fiction cannot be derived from its author's intentions and biography. It is the reader who makes sense of the text, Barthes declared. Since then, the author has been resurrected—for example, with Donna Haraway's (1988) idea of situated knowledges, the feminist-decolonial aims of autotheory and autoethnography directed at incorporating the diversity of personal experience into knowledge creation, or the feminist struggle for having the possibility to be recognized as an author. The author's life stories and their authorial intent have been reclaimed for literary interpretation, often in order to make the knowledge transported in their work more inclusive. Nevertheless, Barthes's statement lives on and is regularly appropriated for various ends.

The French thinker also certainly did not talk of the death of the collective of authors: in his text, the author, who is poised to die, very much remains a solitary figure that gives meaning to the world through writing. Embarking from Barthes's emblematic title, this issue of *The February Journal* probes into the potential of the collective rather than the individual. How do we share authority, responsibility, and authorship in academic knowledge creation? Why do aggrandizing ideas and expectations relating to the author as a lonely hero (even if it is increasingly a 'heroine') remain part of academic expectations and evaluation criteria? What differences exist between artistic collaboration and co-creation in academia? What obstacles and convictions stand in the way of equal and well-recognized collaborative practices, be they of co-authoring, of doing research in a team, or of including interlocutors from outside academia as collaborators? Can collaboration and co-authorship be seen as a tool of resistance against neoliberalism in academia, as Agnieszka Piotrowska's (2020) volume argues with regard to researching creative practices? Indeed, could collaborative work be seen as a/the future of the humanities?

Incidentally, Barthes's own solitariness is being challenged in this issue: **Katie Grant** and **Maxwell Hyett** (both Western University, London, Ontario) explore his friendship with the poet Michel Deguy, delving into the depth of their nuanced collaboration. Grant and Hyett's whimsical collaborative contribution analyzes Barthes and Deguy's citational habits and associated back-and-forth exchanges, identifying what they call 'a collaborative practice that is drifting and active.' With their essay, Grant and Hyett illustrate that even in the circles of French male philosophers and theoreticians at the height of their societal popularity, the figure of a

lonely genius was more of a myth than anything else. In his contribution, the artist and scholar **Moses März** (University of Potsdam, Potsdam) makes a similar argument, albeit working with a different historical period and using different means for the purpose. In his research essay, März discusses his hand-drawn map *Collaborators Dance* (2025), also part of this issue, which traces intersectional collaborative constellations that are loosely associated with the surrealism of the first third of the 20th century. The essay focuses on the friendship between two poets, Léon-Gontran Damas and Robert Desnos, who are considered to be key figures in avant-garde and Négritude history respectively, addressing 'the question of who had to work with whom for their work to take up radically transformative potentials.'

Collaboration has been a feature of the natural sciences for a long time, partly due to the high intensity of laboratory work. The social sciences, driven by the necessity to cross disciplinary boundaries, have also increasingly embraced collaboration. Recent developments in citizen social science have further shifted the focus from strictly academic collaboration to interactions with non-academic participants who become involved in and empowered by research projects on the 'wicked' problems of agency and behavior (Tauginiené et al. 2020). Even the arts have been departing from the idea of a singular genius communing with nature, spirits, or gods and engaging in acts of higher creation as a result.

The article about the Hungarian-born media artist and educator Geörgy Kepes (1906–2001) by the art historian **Juhayna Hilles** (an independent researcher, Los Angeles), published in this issue, investigates how collaboration was both an innovative method in early media art and an ethically dubious practice in relation to state-sanctioned collaboration of institutions with the military-industrial complex. Since Kepes created the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1967 and MIT's subsequent Cold War involvement in military research, things have changed significantly. We now live in times of war again, and technology plays a much more significant role in it. That's not to mention the rapid rise of artificial intelligence (AI) and the associated concerns regarding its potential impact on the future.

Among other related concerns, the development of AI has caused anxieties regarding authorship: in 2023, Hollywood writers held 'the longest strike' in the film industry's history over the use of AI (Anguiano and Beckett 2023). How will this technology change the nature of collaboration? In her essay for this issue, **Elly Selby** (Bartlett School of Architecture, London) introduces the concept of 'Relational Authorship,' which involves reformulating human and non-human collaboration, and 'critically considers how responsibility might be reconfigured in the company of humans, machines, and the networks that bind them.'

Overall, despite increased acceptance in neighboring disciplines, the humanities are surprisingly resistant to the idea of collaboration. The author—of a monograph, a theory, a concept—is not only still alive and kicking but continues to claim the title of the highest form of academic

creation. We, *The February Journal's* editors, have each been pushed towards working individually. Numerous colleagues of ours have spoken of the same pressure. And yet, all of us have worked—researched, taught, discussed, written, and so on—with others, and we think we have done so with great success. Not only does co-creation increase the quality of academic work (and citation rates—see, for instance, Haddow, Xia and Willson 2017), but it also, in our experience, positively impacts scholars' mental health. In this issue, **Christina Bell** (Glendale Community College, Glendale, Arizona) and **Gina Levitan** (CUNY Hunter College, New York City) reflect on the role that peer mentorship and support networks among librarians as well as humanities scholars play in avoiding burnout and achieving sustainable, ongoing care and success. Yes, collaboration with peers not only makes us more successful—it also keeps us sane.

And yet, collaborative work in the humanities seems to be tolerated at most, rather than being welcomed with open arms. At *The February Journal*, we are a team of editors who collaborate on a regular basis. This has not only been a practical necessity as well as a chance to engage in collaboration in more ethical ways, but also a possibility to exchange on the topic of academic conventions. Because we come from different disciplines and work in different countries and from within different academic traditions, this conversation is often enlightening. It reveals preferences of individually achieved successes as opposed to collaborative ones—despite the differences mentioned above. In Germany, for example, where several editorial team members are based, the criteria for achieving the qualification to apply for a full professorship (a 'Habilitation,' also referred to as an equivalent to a 'second book') are often understood to mean that postdoctoral researchers have to have produced a demonstrable amount of published text as single authors, either in the form of a monograph or as single/first-authored papers.

Yet, the recognition of the fundamentally collaborative work that underpins any research and writing process has become an inherent part of the discourse of many disciplines—for instance, of social and cultural anthropology. **Jonas Tinius** (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin) rightly emphasizes this in his review of *Performanzen & Praktiken. Kollaborative Formate in Wissenschaft und Kunst* ('Performances & Practices. Collaborative Formats in Science and Art'), a 2024 volume edited by Katharina Schuchardt and Ira Spieker, noting the broad range of perspectives presented in the book as well as the nuance and ethnographic depth of its contributions. As **Elisabeth Luggauer** (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin) and her collaborator, a dog named **Ferdinand** (an independent researcher, Berlin), underline in their article for this issue, multispecies companionships and research collaborations have slowly started to be recognized in scholarship, too, but there still is a long way to go. Studying human—street dog relationships in the city of Podgorica, Luggauer and Ferdinand go beyond the dominance of human sensory and spatial frameworks. This shows how huge an impact new forms of collaboration—and attention to already existing forms—can have on creative ethnographic research.

This 'fundamentality' of collaboration is even more urgent in the teaching of critical disciplines that connect the humanities and social sciences, such as anthropology. Collaboration is a fundamental matter especially in situations when different cultural and academic contexts intersect. In their reflexive essay for this issue, *The February Journal's* Advisory Board member **Sela K. Adjei** (University of Media, Arts and Communication, Accra) and **Douglas J. Falen** (Agnes Scott College, Decatur) recount their miscommunication during the first attempts at cooperation as well as the pain associated with it, followed by reflections on the subsequent process of reconciliation as a model for the promises and challenges of decolonial collaboration. In their own words, 'this whole experience exposed Doug's and Sela's fallibility as scholars who both acknowledged their intellectual shortcomings and agreed to put their misunderstandings behind them to focus on more productive intellectual ventures.'

An example of anti-collaborative work is the enforced cooperation between early-career researchers and established scholars. While this kind of working relationships can be beneficial for both parties, strict academic hierarchies often lead to younger scholars being seen by their supervisors as a resource for doing fieldwork or increasing publication activity. And while the issue of the (un)ethically of similar practices has already been addressed, for instance in the field of collaborative life writing (Couser 2003), it seems that the topic is still waiting to be taken seriously in academia. In a dialogue between *The February Journal's* editor **Isabel Bredenbröker** (University of Bremen, Bremen) and **Tajinder Kaur** (University of Delhi, Delhi), featured in this issue as a reflexive essay and podcast, the two anthropologists discuss the asymmetries of co-writing across academic hierarchies, 'Global South / Global North' divides, and other intersectional markers.

Demanding a shift in perspective and practices, collaborative work is increasingly called for and also demanded as an ethical research practice. Why, then, do academic power structures in assessment and publishing still reproduce what we regard as outdated ideas: the single author with a self-authentic voice who produces novel ideas and thoughts out of the genius of their own mind?

The 'publish or perish' culture and the neoliberalization of academia in general have had and continue to have a detrimental effect on collaborative work and especially on the peer-review process. Originally meant to help researchers improve their writing courtesy of peers, it could—and should—be seen as an act of collaboration. But increasingly, this process has been used as an opportunity to voice harsh criticism or even destroy a competitor. As mostly unpaid work that is expected of researchers, peer review requests are often highly unwelcome and may be responded to with rejections or with reviews reflecting first and foremost annoyance rather than carefully weighed critique that may have grave influence on other people's careers.

At *The February Journal*, we are faced with the same challenges, for we also work in an often-unjust system of labor relations in academia that expects excellence but gives little to no security and support. In an

attempt to build a different kind of publishing space, our journal's editors, for example, advise reviewers very carefully on how to provide considerate and ethically informed review responses, inviting them to really think about the reviewed text could be improved (which every text always can be), rather than slamming it as 'hopeless.' We also provide extensive editorial commentaries on manuscripts—in addition to mediating reviewers' responses to authors. By implementing these practices, which of course demand extra time and effort from the editors, we hope to cultivate an atmosphere of care in our peer review system. Other journals in the humanities have embarked on similar journeys, as *Etnofoor's* discussion on peer-reviewing fiction (for their 'Fiction' issue) shows (Mulder and Van Roekel 2024). The editors of *Etnofoor* had to adapt processes geared to assess research papers to peer-reviewing fiction. This, of course, required a rethinking of review criteria and a careful guidance of reviewers, who were not used to evaluating other formats. As a journal that also publishes artistic research, *The February Journal* encounters similar challenges, which we have so far met by promoting 'friendly' peer reviews (in a process that explains from the start what an artistic contribution is, what it wants to achieve, and in what context), as well as sometimes not requiring anonymization and inviting reviewers and authors to engage in supportive exchange of feedback.

Yet, all of these relatively unconventional approaches to peer review might be met with severe criticism. Because peer review is a process that is often advertised to be 'rigorous'—meaning strict and unforgiving—as a way to control the quality of published work, new review practices may seem suspicious, as they might be seen to water down such quality control, instead inviting poor contributions for publication. This is what innovations and changes in peer review processes, namely their slow move towards more collaborative and supportive practices, are still up against. While this issue does not have a separate contribution dedicated to peer review as collaboration, we are planning a roundtable event on this topic in early 2026, both to celebrate the issue's launch and to continue the discussion it hopefully starts. Please check the Announcements page on the journal's website for details.

We are also including in this issue **Tatiana Smorodina's** (University of Konstanz, Konstanz) review of Victoria Donovan's 2025 book *Life in Spite of Everything: Tales from the Ukrainian East*. While the book is not directly related to this issue's topic, it certainly is related to our journal's aims in a broader sense, seeking, in Smorodina's words, 'to deconstruct the Soviet myth surrounding the region, engaging with the relatively recent Ukrainian tradition of grappling with Donbas's identity—a tradition that has emerged predominantly since the outbreak of the war in 2014.'

We hope you enjoy reading this issue at least as much as we have enjoyed putting it together. Our ultimate ambition, however, is to encourage you to imagine the academic everyday differently: not as struggles and endeavors of sole geniuses, but as a combination of explicit and subtle collaborative practices underpinning all attempts at knowledge creation.

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Research Article

From Vision to Reality: Gyorgy Kepes and the Ethic of Collaboration

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From Vision to Reality: Gyorgy Kepes and the Ethic of Collaboration

Juhayna Hilles

Gyorgy Kepes's vision of applying art to large-scale public projects culminated in the establishment of the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1967. Conceived as a laboratory for collaboration, CAVS united artists, scientists, architects, and engineers to foster interdisciplinary exchange and produce socially engaged art using emerging technologies. This article examines how collaboration functioned as a founding principle at CAVS and how artists adapted their practices within an institutional and often ethically charged environment. While the center attracted pioneering artists eager to experiment with new media and technology, collaboration also revealed tensions surrounding authorship, political responsibility, and the influence of military-funded research. Building on Kepes's lifelong inquiry into the relationship between art, science, and technology, this article argues that the theoretical tensions often attributed to the institutional context at MIT were, in fact, internal to his own theory of visual language, formulated before his arrival at the institute. Rather than treating collaboration as a compromise, Kepes conceived it as a constructive response to instrumentality and as an opportunity to reintroduce human values into systems of science and technology. Through key case studies, including the *Explorations* exhibition (1970), the political controversies surrounding the 1969 São Paulo Biennale, and later collaborative projects such as *Centerbeam* (1977), this article demonstrates how Kepes extended the Bauhaus legacy into the Cold War era. Ultimately, CAVS was not only an institutional experiment in art and technology but a laboratory for social imagination that sought to reconcile scientific progress with civic and aesthetic responsibility through the creative potential of collective work.

Keywords: Bauhaus, CAVS, collaboration, Gyorgy Kepes, MIT, new media, science, technology

On the 4th of April 1970, visitors to the *Explorations* exhibition at the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., were welcomed with the following introduction: 'You are about to join in a celebration of light, heat, cold, air, electricity, magnetism—forces so omnipresent in our environment that we forget to wonder at their power and beauty.'¹ During the experience that awaited them, the limits of their sensorial perception—visual, auditory, and tactile—would be put to the test.

Equipped with a two-page guide that identified each artwork and contained instructions for direct engagement, visitors stepped into a vibrant landscape of lumino-kinetic sculptures, stroboscopic lights, neon columns,

and cybernetic structures. In this interactive setting, they were transformed from passive observers to active participants.

This collaborative exhibition showcased the work of a group of artists from the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (CAVS) at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), a program founded in 1967 by Gyorgy Kepes (1906–2001) as a laboratory for interdisciplinary artistic practices. Rooted in Kepes's long-standing commitment to integrating art, science, and technology, CAVS provided a framework for artists to collaborate with scientists and engineers, exploring new perceptual and environmental dimensions of science and technology.

What distinguished *Explorations* was not only the exhibition's engagement with technology but its curatorial strategy. Presented without wall labels, the exhibition immersed the audience in a purely sensorial experience, encouraging them to experience the exhibition as a cohesive whole, shifting focus from individual creation to collective expression. In this sense, *Explorations* was not merely an exhibition but a statement on the evolving role of the artist, one that privileged process over object, interaction over isolation, and collaboration over individualism.

The 1960s witnessed a rise in art and technology collaborations, and this intersection quickly became a key concern for the artistic, industrial, and institutional spheres of the time. Encouraged by museum institutions, industry sponsorship, and government support, artists increasingly engaged in novel art and technology initiatives. In 1966, the engineers Billy Klüver and Fred Waldhauer, alongside the artists Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Whitman, founded Experiments in Art and Technology (E.A.T.), fostering collaborations between artists and engineers. That same year, Maurice Tuchman launched the Art and Technology program at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), connecting artists with major corporations and research institutions in California like NASA, Bell Labs, IBM, and Lockheed Corporation.

Several factors set CAVS apart from other collaborative initiatives of its time. Situated within an academic institution, the center operated independently from the industrial and museal sectors, allowing its artists to pursue projects without external influence. Yet, its location at MIT, one of the most technologically and scientifically advanced power houses of military research, made Kepes's vision of channeling technology into socially engaged art and humanizing science appear, to many, as a paradox.

Recent studies on Gyorgy Kepes have turned toward the question of instrumentality, tracing how his work at MIT intersected with military and technological research. These issues have been explored from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including art history (Goodyear 2002; Finch 2005), architecture (Martin 2003), and science and engineering (Wisnioski 2013). This diversity reflects the wide reach and complexity of Kepes's theory, which challenged disciplinary boundaries.

Much of this work contextualizes CAVS as an initiative exploited by MIT to humanize its institutional image, a project inevitably entangled with ethical concerns within the Cold War's military-industrial complex. John

R. Blakinger (2016a) approached the question of instrumentality with care, seeking to avoid a reductive or binary framing of Kepes's relationship to science and technology. His study offers an insightful account of Kepes's interactions at MIT and the institute's ties to military research amid the ethical dilemmas of the Atomic Age.

These studies have approached this apparent paradox between Kepes's humanist ideals and MIT's technoscientific orientation as an external prolem arising from the institute's exploitation of their collaboration. I argue that this issue is in fact internal to his own theory of visual language. Understanding instrumentality as an inherent aspect of Kepes's thought, rather than a condition imposed from the outside, repositions his practice within a broader theoretical continuity. This shift allows for a reconsideration of Kepes's work as a coherent intellectual project, engaged in an evolving dialogue with the scientific and technological paradigms that defined the mid-twentieth century.

While building upon earlier scholarship, my article takes a different approach. I argue that that an awareness of the potential instrumentalization of the visual arts was central to his theoretical framework from the outset. His seminal book, *Language of Vision* (Kepes 1944), written as a pedagogical manual for visual artists, is fundamentally concerned with art as a tool of orientation.

Since instrumentality was an internal theoretical concern, I contend that Kepes conceived collaboration as a solution rather than an ethical dilemma. Collaboration not only opened the possibility of transforming systems from within but also created conditions for transparency and collective action. This perspective also enables a more nuanced reading of what some of Kepes's contemporaries regarded as naïve or opportunistic collaborations with science and technology.

The article proceeds in three parts. The first examines the theoretical foundations of Kepes's concept of visual language, showing how these ideas informed the establishment of CAVS. The second analyzes *Explorations* as a practical realization of these principles and as a case study in the possibilities and limits of artistic collaboration within an institutional environment. The third addresses the ethical tensions that emerged from Kepes's engagement with science and institutional structures, concluding with the broader legacy of his collaborative model at MIT.

The Founding of CAVS: Collaboration with Science and Technology

The concept for CAVS arose from Kepes's conviction that artists play a fundamental role in shaping both the visual and non-visual world. He envisioned art as a unifying force, one that could connect society with the rapid technological and scientific advancements of its time, offering individuals a means to reclaim agency over their evolving environment. For Kepes, the challenge of the modern era was not merely technological but perceptual, requiring new ways of seeing, interpreting, and shaping the world.

This emphasis on the artist as an agent of visual literacy was first articulated in Kepes's seminal 1944 book *Language of Vision*, where he argued that the modern world is shaped by a network of visual communications. To engage with this new reality effectively, artists needed to embrace emerging technologies and develop a new visual language, one capable of expressing the profound transformations brought about by scientific advancements. The book applied principles of visual fundamentals to painting, photography, and advertising design. It extended this consideration to the whole environment of the city, including its architecture and urban design, or what Márton Orosz (2024) aptly described as a consideration of the city's 'optical topology' (p. 200–4). Grounded in Gestalt theory, Kepes sought to reform visual experience in its totality, aiming to reshape how individuals perceived and organized their visual environment.

In a continuation of this vision, when Kepes joined the School of Architecture and Planning at MIT as an associate professor in 1946, his focus shifted toward large-scale collaborative public art projects that extended beyond traditional mediums. This transition laid the foundation for the establishment of CAVS, whose primary mission was to foster collaboration among artists, engineers, and scientists. Conceived as an experimental laboratory, the center would serve as a converging point for artists, architects, scientists, and engineers—those collectively shaping the landscape of the modern city. The artists would engage with the scientific and technological expertise of the academic institution, allowing them to work with cutting-edge knowledge and technology. The outcome of these collaborations would be a socially engaged artistic practice that leveraged the most advanced tools to address contemporary concerns.²

This model of collaboration closely mirrors László Moholy-Nagy's (1946: 358) concept of the 'Parliament of Social Design.' Moholy-Nagy envisioned a utopian workspace where experts from diverse fields would coordinate their efforts toward shared sociological and environmental objectives. Kepes, who had worked alongside Moholy-Nagy at the New Bauhaus in Chicago, saw CAVS as a continuation of that lineage (Davis 1968: 40). For Kepes, however, the significance of CAVS lay not in the technological novelty alone but in its capacity to generate new epistemological frameworks. While many contemporary art and technology initiatives focused on the integration of new materials and industrial processes, Kepes was concerned with the broader implications of perception, visual communication, and environmental design. His vision for CAVS aimed to redefine how knowledge itself was produced and organized across artistic, scientific, and civic spheres.

Amid the politically turbulent 1960s, Kepes's initiative to foster collaboration between art and technology resonated with MIT's broader institutional goals. At a time of significant social and scientific transformation, the center provided a platform for interdisciplinary engagement, reinforcing the university's growing emphasis on humanizing technological innovation and scientific research (Burnham 1980). Kepes's project received strong support from MIT's leadership, particularly Julius Stratton, the then-president of MIT

(Wisnioski 2013:103), and James R. Killian, a former MIT president and a highly influential political figure who played a key role in shaping U.S. science policy.³ By 1965, Kepes had begun reaching out to accomplished artists and scientists who shared the center's commitment to interdisciplinarity. His objective was to build a collaborative network that would later define CAVS. Rather than simply fostering experimental art, Kepes sought established artists who were eager to engage with cutting-edge scientific and technological research, and whose practice could extend to an environmental scale, integrating art into public and urban spaces.⁴ Following a selection process, seven artists were chosen for the center's inaugural year: Otto Piene, Harold Tovish, Vassilakis Takis, Wen-Ying Tsai, Jack Burnham, Ted Kraynik, and Stan VanDerBeek.⁵

While collaboration among artists was a well-established practice, partnerships with scientists within a technological institution such as MIT represented uncharted territory. For artists, one of the central concerns was the ethical implications of working with military-funded research in science and technology, as well as the question of individual authorship within a collective framework. Scientists, on the other hand, were often reluctant to see their theories loosely interpreted or repurposed within artistic contexts. These tensions between artistic autonomy and scientific rigor, between experimental openness and institutional constraints, ultimately shaped the nature of collaboration at CAVS, underscoring both its radical potential and its inherent limitations.

The first exhibition that Kepes organized at MIT foreshadowed many of the theoretical concerns that would later define CAVS. In 1951, the Hayden Gallery at MIT held an exhibition titled *The New Landscape* (Fig. 1). Organized and installed by Kepes and Thomas McNulty, the exhibition featured an arrangement of scientific images and abstract artworks which revealed what Kepes (1956) described as the 'images of a new world' (p. 19). As its title suggests, the exhibition explored the evolving visual landscape shaped by advances in technology and science. Featuring macro- and microphotography of trees, plants, bacteria, insects, and various natural and industrial materials, the exhibition emphasized the intersection of organic and technological worlds. Despite their diverse origins, these images shared a common trait: they revealed structural order and visual patterns inherent in natural phenomena, made visible through technological tools.

These photographs were presented without any identifying wall labels. While this practice was not entirely novel, as Elisabeth Finch (2005:189) notes, with precedents such as Moholy-Nagy's 1929 *film und foto* exhibition, in this instance, omission was intended to create a seamless visual transition, effectively elevating laboratory-generated images to the status of artworks.

In 1956, a few years after the exhibition, Kepes compiled these images in a book titled *The New Landscape in Art and Science*. Despite its critical success, the book encountered resistance from both scientists and art critics, many of whom were skeptical of the parallels drawn between artworks and scientific images. Scientists were often reluctant to see their empirical data aestheticized or reinterpreted, while art critics questioned whether scientific

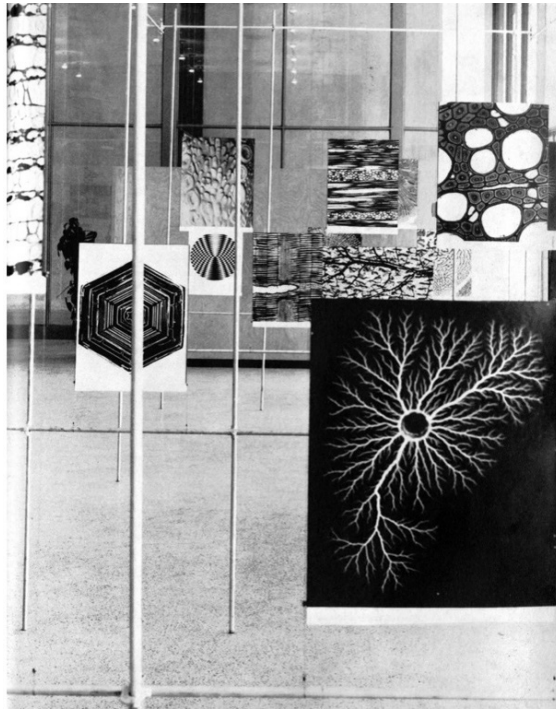


Figure 1. Installation view of *The New Landscape* exhibition, 1951, Hayden Gallery, MIT. Reproduced from *The New Landscape in Art and Science*, 1956, Paul Theobald, Chicago. © The Estate of Gyorgy Kepes.

imagery could be considered art in any traditional sense (Moholy-Nagy S: 1956). These tensions prefigured the larger debates that would emerge at CAVS, where artists and scientists grappled with the practical and conceptual challenges of interdisciplinary collaboration.

To ensure the centrality of collaboration and interdisciplinary exchange, Kepes established some guiding principles for CAVS. The center was a structured artist-in-residence program, annually welcoming six to eight established artists from various disciplines whose work aligned with its mission. In addition to developing their own individual projects, these artists were expected to participate in CAVS's collaborative initiatives, ensuring their work contributed to broader research efforts. They were also encouraged to engage in open dialogue with MIT specialists by participating in seminars, conferences, and discussions intended to deepen interdisciplinary discourse.

To maintain a constant influx of new perspectives, Kepes deliberately limited residencies to a maximum of two years, ensuring an ongoing exchange between different generations of artists.⁶ This rotation prevented intellectual stagnation and fostered a dynamic in which each cohort could build upon the research and creative experiments of their predecessors. Through these principles, Kepes envisioned CAVS as an 'educational unit pioneering in visual education,'⁷ where artistic innovation and interdisciplinary collaboration would drive new approaches to art and technology.

Explorations: The First Collective Exhibition

During its existence from 1967 to 2009, CAVS produced numerous exhibitions, all characterized by their emphasis on kinetic art, interactive environments, and the use of light as a plastic medium.⁸ Most projects also defied traditional museum norms by incorporating new experimental technologies, immersive formats, and large-scale environmental interventions. The center's early years were marked by experimental proposals, many of which remained at the conceptual stage and were never fully realized.

The first group exhibition produced by CAVS was *Explorations*. Initially conceived for the 1969 São Paulo Biennale, it was first presented at MIT's Hayden Gallery from the 28th of February to the 29th of March 1970, before traveling to the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington, D.C., where it was on view from the 4th of April to the 10th of May 1970. In *Explorations* (Fig. 2–3), Kepes redefined the relationship between the viewer and the artwork, encouraging direct interaction through touch and movement. The exhibition layout, provided in a brochure handed out to visitors, contained specific instructions on how visitors could engage with the artworks—whether by walking on them, touching, looking up, clapping, or whistling.

Figure 2. Installation view of *Explorations* exhibition, Hayden Gallery, MIT, 1970. © Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Estate of Gyorgy Kepes, courtesy of the CAVS Special Collection, MIT Libraries.



Figure 3.
Installation view of
Explorations exhibition,
Hayden Gallery, MIT,
1970. © Massachusetts
Institute of Technology
and the Estate of Gyorgy
Kepes, courtesy of the
CAVS Special Collection,
MIT Libraries.

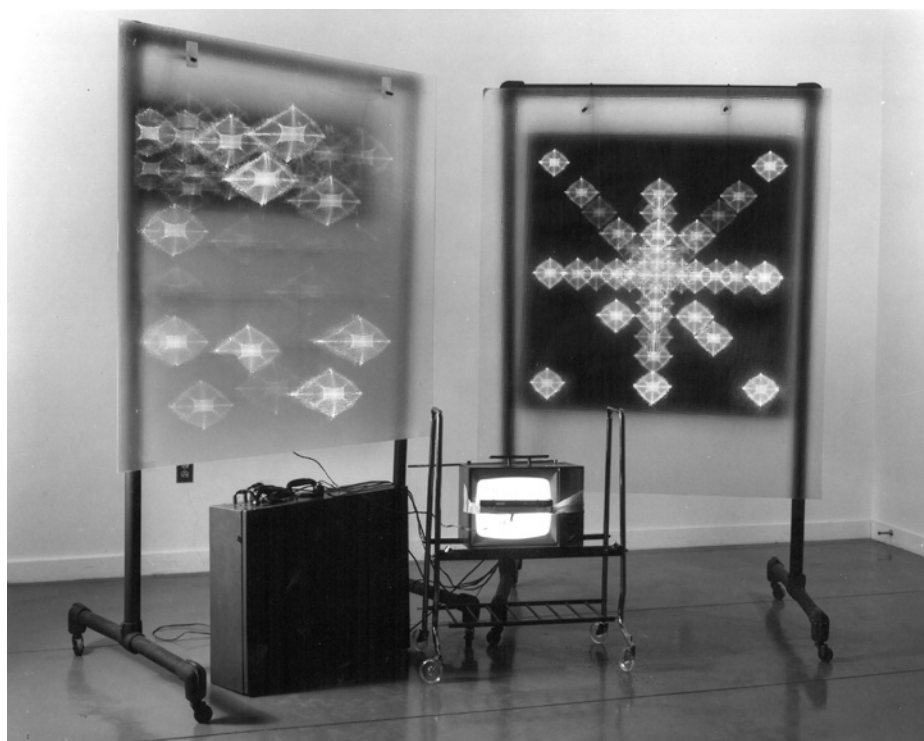


Figure 4.
Ted Kraynick, *Video
Luminar Light Mural*,
1968. © Massachusetts
Institute of Technology,
courtesy of the CAVS
Special Collection, MIT
Libraries.



Figure 5. Wen-Ying Tsai, *Cybernetic Sculpture System*, 1969. © Massachusetts Institute of Technology, courtesy of the CAVS Special Collection, MIT Libraries.

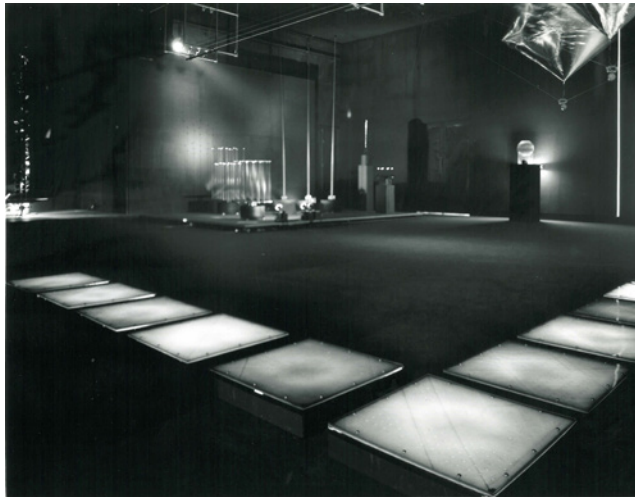


Figure 6. Gyorgy Kepes and William Wainwright, *Photoelastic Walk*, 1970. © Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Estate of Gyorgy Kepes, courtesy of the CAVS Special Collection, MIT Libraries.

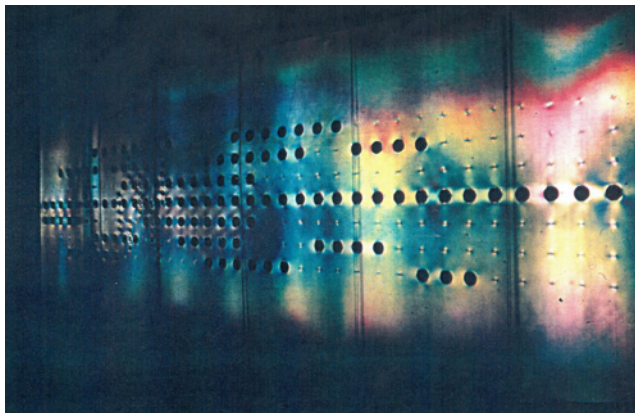


Figure 7. Gyorgy Kepes and William Wainwright, *Photoelastic Walk*, 1969. © Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Estate of Gyorgy Kepes, courtesy of the CAVS Special Collection, MIT Libraries.

This structured interaction challenged the conventions of passive spectatorship, positioning the visitor as an active participant in the creative process. In *Video Luminar Light Mural* by Ted Kraynik (Fig. 4), the audience could manipulate the images displayed on a television, electronic sensors then transformed those image patterns into dynamic abstract light patterns projected onto a screen. Nearby in the exhibition, Wen-Ying Tsai's *Cybernetic Sculpture System* (Fig. 5) converted sound into visual patterns. Stroboscopic light, projected onto the sculpture's vibrating steel rods, was programmed to pulse in sync with the rhythm of sound produced by spectators.

Positioned at the center of the room, Kepes's interactive installation invited visitors to walk across the artwork and actively produce dynamic visual effects. In collaboration with architect and engineer William Wainwright, Kepes designed *Photoelastic Walk* (Fig. 6–7), where polarized screens embedded in the floor generated colorful reflections underfoot. As participants moved, shifting patterns of light and color emerged, transforming the floor into a responsive kinetic surface that reacted to bodily movement.

To heighten sensory immersion, the gallery walls were painted entirely black, eliminating all visual distractions and creating a space where the artworks became the sole focal points. Further reinforcing this effect, Kepes removed all labels and captions from the walls, transforming the exhibition into a collective experience. This curatorial choice emphasized interaction, encouraging viewers to engage with the works through perception and experience. The integration of the spectator into the creative process, a central theme of *Explorations*, extended beyond the artworks into its accompanying public events program, which featured concerts, poetry readings, film screenings, and performances, designed to engage.

Participation also extended beyond the museum walls. In the *Sky Event*, organized by Charles Frazier, Otto Piene, and Vera Simons, spectators played an active role in transforming the urban landscape by launching helium-filled sculptures into the sky.⁹ These inflatable forms, floating above the city, turned the sky itself into a dynamic and participatory artwork, reinforcing the exhibition's broader goal of dissolving the boundaries between artist, audience, and environment.

Like many art and technology exhibitions of the 1960s and 1970s, *Explorations* encountered significant challenges, receiving both praise and sharp criticism from the press. Technical difficulties, a recurring issue in cybernetic and technological art projects of the time, affected its execution. Among its harshest critics were Lawrence Alloway and Grace Glueck. Alloway (1970) dismissed the exhibition as a naïve technological fantasy, arguing that its final presentation bore more resemblance to horror and science-fiction films than to a genuine reconciliation between art and technology. Similarly, Glueck (1970) criticized the exhibition for failing to deliver on its promise of a fully interactive environment, highlighting the gap between its ambitious vision and its execution.

Even Kepes himself acknowledged the exhibition's shortcomings. In a letter to Ida Rubin, he admitted that the exhibition's fundamental intention



was not realized.¹⁰ The challenges of collaboration among artists hindered the development of a truly symbiotic relationship between the artworks, limiting the exhibition's ability to function as a cohesive whole. Billy Apple withdrew his work from the Smithsonian exhibition, underscoring the tensions between the exhibition's experimental curatorial approach and the expectations of its contributors.¹¹

In *Explorations*, Kepes sought to create a fully cohesive configuration of interactive works, aiming to present what he described as 'the expression of an environmental community.'¹² The exhibition's primary objective was to examine the role of technology in contemporary cultural communication. Technology was not envisioned as an end in itself, but rather as a tool for fostering artistic and social engagement, reinforcing the idea that innovation should serve broader cultural and communal purposes.¹³ This concept was clearly articulated in Stan VanDerBeek's installation, *Panels for the Walls of the World*. This work was groundbreaking in both its use of technology and its evolving exhibition format (Fig. 8). As part of this dynamic process-driven project, VanDerBeek employed the newly available Xerox Telecopier machine to transmit images from his office at MIT to the National Collection of Fine Arts, allowing for real time image dissemination as part of the exhibition itself.

Figure 8. Stan VanDerBeek, *Panels for the Walls of the World*, 1970. © Massachusetts Institute of Technology, courtesy of the CAVS Special Collection, MIT Libraries.

The installation consisted of hundreds of printed mixed-media collages, which blended images from current world news with VanDerBeek's own drawings and paintings. By blending mass media aesthetics with personal artistic expression, VanDerBeek created a constantly evolving visual archive, challenging traditional notions of static exhibition formats. Using a grid system to dictate the precise positioning of each transmitted image, the artwork's form evolved progressively throughout the duration of the exhibition.

In 1969, VanDerBeek installed these telephonic panels in multiple locations across Boston, including Boston City Hall, the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, and the Walker Art Center. By replicating this evolving, time-based artwork in different sites, he demonstrated that contemporary artistic expression could 'exist in multiple places at the same time.'¹⁴ The accessibility of the project was further emphasized by the fact that anyone with a fax machine could receive and participate in the dissemination of these telephonic panels, expanding the reach of art beyond traditional exhibition spaces.

VanderBeek's incorporation of media images into a structured grid system recalls Kepes's use of laboratory-produced scientific images in *The New Landscape*, where these images were displayed within the grid of a metal framework. Just as *The New Landscape* sought to visualize the intersection of art and scientific imagery, VanDerBeek's work proposed a new landscape, one shaped by the logic of mass media and visual communication. While Kepes engaged with the aesthetic and epistemological possibilities of scientific imagery, VanDerBeek extended this approach to the realm of mediated information, constructing a visual system that reflected the fragmented, networked nature of contemporary media culture.

One of the most significant challenges faced by *Explorations* was the ethical tensions surrounding artistic collaboration in a politically charged context. Originally conceived for the 1969 São Paulo Biennale, *Explorations* was set to become the first collective exhibition of its kind at an international art biennale.¹⁵ However, the introduction of Institutional Act No. 5 (AI-5) in 1968, which severely restricted civil and political rights in Brazil, sparked global outrage. In response, an international boycott of the Biennale emerged, with many artists withdrawing from the event.

Despite the fraught political climate, Kepes remained steadfast in his decision to participate in the Biennale, a choice that provoked considerable protest among CAVS artists. Among the most vocal was Takis, who had refused in 1964 to represent Greece at the Biennale, or any other international event, in protest against the rise of authoritarianism in Greece.¹⁶ Jack Burnham, also outspoken in his dissent, agreed to participate only on the condition of anonymity. His statement for the Biennale catalogue was so strongly worded in its critique of the government that Kepes doubted it would be translated into Portuguese for the exhibition.¹⁷

Kepes defended his stance to CAVS fellows, arguing that participation in the Biennale would provide an opportunity to engage directly with young Brazilian artists and make a meaningful impact on-site.

Instead of withdrawing in protest, he proposed that the participating artists issue a collective statement condemning the military regime's actions while reaffirming the universal and creative mission of artists.¹⁸ Although some CAVS artists supported Kepes's stance, the boycott gained momentum. With over one third of the participating artists boycotting the event and withdrawing their artworks from the exhibition, Kepes was forced to withdraw CAVS from the Biennale (Goldring and Sebring 2019: 164). This withdrawal marked a defining moment, exposing the complex ethical, political, and institutional challenges that arose when art, technology, and collaboration intersected.

Beyond his ideological justifications, Kepes had pragmatic reasons for insisting on CAVS's participation in the Biennale. The exhibition, which was finally held at the National Collection of Fine Arts, represented a major financial 'gamble.'¹⁹ Its budget was provided by grants from the International Arts Program, the National Endowment for the Arts and MIT's own Art Committee.²⁰ These grants, however, only covered the exhibition's costs, a major public success at the Biennale could have drawn further financial support, helping to sustain CAVS's future activities.

Ethics of Collaboration with Science and Technology

For artists at CAVS, collaboration with military-funded technology at MIT presented a more complex ethical concern. Inaugurated in 1967, CAVS emerged in a period shaped by widespread social movements. In the mid 1960s, American universities experienced a surge of student activism, as protests against the Vietnam War erupted across campuses nationwide. The same technological advancements that enabled the 1969 Moon landing also fueled the rise of environmental, anti-nuclear, and pacifist movements, reflecting the era's tensions between scientific progress and social consciousness.

MIT housed over 70 laboratories which were funded by external public and private sources. In 1969, it was the primary beneficiary of federal research grants, receiving approximately \$100 million from various government agencies. The largest contributor, providing \$40 million in funding, was the Department of Defense (Benthall 1975: 28). In 1968, over half of MIT's total budget was allocated to just two key laboratories: the Draper Laboratory, which developed navigation systems for ballistic missiles and NASA space missions, and the Lincoln Laboratory, which focused on advancing radar and motion detection technologies (Blakinger 2016a: 284). This financial and research structure highlighted the university's pivotal role in both military and aerospace innovation, complicating its position within the broader social and political landscape of the era.

Like many students and faculty members at MIT, Kepes was concerned with the ethical implications of military technology. In 1968, in response to MIT laboratories' involvement in the Vietnam War, more than 50 faculty members, including scientists and engineers, signed a petition calling for a temporary halt to research on campus for one day, the 4th of March

1968.²¹ On this day, professors and students participated in public discussions, exploring alternative applications of technology in ecological and social fields, reflecting a growing movement within the institution to challenge the militarization of scientific research.

The entanglements of MIT's scientific community with technology presented further complexities. Many of the MIT scientists with whom Kepes sought to collaborate were deeply involved in military research. Bruno Rossi, a prominent MIT physicist and a close friend of Kepes, was recruited for the Manhattan Project due to his groundbreaking research on radar technology. Moreover, James R. Killian, MIT's president from 1948 to 1959, whom Kepes often described as a generous supporter of CAVS, served as a trusted liaison at the White House. In 1956, he was appointed the first chairman of President Eisenhower's Board of Consultants on Foreign Intelligence Activities, established to oversee and advise federal intelligence operations. The following year, Eisenhower named him Special Assistant for Science and Technology, a role in which he advised the administration on military research priorities and on the mobilization of the scientific community (Wang 2008).

These connections underscore the paradox of CAVS's position within MIT—situated within an institution deeply involved in classified military research, yet striving to advance artistic, technological, and ecological collaboration for socially engaged purposes. Amid the social and scientific upheaval of the 1960s, CAVS held significant symbolic weight for MIT. Recognizing its potential as a manifestation of progressive interdisciplinary collaboration, the administration sought to elevate the center's public profile and give it greater visibility. Its reception was complex, with some students and artists criticizing its position within MIT as a case of complicity rather than collaboration (Blakinger 2016b).

Kepes approached the relationship between artistic and institutional collaboration with pragmatism. Speaking at a lecture in 1973, he asserted that 'After Buchenwald and Vietnam <...> only creation can counter destruction.'²² Emphasizing the transformative power of visual language, he referenced a statement made by the Committee of Permanent Creation during the May 1968 revolution in France, affirming his conviction that art could be a force of resistance in the face of historical devastation:

'The only weapon of the individual, and of the group, is creation, permanent contesting spontaneity at every level. Only pure creation is subversive and cannot be absorbed. Creation is dangerous for all systems of repression.'²³

In reality, Kepes had already confronted the entanglement of artistic collaboration and military technology during his time in Chicago in the course of World War II. In 1942, while at the School of Design, he taught a course sponsored by the Office of Civilian Defense, titled 'Principles of Camouflage.'²⁴ Its aim was to provide practical training in rapid urban camouflage solutions. The course outline framed camouflage as an inherently collaborative problem, requiring the coordinated work of painters, architects,

and engineers to solve visual problems. Kepes's seminars were thus further enriched by contributions from experts in fields such as chemistry, physics, optics, and biology.²⁵

By the time that CAVS was established, Kepes was acutely aware of ethical issues surrounding the relationship between science, technology, and art. Yet, he resisted seeing collaboration as a moral concession. Instead, he framed it as the most effective solution to these problems. Earlier in his career, Kepes had already faced criticism for applying the techniques of revolutionary European avant-garde to serve modern industry and capitalism in advertising arts (Roach 2010: 34), as well as for his attempt at uniting art and science.²⁶ Far from being peripheral, these criticisms were actively acknowledged by Kepes, who, as his correspondence shows, confronted them openly rather than avoid them. For Kepes, collaboration was not a compromise but a strategy to embed artists within the processes that shaped both the built environment and the broader relationship between science, technology, and society.

This commitment to engagement over withdrawal also informed Kepes's position during the proposed boycott of the São Paulo Biennale. His response was shaped not only by pragmatic considerations, but by a deep conviction in the value of collaboration over isolation. His extensive correspondence with fellow artists regarding this boycott reveals a fundamental divergence in perspective. In their letters to Kepes, many advocates of the boycott drew their position from conversations with Brazilian artists living abroad. In one letter, Jean Clay describes discussions in Paris concerning the boycott and emphasized the stance of Brazilian artists residing there, including Lygia Clark, Hélio Oiticica, Arthur Luis Piza, and Sérgio de Camargo, who denounced the climate of censorship and repression in Brazil and urged solidarity through non-participation.²⁷ In his correspondence with Kepes, Takis likewise referred to a similar call for boycott issued by Brazilian artists in New York.²⁸

Kepes, by contrast, was in active correspondence with artists and cultural figures based in Brazil, many of whom saw the Biennale as a potential subversive act, and an opportunity to fight censorship. In a subsequent long letter explaining his position to Takis, Kepes mentioned exchanges with prominent figures in Brazil who supported participation in the Biennale, including Juscelino Kubitschek, the former president of Brazil, and the designer Roberto Burle Marx, with both offering to provide written statements endorsing CAVS's participation.²⁹ In this way, Kepes's approach reframed participation not as complicity but as a form of critical engagement in a politically charged context.

Measuring the depth of CAVS's influence on MIT's scientific community is not a straightforward question, as scientists and engineers responded in markedly different ways. While some remained ambivalent, others were receptive to Kepes's interdisciplinary approach, actively contributing to projects at CAVS. The physics professor Jerrold R. Zacharias went so far as to propose an exhibition that would explore, in parallel, the

evolution of scientific discoveries related to optics and the history of light in artistic creation, highlighting its significance as both a physical phenomenon and artistic medium.³⁰ In 1965, *Light as a Creative Medium*, an exhibition on light, was ultimately organized, incorporating this exact concept. Similarly, Professor Charles H. Townes, known for his pioneering work on laser technology, suggested that scientists and artists collaborate on shared conceptual questions, which could be explored in an interdisciplinary way, through the lens of physics, art, and psychology.

To cultivate interdisciplinary exchange at MIT, Kepes organized two complementary seminars designed to foster productive dialogue between artists and scientists: the first seminar examined the role of artistic imagery in recognizing and interpreting scientific phenomena, while the second explored how technological progress influenced and reshaped artistic imagination.³¹ One of the most notable examples of such interdisciplinary collaboration was Kepes's partnership with the urban planner Kevin Lynch. In 1954, with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, they launched a five-year study on urban perception, which directly contributed to Lynch's 1961 book, *The Image of the City*. In the book's introduction, Lynch (1960: vi) credited Kepes with providing its theoretical foundation, nearly acknowledging him as a co-author.

In 1968, MIT held a joint dedication for the newly established Center for Theoretical Physics and CAVS. To mark the occasion, a symposium on Science and Art was organized, bringing together artists and scientists to discuss the possibilities of collaboration. Robert R. Wilson, a Cornell University professor and physicist renowned for his work on the Manhattan Project, reflected on the relationship between aesthetics and function:

'I think that if you're making something large, that's going to be looked at, that you're going to work with, then I believe that you have a responsibility to make it aesthetically pleasing. I think that the theories we make too should be aesthetically pleasing, enough so that a generally well-educated person would want to understand the things that the scientist does instead of turning his back as has been the case.'³²

In 1967, Wilson was appointed the first director of the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory (Fermilab). A physicist on one hand and a sculptor on the other, Wilson played a key role in shaping the architecture of Fermilab, which also featured several of his sculptures. Summarizing his dual practice, Wilson remarked: 'I make, or I help make two types of forms, on one hand I make sculptures <...> on the other, I make, or I help make large nuclear machines.'³³

Building on this spirit of dialogue between art and science, the *Vision+Value* anthology series encapsulates the interdisciplinary philosophy that Kepes sought to cultivate at MIT. Published primarily between 1965 and 1966, the series, edited by Kepes, explored fundamental themes linking art and science, fostering a transdisciplinary dialogue around concepts such as structure, order, rhythm and movement. The volumes featured contributions from artists, architects, filmmakers, and musicians, alongside essays by

leading scientists in fields including physics, biology, chemistry, cybernetics, sociology, and psychology. More than a collection of essays, *Vision+Value* reflected the intellectual exchanges unfolding at MIT during the 1950s and 1960s and revealed the scientific community's differing attitudes and degrees of openness towards collaboration.³⁴

A Future Shaped by Collaboration

These early interactions continued to shape the projects that followed at CAVS. As its reputation expanded, the center drew artists engaged in the emerging fields of new media, electronic, lumino-kinetic, and environmental art. Within the first two months of 1972, the center reportedly received two hundred residency applications from both American and international artists.³⁵

Following Kepes's retirement in 1974, Otto Piene was appointed as the new director of CAVS. Under his leadership, the center remained committed to Kepes's vision, focusing on projects that fostered dialogue between technology, the environment, and the public. According to the 1974 course catalog, the center's program was structured around a series of seminars and workshops led by resident artists, each exploring the intersections between art, science, and technology. Piene himself conducted a seminar on art and the environment, examining the historical role of environmental art across various cultures. Paul Earls focused on cataloging innovative environmental and sound art projects. Lowry Burgess explored the historical significance of light in visual communication. Avatar Moraes led a seminar on the use of computers in artistic creation, reflecting the increasing role of digital technology in contemporary art. Other artists investigated themes such as sensory perception in space, visual and sound phenomena, and the relationship between the body and the environment.³⁶ Together, these diverse topics shaped CAVS's ongoing commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration, expanding the dialogue between artistic practice and scientific inquiry.

In 1977, CAVS produced one of its most ambitious collaborative art projects, *Centerbeam* (Fig. 9), a kinetic, performative, and participatory sculpture first exhibited at Documenta 6 in Kassel in 1977 and later presented on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., in 1978. Fourteen artists, supported by five scientists and five engineers, collaborated to create a 44-meter-long structure that incorporated lasers, holography, steam, neon, video, and inflatable sculptures (Goldring 1980: 37). The main structure of the work consisted of a massive, inverted glass prism filled with water and elevated on a metal framework. A network of tubes and cables running the length of the sculpture, transformed the prism into a dynamic machine, acting like a central nervous system that circulated natural and artificial energy, including air, steam, water, electricity, radio signals, image transmissions, and artificial light through the sculpture.

Described as a 'kinetic multimedia dragon' (Schneckenburger 1980: 27), *Centerbeam* exemplified a collective artwork where individual artistic



Figure 9. Collective artwork, *Centerbeam*, Documenta 6, Kassel, 1977. © Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Estate of Gyorgy Kepes, courtesy of the CAVS Special Collection, MIT Libraries.

expression was preserved within a monumental, multi-sensory experience. CAVS artists conducted extensive research and technical experimentations at MIT to develop a format that enabled group collaboration while allowing each artist to maintain autonomy and control over their contributions (Goldring and Sebring 2019: 94). Invited by Manfred Schneckenburger to participate in Documenta 6, the artists developed several proposals, three of which were seriously considered: Harel Kedem suggested a programmable habitat made from computer equipment, Otto Piene envisioned a diamond-shaped structure amplifying solar energy through various materials and media, and Lowry Burgess proposed a pipeline network sculpture connecting the urban and natural environments (Goldring and Sebring 2019: 91). Burgess's concept was unanimously adopted, as it aligned with CAVS's core themes of energy, technology, and communication.

The project was named *Centerbeam*, referencing both its structural form and its origin at the Center for Advanced Visual Studies (Alloway 1980: 5). Each artist designed their own energy pathway while interacting with the larger structure and its interconnected components. The transformation of energy served as the central theme, with modulations of steam, light, and sound producing a continuously evolving orchestra. Installed in the outdoor garden of the exhibition, the sculpture engaged directly with its surrounding environment.

Paul Earls's laser line (Fig. 10) projected ten beams of different colors along the prism, extending into the trees of the garden. As the beams moved through space, they intersected various objects in both the natural and artificial landscape. Using a system of mirrors controlled by a central computer, the beams formed complex configurations, projected onto steam, trees, and buildings. The sculpture encouraged audience participation through a series of interaction stations, offering visitors multiple ways to modify the programmed orchestra. Spectators could manipulate the flow of steam and light, adjust projection directions, and even generate their own images. A specialized device enabled participants to use their eye movements to draw with light, with their luminous creations displayed on video screens.



The structure also harnessed the energy lines that powered the central machine, integrating them into the artwork itself. The saline solution line, part of the machine's cooling system, was used to create ice crystals that shimmered in the sunlight. *Centerbeam* was a living installation, inhabited by both artists and spectators who activated its components (Piene 1980: 20).

While some critics dismissed Kepes's efforts to bridge art and science as superficial or idealistic, his ideas on collaboration and interdisciplinarity found strong support among theorists in both fields. This spirit resonated across MIT, inspiring the creation of several interdisciplinary initiatives. According to Jeremy Grubman (2017), the integration of art into MIT's current programs is a direct legacy of CAVS. In the late 1960s, Ed Pincus and Richard Leacock collaboratively shaped the Film and Video Section at MIT, a program dedicated to documentary filmmaking. In 1967, Nicholas Negroponte and Leon B. Groisser established the Architecture Machine Group (ARCH MAC), a multidisciplinary laboratory exploring new applications of computers in architecture and engineering. In 1974, Muriel Cooper, who maintained a close professional relationship with Kepes, co-founded, with physicist-photographer Ron MacNeil, the Visible Language Workshop (VLW), an experimental program in graphic design that pioneered new approaches to processing and visualizing complex data.

Figure 10. Collective artwork, *Centerbeam*, Documenta 6, Kassel, 1977. © Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Estate of Gyorgy Kepes, courtesy of the CAVS Special Collection, MIT Libraries.

The MIT Media Lab, established in 1985 by Nicholas Negroponte and the former MIT president Jerome Wiesner and still active today, integrated several of these experimental groups, including the Film section, ARCH MAC, and the VLW. Cooper (1989) described this interdisciplinary laboratory as a 'response to the information revolution, much as the Bauhaus was a response to the industrial revolution' (p. 18). Its objective was 'eliminating the isolation of separate media by bringing together the most advanced thinking about applications with the most advanced research in imaging technologies, interactive systems, theories of computation, and the human cognitive system' (Cooper 1989: 18). This vision closely echoes the interdisciplinary collaborative work model championed by Kepes. One that not only sought to establish theoretical and formal intersections between art, science, and technology, but to position art as an active force in social organization.

During a late-1980s public lecture and conversation with Piene, Kepes reflected on his career at CAVS and the core values that guided his work:

'When I started the center, I started not as an aesthetic acrobat, not to create something novel in the world of art, I have to be honest, I still don't care about the world of art as a primary issue, I care about the use of art or the meaning of art in terms of its social human context <...> I believe that art is the most essential potential media, and I mean that in a very broad sense of the word media, which could bring about a new deal.'³⁷

Kepes's vision for CAVS was not rooted in pure formalist concerns, but in the conviction that art, when interwoven with science and technology, could act as a catalyst for interdisciplinary exchange and societal transformation. The goal was to explore new ways of collaboration, expanding the artist's perspective outside the confines of their studio and individual research.³⁸ Beyond the aesthetic and sociopolitical impact of the center's projects, Kepes envisioned transforming the identity of the scientist and, by extension, the broader MIT scientific community.

In a 1969 newspaper article, one journalist wrote that a new art is emerging at CAVS. He noted however that 'nobody can tell, even from projects that have been completed, what this art will look like or do. At this point, that is not very important. What is important is the collaboration' (Kirkhorn 1969). At CAVS, collaboration drew both skeptics and advocates, but the message that remained certain was that collaboration itself could become a creative act.

1. This passage appears on a page of instructions titled A Guide to Explorations (unpaginated) (Kepes 1970).
2. Gyorgy Kepes, Report to Julius Stratton, 1965. Box 82, Folder 3, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Stanford University.
3. James R. Killian was the president of MIT from 1948 to 1959 and a key figure in founding MIT Press. He also co-directed military scientific research at

- MIT during World War II. In 1957, he became chairman of the President's Science Advisory Committee (PSAC), tasked with evaluating the potential applications of new scientific discoveries. The committee played a key role in reforming the national science and technology curriculum and contributed to the establishment of NASA in 1958. See Wang Z (2008).
4. Gyorgy Kepes, Report to Julius Stratton, 1965. Box 82, Folder 3, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Stanford University.
 5. According to his correspondence with Jack Burnham and Otto Piene, Kepes required extensive discussion with artists, along with numerous studio visits and viewings. See Fellows Individual Records, Gyorgy Kepes Folder, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 6. Georgy Kepes, Artists Speak, filmed interview conducted by Otto Piene, n.d. Author's transcription. CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 7. Georgy Kepes, Proposal for the Center for Advanced Visual Studies, 1965. Folder: Founding Material, CAVS Special Collections, MIT.
 8. CAVS merged with the Visual Arts Program in 2009 to form the MIT Program in Art, Culture and Technology.
 9. Program brochure accompanying the exhibition Explorations. Box 28, Folder 9, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Stanford University.
 10. Georgy Kepes, Letter to Ida Rubin/Mrs. Jerome Rubin, 9 April 1970. Projects Series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale-Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 11. Georgy Kepes, Letter to Billy Apple, 7 April 1970. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 12. Georgy Kepes, Letter to Billy Apple, 7 April 1970. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 13. Georgy Kepes, Press release, 30 March 1970. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 14. Stan VanDerBeek, Press release, May 1969. Fellows Individual Records, Folder: VanDerBeek, Stan, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 15. Official announcement, May 1969. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 16. Takis, Letter to Pierre Restany, 17 January 1969. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 17. Georgy Kepes, Letter to Takis, 17 June 1969. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 18. Georgy Kepes, Letter to Takis, 20 June 1969. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
 19. In a letter to Gyorgy Kepes, John E. Burchard, the then-dean of MIT, noted that, due to MIT's contribution to the Explorations exhibition, the Art Committee Fund was consequently unable to support other art initiatives on campus. John E. Burchard, Letter to Gyorgy Kepes, 25 April 1970. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.

20. Memorandum from Lois A. Bingham to T. Ames Wheeler, Budget for International Art Program Exhibition, Explorations, 17 March 1970. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
21. This petition led to the founding of the Union of Concerned Scientists, established at MIT in 1969. MIT faculty statement accessible online: <https://www.ucs.org/about/history/founding-document-1968-mit-faculty-statement> (29/03/2025).
22. Georgy Kepes, *Art in a Civic Place*, 1973. Berlin lecture typescript: 13. Microfilm 5313, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
23. Georgy Kepes, *Art in a Civic Place*, 1973. Berlin lecture typescript: 13. Microfilm 5313, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
24. For a detailed account of how the School of Design restructured its curriculum and collaborated with the Office of Civilian Defense during WWII, see Findeli 1995.
25. Outline of the Camouflage Course at the School of Design in Chicago 1941–1942. Microfilm 5318, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
26. In her correspondence with Kepes, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy was critical of his relationship to MIT. Her (Moholy-Nagy S 1959) review of *The New Landscape* criticized the formal comparisons between scientific images and abstract artworks.
27. Jean Clay, Letter to Kepes, 12 June 1969. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
28. Takis, Letter to Kepes, 10 June 1969. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
29. Gyorgy Kepes, Letter to Takis, 20 June 1969. Projects series, Folder: Sao Paulo Biennale—Explorations 1969–1970, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
30. In his report to Stratton, Kepes describes positive encounters with the scientists: Philipp Morrison, Egerton, Cerillo, Bitter, Rosenblith, Fleisher, George Clark. See Gyorgy Kepes, Report to Stratton, 1965. Box 82, Folder 3, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Stanford University.
31. MIT Art Committee Meeting, 5 December 1965. Meeting Minutes, Microfilm 5312, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
32. Robert R. Wilson, Remarks delivered at the Science and Art Symposium, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 20–22 March 1968. Box 9, Folder 11, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Author's transcription from audio file.
33. Robert R. Wilson, Remarks delivered at the Science and Art Symposium, MIT, Cambridge, MA, 20–22 March 1968. Box 9, Folder 11, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Author's transcription from audio file.

34. For an in-depth study on the conception, publication and reception of the Vision+Value series, see Arning 2008.
35. Gyorgy Kepes, Letter to William Porter, Dean of the School of Architecture at MIT, 2 May 1972. Microfilm 5308, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
36. Center for Advanced Visual Studies Course Catalogue, 1974: 4–11. CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
37. Gyorgy Kepes, Artists Speak, filmed lecture, c.1985–1990. Author's transcription, CAVS Special Collection, MIT.
38. 'Our function is to explore new creative ideas in art which go beyond the studio scale of the individual artist and his subjective interest.' Gyorgy Kepes, Letter to William Porter, Dean of the School of Architecture at MIT, 2 May 1972. Microfilm 5308, Gyorgy Kepes Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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Research Article

Fieldwork on Six Legs: Ethnography as Multispecies Experimental Collaboration

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Fieldwork on Six Legs: Ethnography as Multispecies Experimental Collaboration

Elisabeth Luggauer & Ferdinand

Cayenne, Hester, Torridon, and Doni, to name just a few, have become known not only as dogs present in the everyday lives of the scholars Donna Haraway, Timothy Hodgetts, Karen Lane, and George Kunnath, but also as active participants in their research, thinking, reflection, and ultimately, writing. Thinking with these multispecies companionships, this paper explores the ethnographic techniques of Elisabeth and Ferdinand's *human-dog-entanglement* within the research field of human—street dog relationships in the city of Podgorica. The paper elaborates on how fieldwork, guided by multispecies modes of being in a city and in a research field, enables an ethnographic approach that moves beyond the dominance of human sensory and spatial frameworks. Unpacking this example of a multispecies experimental collaboration between a human ethnographer and a canine para-ethnographer, the paper connects the two vibrant bodies of scholarship on multispecies ethnography and ethnographic experimentation.

Keywords: contact zone, ethnographic experimentation, multispecies ethnography, multispecies experimental collaboration, Podgorica, street dogs, urban anthropology

Strolling in

It is a cloudy, rainy, and chilly morning in February 2016 in Podgorica (Montenegro). After a brief initial visit a few months earlier, I have now returned for the main fieldwork for a research project exploring the practices and politics of cohabitation between humans and street dogs in this city. We are slowly walking along Hercegovačka, one of the historic roads in the city center, which has now been converted into a pedestrian area.

We: that is, myself (Elisabeth), Anna (my partner at the time), and my dog, Ferdinand. Anna is absorbed in observing antifascist graffiti, while Ferdinand, whom I kept on a leash connected to me, sniffs his way along the street, along the few trees planted in this urban ground, and the walls of the buildings that frame the narrow road. Meanwhile, I try to pay attention to (signs of) the presence of psima lutalicama or ulični psi ('stray dogs' or 'street dogs').

Suddenly, a white dog crosses our paths. She glances briefly at the humans, then turns her attention to Ferdinand. The two circle one another, sniffing noses and butts with cautious curiosity.



Figure 1. Elisabeth and Ferdinand encountering their future research partner Angela, February 2016, Podgorica. © Anna Klieber, all rights reserved, used with permission.

The other dog moves on, trots down the road, turns the corner, and disappears.

A few days later, Ferdinand and I are in Café Berlin—one of the few places recommended to us as ‘pet-friendly.’ Settled at a small table in the corner of the mostly empty café, I am writing up fieldnotes. At the table next to us, a woman begins engaging Ferdinand in a warm, playful interaction, calling him over to her, which results in an exchange of glances between the woman and me.

‘Is he yours?’, she asked me in English.

‘Yes,’ I reply.

Just now, a large white dog stands up from another corner of the café and makes their way over to us. ‘And she’s a stray,’ the woman says, introducing the dog.

As the two dogs greet each other, I suddenly recognize her: it was the same white dog we encountered a few days earlier on Hercegovačka. It turns out that the woman is deeply entangled with this dog and has much to tell about her: she first appeared on the café’s terrace the previous summer. She kept returning, hanging out between the tables and guests, and wanting to enter the indoor space. After some negotiation between the café’s regulars and friends of the owner, including this woman, Martina, the dog was granted access to the café’s interior.

Following this, the dog became an integral part of the café’s small community, as well as the shops, bars, and surrounding neighborhood. That group that formed around her care, including Martina, waiters, guests, and local neighbors, named the dog Angela. They regularly arrange food and water for Angela at the café and keep a constant eye on her well-being.

Podgorica is the capital city of Montenegro, with approximately 180,000 human inhabitants. Like many Southeast European cities, Podgorica is also home to numerous, yet uncounted, strays (Luggauer 2018, 2022). While practices of living with pet dogs in the city have spread only in the past few decades, *luta*lice have, in the words of our human research partners, 'always been present.' Earlier, their population was controlled by hunters shooting dogs or by spreading poison in the streets.

In 2001, animal welfare activists founded the country's first dog shelter in Podgorica. Since then, the practices of stray dog population management have gradually shifted to focus on housing dogs in the shelter and promoting their adoption. In parallel, programs of 'trap-neuter-release' temporarily foster dogs in the shelter for castrating and vaccination, then return them to their previous locations on the streets.

These measures are largely sustained by animal welfare activists, who care for dogs on the streets, volunteer in shelters, foster dogs in their homes, and campaign in the media for the adoption and humane treatment of stray animals and pets. Obviously, this collective effort has a significant impact on the local stray population. However, in recent decades, there has been a growing interest in keeping dogs as pets, many of whom end up abandoned or left to roam freely and mate with strays. Thus, in general, the number of strays living in the city is increasing.

Life as a stray is precarious. Many dogs are well-fed, but medical care is scarce. Particularly when they appear in groups, dogs are often perceived as disturbing or dangerous. Depending on a dog's shape and behavior, attitudes towards them can often be indifferent or even hostile. Dogs are mistreated and often poisoned, or transferred to the shelter. For some dogs, the chances of being adopted and leaving the shelter are quite low. What sparked my research interest was the daily coexistence of humans and strays, and how public urban spaces are (re)imagined and (re)shaped through their multispecies experiences in, appropriations of, and claims to space.

This continuum of multispecies encounters, first on Hercegovacka and then in the café, opened up a research field of reciprocally crafted relationships between some humans and some strays, which I (Elisabeth, the anthropologist and essay-writer) came to conceptualize with Donna Haraway (2008) as 'naturalcultural contact zones,' mutually maintained 'worldmaking entanglements' between the dogs and the humans. Ultimately, the project focused on three such contact zones situated in different parts of town. This paper outlines how it matters that it was a particular multispecies 'we' that strolled through the city, was present in this moment in the café, and eventually became an epistemic entanglement of human and dog sensor apparatuses and modes of being in the urban.

I also reflect upon the experimental methodological endeavor of conducting multispecies ethnography as a multispecies entanglement. Here, 'experimental' denotes leaving well-trodden paths, trying something radically new, and attuning one's senses to a totally unpredictable process and outcome.

In that sense, experimentality is essential for multispecies research. Although this is not a new observation (Bubandt et al. 2022; Hamilton and Taylor 2017; Kirksey 2014), interestingly, multispecies methodological scholarship is not yet thoroughly intertwined with scholarship that epistemologically characterizes and reflects on ethnographic experimentation (Criado and Estalella 2018, 2023; Estalella 2024; Martínez 2021).

This paper outlines the experimental reconfigurations necessary to open up a multispecies companionship to a research collaboration. I mobilize the concept of the 'para-ethnographer,' coined by Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2005), for research partners epistemically collaborating with ethnographers, and consider the dog Ferdinand a canine para-ethnographer in my research project. Fleshing out the research practices of this multispecies ethnographic companionship, the paper connects multispecies ethnography to the scholarship emphasizing the experimental character of ethnography in fieldwork (Criado and Estalella 2018, 2023; Estalella 2024). I argue that a further epistemic intertwinement of these scholarships is beneficial for both: a deeper conceptual engagement with the experimental can enrich the repertoire of multispecies ethnographic techniques, and including other than human collaborators in ethnographic experimentation will certainly expand human ethnographic fieldworkers' imaginative abilities.

Companionships and Arrangements

Ethnography created and has long rested upon an image of fieldwork as a long-term stay away from home, a somewhat lonely adventure among strangers, conducted by an ethnographer—often imagined as a cis male and white individual—who is seemingly independent and always ready to leave everything behind to spend months abroad. These heteronormative and elitist concepts of fieldwork and the ethnographer's identity are being dismantled by feminist and decolonial approaches to ethnographic knowledge production. It is pointed out that research and knowledge, often presented as the product of solitary effort, are in fact frequently made possible only through the accompaniment and labor of others—such as wives, partners, and assistants—who take on care work, support in the field, transcribe notes, edit texts, and more.

Researchers are increasingly public about the challenges of arranging fieldwork logistically while being embedded in academia's administrative structures and entangled in relationships of care with humans and others. As one example, the term 'patchwork ethnography' has been coined to describe alternatives to 'long-term "traditional" fieldwork' (Günel, Varma and Watanabe 2020). In the German Anthropological Association's working group 'Family in the Field,' to name another example, the presence of companions and children is discussed not only as a nuisance or organizational challenge, but also as a potential source of enrichment for ethnographic research. Along similar lines, Kristen Ghodsee (2005) has reflected on the

challenges of including multispecies family members—Tosca and Porthos, two Bassets—in her fieldwork arrangements, while also discovering its epistemic benefits.

These methodological reflections emerged from a planned eight-month fieldwork stay in Podgorica for a research project. Initially, I (Elisabeth) considered Ferdinand's presence on the trip a mere logistical challenge. At the beginning, Ferdinand's presence required us to balance the ethnographic activities of exploring the city through walks, site visits, and engaging with locals with our existing multispecies rhythm of moving, eating, and resting—finding food that fits his needs and taste, learning about local veterinary infrastructure, and moderating his exposure to the 'Mediterranean diseases' and scabies the vets at home in Austria had been warning me about. However, at some point, Elisabeth realized that our very presence as a multispecies entanglement researching the everyday lives of other human-dog-entanglements had the potential to teach us more than practicalities. Our multispecies mode of being present could actually open up tracks and connections in the field that a human-only research presence could not access, and a dog by himself would probably not have interpreted and connected in that way.

In Haraway's (2003) work, the concept of the 'companion' recognizes the social as an entanglement of multiple 'companion species,' such as humans and dogs, who have co-shaped each other and the worlds they inhabit; it encompasses co-living, co-inhabiting, and co-creating. In his thoughts on 'assembling the contemporary,' Paul Rabinow (2011) also re-accentuates the figure of the companion in order to rethink anthropology as a project that always emerges from experimentation and collaboration. Rabinow highlights anthropology as a mode of doing research with companions—the individuals with whom we think and theorize, the ones with whom we research, and all those who transcend these boundaries.

This paper is crafted out of a human—dog companionship that shapes and creates their everyday world together. Integrating the two perspectives on companionship—the multispecies everyday world-making and the scholarly co-crafting—the paper proposes considering multispecies ethnographic collaborations as multifaceted relationships in which dogs also become companions in thinking, reflecting, and ethnographing. In so doing, it is thinking companionship alongside Karen Lane and Torridon, an anthropologist and her canine 'research assistant' who have countered narratives about the dividedness of Belfast (2015); Timothy Hodgetts and Hester, a geographer and a dog who have co-written about forming a 'humandog collective' within wildlife conservation studies (Hodgetts and Hester 2018); and George Kunnath and Doni, an anthropologist and a stray who met during George's fieldwork within the Maoist movement in India (Kunnath 2021).

Multispecies Experimental Collaborations

Ethnography is not a method; it is not a set of standardized steps and techniques applied in a certain sequence. Rather, ethnography is an open-ended, creative, inventive, and immersive mode of being present—a critical and (self)reflexive engagement with the everyday lives and struggles of other living beings, both human and non-human. Often, ethnography poses an intervention in social dynamics; it begins with researchers asking questions and often evolves into joint problematizations by multiple research partners from different sites. This immersive and critical engagement with others' everyday lives depends on collaboration between researchers and other research partners.

Although collaboration is inherent to ethnographic knowledge production, it has not always been reflected, recognized, and acknowledged. In the past decades, the ethnographic concept of collaboration has been reformed by critical and reflective decolonial, feminist, and inclusive approaches that aim to trouble and shift power relations between 'the ethnographer' and 'the field,' between co-working scholars, and between ethnographers and their companions (Weiss 2016). In fact, the plurality of possibilities for how to collaborate on ethnographic knowledge production has become itself a research subject (Boyer and Marcus 2020).

In this paper, I connect the multispecies and the experimental perspective on ethnographic collaboration, both of which have spawned vibrant scholarship in the past decades. In response to posthumanist worldviews and attunements to life as situated in naturecultures (Haraway 2003; Latour 1991), ethnography has opened itself up toward concepts of multispecies ethnography (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010), or an anthropology beyond the human (Ingold 2013), pushing at times towards understanding cohabitation as collaboration (Pardo Petraza 2023). In parallel, a scholarship invested in ethnographic experimentation has emerged, highlighting the impetus that different modes of ethnographic encounter bring to fieldwork as they open up new roles, contributions, outcomes, and ways of collaboration (Estalella 2024; Martínez 2021).

Acknowledging other than human creatures as ethnographic agents challenges our automatized conceptions of research partners as interlocutors with whom the ethnographer can engage through verbalized language. Laura Ogden, Billy Hall, and Kimiko Tanita (2013: 17) advocate for a multispecies ethnography as 'a mode of wonder' and a 'speculative mode of inquiry.' Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey and Ursula Muenster (2016) emphasize the aim of multispecies studies to 'cultivate arts of attentiveness' for more than human worlds and worldings. By means of 'passionate immersion,' a term taken from Anna Tsing (2011: 10), van Dooren, Kirksey, and Muenster call for 'immersive ways of knowing and being with others' and paying 'attention to what matters to them—attention to how they craft shared lives and worlds' (2016: 6).

Ethnographic research has been pursuing attunement to more than human lifeworlds from several directions. Since its very beginnings,

multispecies ethnography has mobilized the imaginative, transgressive, and provocative potential of art and artistic practices (Kirksey (2014). Artistic approaches to highlighting the interwovenness of humans and others often leverage multimodal formats other than text such as image-based exhibitions and films (Hamilton and Taylor 2017; Jasarević 2025).

Another mode of 'cultivating arts of attentiveness' engages biologists and ethologists as gatekeepers and translators of other than human voices (van Dooren 2014 and 2019). Under the names of 'etho-ethnology' or 'ethno-ethology' (Lestel, Brunois and Gaunet 2006), 'lively ethnography' (van Dooren and Rose 2016), and an 'ethologically informed ethnography' (Hartigan jr. 2021), scholarship has emerged that seeks to combine perspectives and methods of observation and participation from ethnography and ethology.

Furthermore, attentiveness towards nonhuman research partners emerges from particular emphasis on the multisensoriality of ethnographic research. Building on approaches in sensory ethnography (e.g., Pink 2009), the researcher's body is mobilized as an interface for communication and exchange that extends beyond words. The researcher is encouraged to smell, touch, and feel with multispecies research partners, their surroundings, and places associated with them such as their dwellings (Hamilton and Taylor 2017). This approach involves mobilizing both the researcher's and the research partners' bodies as instruments of cognition and attunement to the other, such as by feeling the vibrations of a bee's hum on the skin (Fenske 2017) or noticing the histories and relationships embedded in damp fur or substances clinging to animal bodies (Luggauer 2018).

Astrid Oberborbeck Andersen, Nils Bubandt, and Rachel Cypher (2022: 12) recently recapitulated that multispecies ethnography is always 'an invitation also to get outside of one's disciplinary comfort zone by experimenting with other methods.' Arguably, multispecies ethnography needs to go beyond experimentation with methods to include an experimental approach to the core concepts of ethnography as well. Multispecies ethnographic scholarship has expanded anthropocentric understandings of research partners and research collaborations to include animals and plants in ethnographic encounters, as entangled with humans and as collaborators in their own right. This paper focuses on an ethnographing multispecies collaboration of a human and a dog, where the dog appears in the research field entangled with the ethnographer as a canine partner in multispecies research.

Echoing older debates in anthropology (Wagner 1981), Tomás S. Criado and Adolfo Estalella (2018, 2023) stress invention as a crucial feature of ethnographic fieldwork that seeks to closely participate in different and complex lifeworlds and struggles. According to Criado and Estalella, cultivating inventiveness opens up spaces for experimental approaches to ethnographic encounters, as well as assembling a research field connecting those who are willing to participate. Here, 'experimental' does not just mean doing something new; it is a dynamic that fosters the unexpected and unpredictable. Experimentality emerges as a research design initiated by ethnographers in fieldwork encounters and materializing in unplanned

or unintended fieldwork collaborations shaped by other research partners. Such experimental collaborations materialize in co-created 'fieldwork devices' (Criado and Estalella 2018). As demonstrated in their two lively edited collections (2018, 2023), fieldwork devices can take an indefinite plurality of forms, whether co-authored works, jointly redesigned tools, or digital technologies such as WhatsApp groups. Fieldwork devices can be a frame or initiator for experimental collaboration. At the same time, the fieldwork device emerges from and is shaped, developed, and changed in experimental collaborations.

Building on Estalella and Criado, I consider the presence and ethnographic engagement of Ferdinand as a 'fieldwork device.' While, as outlined above, Ferdinand was physically brought to the research space by the ethnographer, his epistemic engagement was nonetheless inspired by human and canine actors participating in this fieldwork. In what follows, I discuss Ferdinand's and my multispecies experimental collaboration within the dynamics and struggles of the shared everyday lives of humans and street dogs in Podgorica.

On Two Legs

Exploring urban formations through walking is a core research technique within urban ethnography, a continuum that spans sociology, anthropology, and geography. Perhaps anticipating the sensory turn a century ago, Robert Ezra Park appropriated the journalistic phrase 'nosing around' to denote a mode of discovering cities by straying from the beaten path and sticking one's nose in hidden niches that do not initially invite discovery (Lindner 1990: 10). Walking as a method in urban ethnography has been cultivated from many angles, with a focus on the sensory and perceptual dimensions of urban formations and dominant or subversive rhythms, as elaborated, for example, by Johanna Rolshoven (2017) walking through Florence, or Tim Edensor (2018) exploring ruins in England.

At the beginning of the project, particularly during my very first short-term visit to the city, which Ferdinand did not attend, I walked through Podgorica on my own, on two legs. I nosed around roads, pathways, and niches, paying attention to what I could sense, feel, and notice under my feet, in the air, and when touching things. I followed the dominant rhythms of the city, moving at the same speed as others and stopping where they did, but I also challenged this rhythm and attempted to catch the modes of functioning in the spaces left outside the dominant flow. I noticed traces of paws in the ground, half-eaten food leftovers, and bowls that were both filled and empty. I engaged in superficial small talk with humans and caught glimpses of dogs who were most likely not pet dogs but strays, exchanging looks, sounds, touches, and sometimes even cuddles with them.

It proved difficult for me to open conversations with other humans about dog passers-by while the dogs were being briefly greeted or chased

away from café terraces—and insufficient for the in-depth immersion ethnography required. Especially challenging was actually following the dogs, that is, keeping track of them as potential future canine research partners. Those dogs who avoided contact ran away even faster when they noticed they were being followed. Those who were interested in contact attempted to stay around, thereby twisting the dynamics by following me instead.

On Six Legs

While I struggled to find a way into this elusive multispecies research field, I was also present in this research space as a human—dog contact zone myself. The world Ferdinand and I have been creating together is one in which a nameless puppy of unknown origin, apparently found somewhere on the streets of the Slovakian city of Nitra, gets adopted by a student of anthropology living in Graz, Austria. Our relationship is formalized in a 'pet passport' listing 'Ferdinand' in the box of 'animal' and 'Elisabeth Luggauer' in the field of 'owner.' Becoming with each other has meant that we have learned to detect the other's needs for food, water, sleep, and relief, as well as wishes to play, rest, or concentrate on scripts and books. The rhythm we have been developing together is one structured by long morning and evening walks during which we pursue our various interests (nosing, sensing, thoughts, and podcasts). We also enjoy long hikes and long hours spent together in cafés, as well as periods of spatial independence.

Kristen Ghodsee (2005) reflects on the challenges of accommodating the needs of Tosca and Porthos, two Bassets, in her fieldwork with the Slavic Muslim minority. Ghodsee's intention was to simply transfer their American urban life to a Bulgarian village. Initially, it did not occur to her that their joint presence could be of any epistemic relevance. However, one day on a walk, the bassets caught the scent of sheep and set off in pursuit. Ghodsee, surprised by her dogs' capacity for hunting, ran loudly screaming after them. This canine action caused a stir in the village. Aiming to calm her neighbors' anger, Ghodsee explained that the city-dwelling dogs were not accustomed to sheep, which in turn caused irritation among her research partners, who questioned which dog would not be used to sheep. She reflects that this moment not only made her well-known in the village but also made it easier to build research relationships. Furthermore, this mutual surprise and irritation was a crucial moment in understanding the other's everyday world and positionality better. Although Ghodsee points out the epistemic relevance of the dogs' actions, she does not elaborate further on how this moment changed the modes of their multispecies presence in the field.

Similar to Ghodsee's situation, I initially considered Ferdinand's presence primarily an organizational challenge. I attempted to distinguish between fieldwork and being with a dog through two strategies: (1) separating the dog walks from the walks around the city I designated as a research activity and (2) keeping Ferdinand, who was used to a life mostly off-leash,

on a leash. However, the encounter in Hercegovacka and its continuation a couple of days later in Café Berlin recalled at the very beginning of this paper led me to reflect on Ferdinand's potential role in shaping the research field. I found myself wondering what else actively allowing Ferdinand's presence and spatial practices might open up to me.

Thus, our joint walks expanded from operationally fulfilling Ferdinand's canine physical needs to ethnographically exploring the city together. Gradually, I relinquished my role as guide and reduced the control I exerted over Ferdinand. As a human, even when I actively try to embrace multisensoriality, vision and hearing always dominate my ethnographic experience. As a dog, Ferdinand is primarily a nose on four legs. The ethologist Alexandra Horowitz (2010: 12) goes so far as term a dog's take on the world a 'point of nose.' Dogs can not only identify, connect, and remember a broader variety of odors than humans; they also engage with the world by sniffing, catching, and interpreting smells. They investigate beings and things by means of deep sniffs that require them to come very close.

Ferdinand's world can be understood as a lively smellscape. He organizes odors, along with events, experiences, and other visual, aural, tactile, and thermal sensations from his coat, skin, and paws, into meaning. Ferdinand not only senses a different world than I do, but he also renders himself a different *umwelt*. Relinquishing my guidance of our joint spatial presence meant allowing the dog's sensory attunement to the world to become the driving factor in our ethnographic engagement. Thus, the ethnographic motto of 'nosing around' turned into a literal mode of doing ethnographic research.

Following Ferdinand's sensorial attunements and enabling the interactions he sought brought me to spots in the city where my human senses and modes of exploring had not yet taken me—and probably never would have. We ended up under bushes, between buildings, behind and under cars, in gardens, and in particularly narrow niches. Ferdinand's modes of claiming urban space led me to pause over seemingly uninteresting things and events, turn over stones, peer into holes and trash, and ultimately find myself in numerous fascinating and enriching interactions.

By engaging in this multispecies way of sensing the urban environment, I noticed the various types of food placed or scattered in many places hidden from human perception: leftovers, bones, pieces of local street- and fast food like pizza, burek, and other pitas, as well as kibble and wet food for dogs or cats. We found improvised shelters mounted in the corners of the city's built structures, covered with cardboard, wood, and plastic bags, as well as dog and cat houses constructed from wood or old furniture such as cupboards. We discovered places that animals probably created or adapted as regular resting or sleeping spots.

Among the large numbers of cats, birds, tortoises, and butterfly larvae we encountered, my research interest in relations between humans and street dogs focused my attention on dogs and the critters dogs are closely entangled with: ticks, fleas, mites, and worms. At times, Ferdinand seemed

more interesting to strays than I did alone. Additionally, his presence often seemed to startle the dogs less than when I approached on my own.

We obviously did not only encounter other than human beings. Ferdinand's canine attentiveness often led us into situations that made it clear to me that we had crossed a personal or spatial boundary, and I became aware of how often his presence was unwelcome. However, our practice of sensing around as a multispecies entanglement also invited people to talk to me about dogs. Ferdinand's rather small, fox-colored body with its friendly and curious appearance probably made it easy to not be scared of him, and hence approach him and us. Not belonging to any of the currently fancied dog breeds in Podgorica (the Labrador, the Staffordshire Terrier, Pitbull, Cane Corso, Husky, Akita, Maltese, or Poodle) sparked many questions about Ferdinand's breed, and my answer, revealing his origin from the streets, often led to intense conversation about the subject of street dogs.

Canine Para-Ethnographers

Searching for stories that counter the dominant narrative of Belfast as a divided city, Karen Lane (2015) describes how her dog and their joint walks became an ethnographic technique. She reflects that a walk that follows primarily the dog's sensing and interests enhances serendipity. It leads to unexpected places (at least for the human, possibly also for the dog) and interactions that can kick off deeper conversations about difficult subjects. Lane is accompanied by Torridon, a Wheaten terrier—a medium-sized dog with a fluffy, long, and light-colored coat, and a friendly and welcoming attitude towards strangers. Lane reflects that, much as in Ferdinand's case, the dog's shape and temper essentially contributed to their ice-breaking effect. Lane analyzes their work as a collaboration between the dog as a 'research assistant' enacting connections, and an anthropologist who then takes over.

In their essay 'How We Nose,' Timothy Hodgetts and Hester (2018), a hunting dog with a particularly strong sense of smell, describe a methodological approach to walking, nosing, and sensing together. Connected to Hester via the leash between them, Timothy found himself part of a much broader than human sensory apparatus, engaging in a multispecies research field. Hodgetts conceptualizes his and Hester's nosing around as doing research as a 'humandog collective' implicated in social dynamics between mammal actors from human and dog to pine martens.

In all these examples, while human ethnographers did not plan for canine involvement, it nonetheless came about gradually during fieldwork, enacted not only by the human ethnographer but also by the canine companion, as well as other actors in the research fields. Karen learned that contested spaces where a stranger could not simply go could be covered as part of a dog walk, and she discovered Torridon's potential for initiating interactions with strangers. Timothy realized how Hester's nose detected and localized many more traces of pine martens than he could through his

human sensory apparatus. In Ferdinand's and my research, both collaborative techniques—the multispecies extension of sensory engagement and the enactment of dog-initiated interactions—came together.

Timothy and Hester undertook their fieldwork connected via a leash, a device of moderation, control, and protection. The reason for this material connection and thus human control over the situation may lie in regulations for wildlife-protected areas. However, the leash can also be seen as a tool helping to ensure the fundamental ethnographic research ethics of not causing harm to any research partners involved. A dog roaming through forests, leaving her scent behind, and possibly chasing other animals might not only disturb these research partners but also cause actual harm to the habitats of animals other than humans. Furthermore, Hester could get injured or lost.

Not situated in wildlife conservation areas, Karen Lane and I probably benefited from our greater ability to be with dogs unleashed, a constellation that allows a deeper immersion of the canine companion in our research fields. Lane notes that one conversation crucial to the research process was initiated by Torridon approaching a woman while off-leash. She reflects that this particular connection could only have happened due to Torridon being unleashed, randomly approaching a stranger, and Karen being too slow to stop her. Similarly, the interaction between Martina and me in the Café occurred only because Ferdinand approached Martina, and I was too slow to intervene.

Ferdinand is a gentle walker who approaches others cautiously, shows little interest in chasing others, and responds well to vocal and other commands. Thus, during his life, he has mostly moved around urban spaces without a leash. Probably like Karen Lane, I had come to terms with the fact that Ferdinand might occasionally engage in unwanted interactions that needed to be disentangled by his human owner. And yet, on our very first walks through Podgorica, an unfamiliar spatial arrangement for both of us back then, I kept him on a leash. While most strays only showed affection towards me after I had made friendly contact, Ferdinand's canine presence attracted several of them from a distance. He was barked at, chased away, interacted with, and even followed for whole walks and all the way home to our apartment. Keeping him close and having some control over his engagement with the city and its inhabitants certainly helped protect him. Furthermore, dosing his, and hence my, immersion into the field seemed at the beginning a good compromise in terms of the classical issue of maneuvering between proximity and distance in ethnographic fieldwork.

However, growing confidence in the transferability of our well-established contact zone into this new socio-material context, and also my curiosity about how many more interesting things and links might become noticeable if he were unleashed, led to an increasing removal of this device of dosage. Gradually, Ferdinand and the fieldwork became unleashed from human supervision and the dominance of human interpretation of urban space. We slipped back into our usual and embodied modes of being

present, not connected via a leash, but negotiating our spatial appropriations through looks, sounds, gestures, and modes of movement. Now the dog's modes of appropriating space were not just suggestions but often became the leading rhythms, bringing us to unexpected and exciting, at least for me, places and social situations.

Karen Lane qualifies Torridon as a research assistant and describes the dog as initiating interactions, which Lane, who refers to herself as 'the anthropologist,' then transforms into actual research situations. Thus, she sets a clear hierarchy in their multispecies collaboration. At the same time, echoing Horowitz (2010), Lane (2015) reflects upon dogs as anthropologists: over thousands of years of cohabiting with humans, dogs have developed and fine-tuned their sense of smell, along with their other senses, and become experts in interpreting human behavior and social situations. They can sense excitement and conflict in humans, as well as danger in social situations.

In a playful and speculative essay about his relation with Doni, a stray dog he encountered on fieldwork and who eventually joined him in the research, anthropologist George Kunnath (2021) goes one step further and refers to Doni as 'an anthropologist in his own right.' Unlike Torridon, Doni lives in a loose bond of temporary companionship with the visiting anthropologist, sleeping in the yard of the anthropologist's residence; Doni makes his own choices on when to follow the anthropologist, which fieldwork situations to join, and when to cautiously yet actively seek interaction. Doni even decides to join other humans, disappearing and living with a different community for a while—practices that remind one of an anthropologist.

Like Lane and myself, Kunnath also identifies a moment of action by Doni as crucial for his research process: one day, Doni's nose caught an apparently intense smell, and he excitedly sniffed the air. He ran away, following the smell. Pursuing Doni's sensory stimulus, George discovered an opium field—an economic activity that his other research partners had not mentioned to him. This discovery altered the anthropologist's understanding of the research field, as well as his role within it.

Lane and Kunnath reflect upon Torridon and Doni as research assistants, anthropologists, and even anthropologists in their own right. I propose a different concept for dogs as fieldwork companions: how about considering Torridon, Hester, Doni, and Ferdinand 'para-ethnographers'? Para-ethnographer is a term introduced by Douglas Holmes and George Marcus (2005) for research partners who are not (academically) trained as ethnographers, yet engage in ethnographic practices. They collect data through sensory attunements, interactions with others, and interpretations of social dynamics, thereby co-producing ethnographic knowledge. The term was originally coined in the context of research into public institutions and expert cultures, and thus describes highly skilled individuals, often engaged in research or at least academically trained.

Criado and Estalella (2018) broaden this term by considering all those who engage with ethnographers in experimental collaborations as para-ethnographers. Ethnographers initiate research projects with a defined

research interest; para-ethnographers are characterized by being, often even equally, dedicated to the ethnographic collaboration, but motivated by different interests. They challenge the ethnographers' techniques, interfere with procedures, and turn research processes into 'experimental collaborations,' as Estalella and Criado put it (2018).

Canine para-ethnographers do not follow a particular research interest, or if they do, Karen, Tim, George, and I were not able to find out what. However, the dogs certainly follow a broad range of other interests; in fact, their autonomous actions often intervene in carefully planned fieldwork. Across our different research fields, we human companions' decision, or need, to follow the dogs and engage with their sensory attunement to the world altered our perceptions and orientation.

The para-ethnographer is a relational figure, emerging from and simultaneously enhancing collaboration. Hodgetts and Hester (2018) refer to their immersion into a research field as a 'humandog collective.' In contrast to Hodgetts and Hester, who were connected via a leash, Ferdinand and I did not always move through our field sites close to one another, walking as a collective; we often moved separately, following different sensations, much like Doni and George's mode of collaboration. I conceptualize Ferdinand's and my multispecies mode of ethnography as a *human-dog-entanglement*. I use hyphens to interrupt but link the threefold elements of the human, the dog, and the two of them entangled.

Doni, like Ferdinand, enjoyed multispecies field trips and the excitement they came with (Kunnath 2021). And, joining Kunath and myself, Doni and Ferdinand further developed their sensory navigation through and along different field sites and field relations. The humans in the teams deepened their understanding of the dogs' perceptions, and together, we aimed to deepen our communication.

Ethnographing multispecies collaborations between handlers and mine-detecting dogs in Colombia, Diana Pardo Pedraza (2023) refers to the 'repetitive choreographies of detection' wherein handlers send dogs out into a field to sense and communicate the presence of mines underground as 'sensory co-laboring.' This 'sensory co-laboring' emerges from a shared commitment to understanding each other beyond verbalized conversation tools. 'Sensory co-laboring' also means jointly engaging in something that neither can do alone, while reflecting on the structural differences between the collaboration partners: the dog, unprotected, in the minefield, the handler standing outside, wearing a protective vest. With Pardo Pedraza, I conceive of Ferdinand's and my mode of being together in the ethnographic research field as such 'sensory co-laboring': laboring to fine-tune our sensory perceptions and communication in order to navigate the city as a research field; laboring that is epistemically enriching and at the same time safe for both of us.

Unleashing Fieldwork

Arguably, due to its open research design, ethnography is always somewhat experimental. The more ethnographers relinquish control over research processes and the more other actors in the field take over, the more experimental—in the sense of radically unpredictable—a research setting can be. When allowed, the dogs' thwarting of convention and expectation alter fieldwork into an experimental collaboration between human ethnographers and canine para-ethnographers. These research collaborations initiate further collaborations with other actors in the field, which are equally experimental due to their multispecies nature and thus hardly predictable.

In his concise review of the mobilization of the experimental in ethnographic settings—ranging from fieldwork to analysis to knowledge dissemination—Estalella (2024) points out the plurality of understandings of the experimental, reminding readers that the experimental itself is very open, emergent, and difficult to conceptually pin down. In ethnography, Estalella summarizes, 'the experimental' reaches from a colloquial concept of novelty and unpredictability up to carefully curated scenarios where ethnographers encounter future research partners.

I argue that the ethnographic collaboration as a human-dog-entanglement discussed in this paper is characterized by two experimental features: the involvement of a canine sensory apparatus, and, at least partially, unleashing the fieldwork to these other than human attunements to the world. At the time of this research, Ferdinand and I had been crafting a companionship for a while. Ferdinand's attunements and assessments were not unpredictable to me; unpredictable was, however, where his actions might lead.

Ferdinand is guiding me on one of our multispecies-sensory walks down the road where we are staying, near the outskirts of Podgorica. Suddenly, a passerby stumbles over him. I expect a complaint, but the man just gives Ferdinand a long, appreciative look and comments on how beautiful he is, adding that it must be pleasant to walk together. Then he suggests that an even better place for a walk would be the 'forest for dogs' (šuma za pse), as he calls it, pointing toward the large green-brown area at the end of the road that marks, for now, the edge of the city.

A few days later, Ferdinand and I explore this area, which at first glance seems to be just a piece of unbuilt land. Then, from between the pine trees appear a playground, a fitness park, and then an agility obstacle course, welcoming us with the sign 'pasji park' (dog park). A man and a Malinois stroll around between the trees and obstacles. It is the interaction between the dogs that prompts the man and me to exchange a few words. My slow skills in Montenegrin soon reveal me as a foreigner.

The man, Radovan, turns out to be the founder of this park, Montenegro's first park dedicated to walking and spending leisure time with dogs. Having heard about my research interest, he asks if I have already seen

the 'little houses for strays' ('kućice za pse') in the strip of pine trees a bit further on. I haven't, so he offers to show them to me, and the four of us walk over there. On the way, Radovan engages me in a conversation about local practices of living with dogs, reflecting upon the concepts of dogs belonging to a house or an owner ('kućni psi' or 'vlasnički psi') as well as those living as strays on the streets.

What was advertised as houses for dogs turns out to be a camp of improvised huts constructed from kennels, pieces of wood, and furniture, offering shelters of varying sizes. Dogs of different sizes, colors, types, and ages are lying, sitting, walking, and jumping about the camp. Approaching them, Radovan puts his dog on a leash. It would be better to keep a bit of distance, he explains; strays can transmit diseases to our dogs. For the same reason, he urges us to leave soon.

Eager to learn more about this camp, I kept returning there until I finally met a woman who came by to feed the dogs, apply eye drops, and treat their scabies with cream. Initially, she was skeptical about my presence and the questions I posed. But when she heard about Ferdinand, whom I kept in my car parked a few meters away during my first visits to this camp, she smiled and started engaging in conversation with me.

This camp was established by a group of animal welfare activists as a place in the city where dogs could recover from injuries and be treated for diseases, as well as for puppies deemed too young to live unsupervised. Since I was living close to the camp, my participant observation in the human–stray contact zone around these huts soon included not only being present in the camp and engaging with the dogs and human operators via different languages but also becoming involved in feeding, cleaning, and providing further care. It was not long before Ferdinand was let out of the car, which had been the device for dosing his immersion in this particular multispecies research field.

From the beginning, Ferdinand was well accepted by the camp inhabitants and the human caregivers. While I was observing, listening, asking, talking, picturing, touching, wiping, removing ticks, fixing huts, and more, Ferdinand shared food with the dogs, engaged in play with them, and joined some of them on their explorations around the camp. Soon, the usually quiet, gentle, and careful dog became a part of the more outgoing group of inhabitants who would loudly defend the camp against every unfamiliar person driving, walking, or running by too close, at times even chasing them away.

Each of these moments posed the question to me whether his fieldwork collaborations would require human intervention. Ferdinand's immersion into the practices of the camp dogs sparked questions and jokes from my human research partners and pushed our conversations away from the 'classical' dynamic of an ethnographer asking questions and an interlocutor answering and towards dialogue: joint thinking and reflecting on dogs, dog food, and dog behavior; collaborating on troubleshooting, such



Figure 2. The Camp, April 2016, Podgorica. Courtesy of Elisabeth Luggauer.



Figure 3. Ferdinand with some of the camp inhabitants, April 2016, Podgorica. Courtesy of Elisabeth Luggauer.

as moving huts or negotiating between the camp dogs' spatial concept and those of the others, human and nonhuman, who claimed this pine forest.

One morning, Ferdinand and I had just stepped out of our apartment for a quick walk and grocery run when I noticed a particular excitement in him. Usually careful in approaching other dogs, Ferdinand now craned his neck and wagged his tail heavily as he strode over to a group of dogs on the unbuilt land in front of my building. A few steps closer to them, I understood the reason for his excitement: among the dogs was Orka, a

big black female, and part of the group of dogs living in the forest. She must have recognized him, or us, too, and ran over, greeting both of us with jumps and barks. She joined us on our walk around the block, waited next to Ferdinand in front of the supermarket, and eventually followed us back to our apartment.

Stepping out of the building the next morning, we were welcomed not only by Orka, but also by Štroko, Zia, and Bubi, three other dogs from the camp. They joined us on our walk around the block, engaging with the people, strays, and owned dogs from the neighborhood. They paid particular attention to all the trash cans along the way and the food on the ground and barked at some of the cars passing by.

From this morning on, the dogs' explorations, which had previously been limited to the area around the camp, extended further into the city, reaching the area where my apartment was located and becoming an almost daily routine. The motivation for these wanderings, the human camp operators hypothesized, was that the dogs were bored in the camp back in the forest. Also, they suspected, having noticed and localized Ferdinand and me on their strolls encouraged them to pass by this particular corner of town.

Soon, the dogs became known in this neighborhood as the 'gang from the forest' and were perceived as related to Ferdinand and me. While some neighbors were amused by their presence, interacting with them and providing water and food along the road, others were displeased to have them around. They identified Ferdinand and me as the root cause of their presence, complained to me, and urged their removal from this corner of the city.

When the dogs got tired of walking, running, and barking, they would lie down under the linden tree in front of my apartment building. That means the caregivers, arriving at the camp by car from different parts of the city, changed their routes to always pass by the spot under the linden tree, collect all the dogs there, and return them to the camp. Since I was living there, I too was asked to collect and return them to camp whenever I met them around my place.

While Ferdinand was always very happy to encounter the gang in his neighborhood, set on joining them on their tours of local trash cans and car-chasing games, I was increasingly stressed by tensions with the neighbors and worried about the dogs, who were even transferred to the shelter, and only released again due to lots of negotiations by the animal welfare activists.

Ferdinand and I were no longer just arriving at the camp for time-constrained visits; we could no longer control our immersion by just getting back in the car and driving away, particularly not after the little dogs made it through my building's fence to meet us in the yard. Our canine research partners had taken over control of Ferdinand's and my intertwinement with their everyday lives. Again, dogs' modes of sensing and moving had changed the dynamics of this research process and my level of immersion in the field. This time, it was not those of the canine para-ethnographer that did so, but those of our other canine research partners.

The caregivers knew the dogs were not safe anywhere, but they expected fewer troubles for them when they remained in the somewhat remote piece of forest where the camp was. When the camp dogs extended their mobility into the neighborhoods of the city, on the one hand, their human caregivers cheered for the dogs' spatial appropriations, their inscribing themselves into this urban space and claiming their right to it. On the other hand, they expressed concern that the more the dogs are present in the city, the greater their danger would be.

When the funding for this fieldwork came to an end, Ferdinand and I eventually had to drop out of these lively and precarious everyday struggles for space. After our departure back to Austria, the dogs continued to roam around that particular corner of the city for a couple of weeks, but then shifted their attention to other attractions. Caregivers continued operating the camp for about another year, including by transferring the dogs from the various endpoints of their wanderings back to the camp and arguing for their release from the shelter when they were picked up by dog catchers. When some of the dogs were found poisoned, those who survived were boxed in private dog kennels, and some of them were adopted later.

Collaboration, Companionship, Co-Authorship

This paper fleshes out a multispecies experimental collaboration in the course of which a human-dog-entanglement becomes deeply immersed in the everyday struggles of street dogs and their human caregivers. The paper echoes calls within multispecies ethnography for cultivating posthumanist, creative, speculative, and experimental approaches to researching more than human everyday lives and engages in thinking companionship with other human—dog formations.

I propose conceptualizing Ferdinand, the dog accompanying a human ethnographer, as a canine para-ethnographer who intervenes in fieldwork and thereby significantly contributes to ethnographic knowledge production. I consider his presence and actions as a fieldwork device that unleashes our ethnographic immersion into the shared everyday lives of humans and strays. In so doing, I mobilize two conceptual figures central to ethnographic experimental collaboration and demonstrate their benefit for methodological reflections on both modes of doing multispecies ethnography and practices of ethnographic experimentation. What would it mean to generally conceive of multispecies ethnographic encounters as experimental collaborations about to be crafted? Which fieldwork devices can best kickstart different multispecies ethnographic collaborations, and what devices might be crafted out of them? And, last but not least, how do we adequately document multispecies ethnographic collaboration?

With the fading of the image of ethnographic knowledge production as a work done by one individual mind, the single-authored piece as the highest standard of knowledge dissemination is also gradually being

dismantled. Feminist academic practices in particular have played a key role in introducing and advancing modalities of co-authorship—both among scholars and between researchers and research partners—to bring together diverse perspectives in the production of knowledge and to acknowledge the value of epistemic collaboration (Searcy and Castañeda 2020).

Meanwhile, co-authorship—or, more accurately, making collaborations in research and writing public—has become widespread in anthropological knowledge production. Hodgetts and Hester (2018), for example, push towards a multispecies co-authorship. As they reflect, Hester did not intentionally type sentences into a keyboard; however, she made significant contributions to knowledge production. Hodgetts, thus, decided to cite her as a co-author, making the methodological reflection about their research as a ‘humandog collective’ recognizable as a collaborative effort.

Ferdinand also did not type any lines of this paper; he just walks over keyboards, and occasionally sits down on them. However, he has undoubtedly contributed significantly to this research, actively participating in creating the research field from which this paper emerges. He troubled and twisted carefully prepared scenarios, deeply immersing me and us in the everyday struggles of human–stray relations. Collaboration, of course, does not need to be equal to be acknowledged and made visible.

We have been becoming with one another for the past seventeen years, in overlapping everyday, scholarly, and ethnographic dimensions. A companionship that deserves to be acknowledged, I’d argue. However, unlike Hodgetts and Hester, who chose to write from the point of view of a multispecies ‘we,’ the narrating voice in this paper remains a human ‘I.’ While we are certainly both invested in this companionship, to the best of my knowledge, Ferdinand perhaps reflects upon his (ethnographic) encounters, memorizes places and situations, and learns from them, but it is Elisabeth who reflects upon this companionship as a methodological contribution to multispecies ethnography and ethnographic experimentation. But, if I may speculate, it is the two of us who call for further intertwining experimental and multispecies collaborations to enrich and enhance a plurality of modalities beyond text for multispecies authoring and dissemination of knowledge.

1. The common expressions for perspectives and entities beyond an anthropocentric scale are ‘more-than-human’ and ‘other-than-human.’ However, in *Matters of Care*, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa suggests that a formulation without hyphens, as ‘more than human’ or ‘other than human,’ ‘speaks in one breath of nonhumans and other than humans such as things, objects, other animals, living beings, organisms, physical forces, spiritual entities, and humans’ (2017: 1). I follow this lead, hoping to contribute to eroding the dichotomy of humans on the one side and everything else on the other.

Acknowledgements

This paper is a result of an intense collaborative ethnography to which many companions of several species have contributed. I thank Ferdinand for the vibrant, eye- and perspective-opening exchange; Ferdinand and Anna for strolling together through Podgorica; and Martina, Angela, and the camp dogs and their caregivers, particularly Orka and Tamara, for engaging with me in contact zones of temporarily living and ongoingly thinking together.

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Author's bio

Elisabeth Luggauer (she/her) is an anthropologist exploring various dimensions of more than human urban everyday lives and the possibilities of doing ethnography beyond the human. In her PhD, she explored the question of how humans and stray dogs co-create urban spaces and the meanings of places, shaping the city of Podgorica as a multispecies meshwork. Currently, Elisabeth focuses on urban climate politics as a multispecies matter. She researches how 'green'—approached as entanglements of species and organisms—becomes enacted and acts in shaping ideas of future urban cohabitations in the context of accelerating global warming.

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Ferdinand (he/him) is a dog, a canine para-ethnographer, and a companion to Elisabeth Luggauer both in doing anthropology and doing everyday life. His special interest is following the smells that his sensorial apparatus captures and tracing them to their sources. This may take some time, but that is okay.

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Reflexive Essay

Mapping Collaborators Dance. An Artistic Research Inquiry into the Decolonial Potentialities of the Surrealist Archive

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Mapping Collaborators Dance. An Artistic Research Inquiry into the Decolonial Potentialities of the Surrealist Archive

Moses März

Collaborators Dance is a large-scale hand-drawn experimental mapping of collaborative constellations loosely associated with surrealism. The research is inspired by the spirit of solidarity pervading this historical movement, leading to many of its protagonists deliberately crossing some of the big categories of difference that they inherited from colonial modernity, such as race, nationality, gender, and class, as well as professional categories such as 'artist,' 'academic,' and 'activist.' The map, presented in this contribution alongside an essay contextualizing it, seeks to offer an image for this kind of intersectional collaboration. Instead of celebrating the genius of individual artists, it addresses the question of who had to work with whom for their work to take up radically transformative potentials. In addition to providing insight into the main considerations, questions, and intentions driving the artistic research process that informed the drawing of the map, the essay provides an example for the way in which the map can be read from some distance and from up close, as an image and as a text. The latter approach is performed via an engagement with a section of the map that is dedicated to the friendship between two poets, Léon-Gontran Damas and Robert Desnos, who are considered to be key figures in avant-garde and Négritude history respectively. The specific qualities of artistic research and of experimental cartography in engaging with this archive are discussed on that basis.

Keywords: artistic research, avant-garde, black radical tradition, collaboration, mapping, surrealism

Prelude to Writing Together

In the autumn of 2023, the curatorial team of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) in Berlin invited me to contribute a series of maps to a project entitled *Surreal Continuum—Revisiting, Remapping, Reimagining Surrealism* that resulted in a literary event on the 11th and 12th of April 2025. In our initial conversations around the project, Dzekashu MacViban, the HKW Curator for Literature and Oralture Practices, expressed his interest in countering prevailing perceptions of surrealism as a male, French, and European art movement. This view effectively marginalized a long list of visual and verbal artists who did not fit into these categories or who were in close conversation with the surrealist movement without being in direct contact with the circle around André Breton. Breton published *Le manifeste du surréalisme* in

1924 (Breton 1969) and over time became the movement's chief ideologue. My collaboration with the HKW team on the *Surreal Continuum* project resulted in an installation of seven large-scale hand-drawn maps that were shown in the HKW Sylvia Wynter foyer from the 11th to the 28th of April 2025.¹

Since I am not a trained art historian, but a scholar interested in African and Caribbean anticolonial intellectual traditions from a political theoretical perspective, my interest in surrealism may not appear self-evident. What initially attracted me to this project was that it would allow me to weave together several strands of my research and combine it with my practice as an artistic mapmaker and editor of print publications. In terms of existing research trajectories, the enquiry into the surrealist archive allowed me to expand on the series of five experimental mappings that I had produced following Saskia Köbschall and Natasha A. Kelly's invitation to contribute to the exhibition *Expressionism Here and Now! The Horn Collection in Dortmund*, which opened at Museum Ostwall in October 2023 (März 2024a). During this research, I learned about the colonial entanglements of some canonical German expressionist painters who were part of the artist group *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), which was formed in Dresden in 1905. Although the artists of *Die Brücke* set out to distance themselves from the aesthetic and lifestyle norms of the bourgeoisie and the modern industrial society of Imperial Germany by turning their attention towards 'foreign cultures' and 'primitive art,' they remained locked inside a colonial exotic imaginary, where non-Europeans tended to be portrayed in an objectified, romanticized, and sexualized manner (Kelly 2022). Moreover, idealized visions of a 'pure' and 'primordial' natural world were associated with women in a way that reproduced sexist tropes of fixed gender roles, female passivity, and innocence (Köbschall 2019). Thus, collaborative practices in a German expressionist context in the early 20th century meant, in my view, a group of middle-class men working together to foster their own art careers by disrupting Wilhelminian social and aesthetic norms, before they eventually re-integrated into the existing social order. In the case of Emil Nolde this went as far as making advances to key figures in the Nazi regime (Aagesen et al. 2021). Against this background, I was curious to find out how collaborative practices among surrealists differed from this earlier avant-garde movement?

A second strand informing my interest in surrealist histories was an ongoing study of the poetic and political practice of the Martinican poet, philosopher, and novelist Édouard Glissant. In Glissant's oeuvre, painters and writers like Wifredo Lam, Roberto Matta, and Agustín Cárdenas, whom art historians associate with the global reach of surrealism (d'Allessandro and Gale 2022), feature prominently without being discussed as surrealists, but in terms of their engagement with their respective Caribbean and American landscapes, as well as their visions of the whole-world, or *Tout-Monde*, in Glissant's (1997) terms. After having studied Glissant's role in the anticolonial Caribbean and African intellectual tradition, the *Surreal Continuum* project gave me an opportunity to look more closely at the avant-garde networks of visual and verbal artists with whom Glissant had been in conversation in Paris

in the early 1950s. Leaving aside Glissant's own critique of Breton's brand of surrealism as suffering from a tendency of '*européocentrisme*' (Glissant 1981: 429), I wanted to find out through which networks he, for example, had met the Austrian-Mexican painter and theorist Wolfgang Paalen, who had illustrated Glissant's volume of poetry *La terre inquiète* in 1955 and who had played an important role in the Paris Surrealist exhibition in 1938 before moving to Mexico with his partner Alice Rahon (Neufert 2015; Norby 2021).

A third, more personal and practice-oriented strand of my interest in the *Surreal Continuum* project was related to the tradition of politically committed publishing projects in which I have been engaged since 2014, when I joined the editorial team of the *Chimurenga Chronic*, a Panafrican literary magazine based in Cape Town, South Africa. The collaborative practice of working as part of an editorial team—where people with complementary skills meet to work towards a shared goal—informed my decision to launch, together with Philipp Hege in 2018, a publication project of my own, entitled *Mittel und Zweck* (MUZ). In several MUZ projects, we have been searching for an intellectual tradition to which we could link the editorial and artistic practices we are developing, practices that appear to us as being equally informed by the European avant-garde (Emmanuel 2017) and by writers, artists, and musicians considered to be part of the Black radical tradition (Robinson 2021). Where do these intellectual traditions overlap? How could their entanglements and exchanges be shown? And, in a more immediate sense, to what extent are the print publications produced at the intersection of surrealism, anticolonialism, and communism related to our own writing and publishing practices? The *Surreal Continuum* project presented itself to me as an opportunity to formulate a response to these questions. In addition to a shared affinity to printmaking, the surrealist movement also provided important points of connection with my practice of experimental mapmaking.² This practice essentially consists of translating my own reading notes from academic and literary texts into lines, images, symbols, and quotations (März 2024b: 117). The map *Le monde au temps des surréalistes* (Éluard 1929), which is considered to be one of the predecessors of contemporary counter-cartography (kollektiv orangotango 2019: 13), is just one among several instances where surrealists broke with established ways of writing and sharing knowledge to work against imperialist and Eurocentric representations of the world. When I chose the title *Where the Maps Come From* for the publication accompanying the installation, I had this diverse confluence of traditions and artistic practices in mind (März 2025).

Surrealist Spirits of Solidarity

The book *Black, Brown, & Beige—Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, edited by Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley (2009), provides a geographically ordered anthology of a tradition of surrealism that is explicitly non-Eurocentric and anticolonial in orientation, and planetary

in scope. It opens up the concept of surrealism in a way that allowed me to connect my own interests and commitments to the discourse produced around it. Rosemont and Kelley (2009) frame surrealism not as an art style or an ideology but as 'a spontaneous association, based on elective affinities' (p. 1), 'a community of ethical views,' whose 'spirit of solidarity is its essence' (p. 3). Its political positioning on the far left led to a situation when 'surrealism's self-declared enemies also tended to be supporters of colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy, and other forms of chauvinism, racism, and reaction' (Rosemont and Kelley 2009: 14).

Thus, at the onset of my research, I was less interested in engaging with the aesthetic innovations brought about by surrealist art than in the commitment to break with the idea of an autonomous social sphere of 'art' and to turn art into an everyday living practice instead (Emmanuel 2017: 30). It was this socio-politically committed perception of the artist or the poet that, in my view, had turned the term 'surrealist' into a rallying term that allowed for artists and activists to work together on specific issues, such as the exhibition *La vérité sur les colonies* (The Truth about the Colonies), which countered the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931 (Egger 2023). In my readings, the project was variably attributed to surrealist (Egger 2023) or Black diasporic activists in Paris (Edwards 2003: 373). The surrealist sensibility to the invisible, such as dreams or spiritual forces, and its resistance to fascism and colonialism provided a common ground for its adherents to connect to artists and political activists across national, linguistic, and continental boundaries. In that sense, it struck me as reminiscent of the role played by the term 'decolonial' in the early 21st century. Similar to 'decolonial' initiatives, it seems to me less productive to discuss the virtue of 'surrealism' in abstract conceptual terms than to consider the concrete practices, interventions, and collaborations to which it gave rise. The term 'surrealist' seems to have offered a shared language to develop a critique of the European imperial project as well as a strategy to create alternative communities of resistance.³

In response to the predominant male, white, and European focus of art-historical scholarship, a series of publications and exhibitions have been dedicated to balancing this one-sided perspective on surrealism. In addition to *Black, Beige, & Brown*, one could point out the volumes *Surrealist Women* (Rosemont 1998) and *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (D'Alessandro and Gale 2021) in this regard. While these works are committed to the opening up of the category of surrealism, they also inadvertently maintain some of the main categories of difference at play in art-historical research. In my view, this categorical approach contradicts the boundary-crossing, queer, or transversal energy that permeated the movement. Among the many cases that come to mind are Toyen's insistence on using the gender neutral version of her surname (Görge-Lammers et al. 2021), Ted Joans's (1970) claim that the Beat Poet Jack Kerouac was both 'black and white,' and the fact that Aimé and Suzanne Césaire's revue *Tropiques* operated in France and in the French-speaking Caribbean at the same time (Edwards 2003: 194). While Rosemont and Kelley's (2009) work was thus an important entry point in the way that

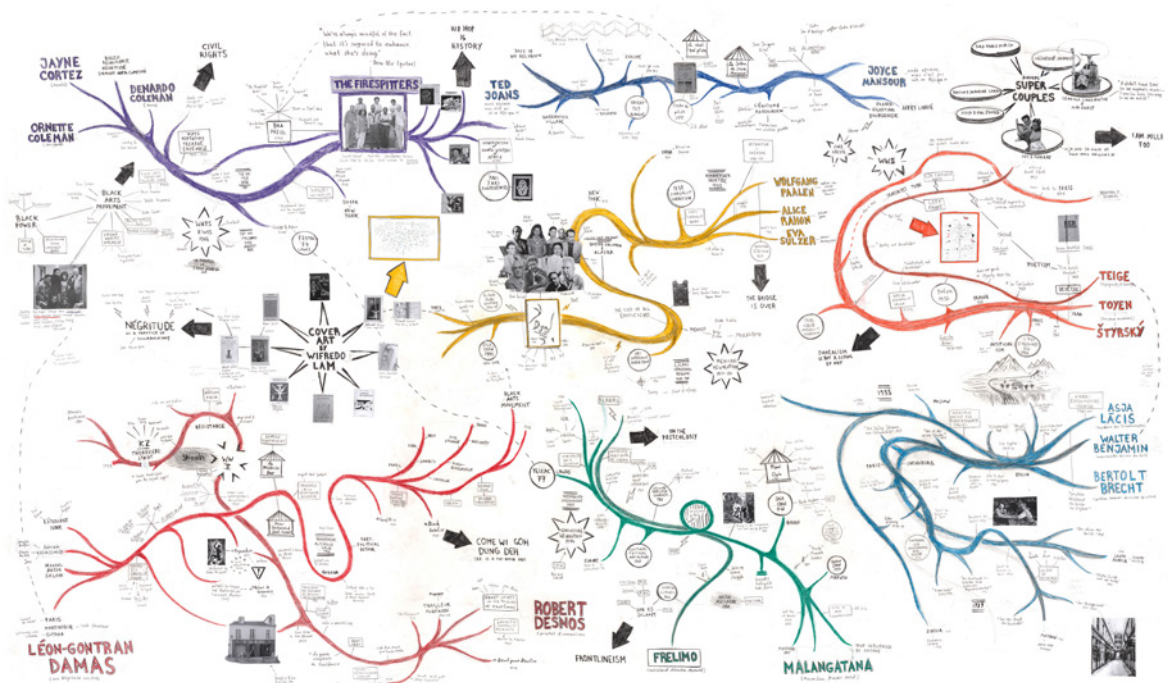
it frames Afrosurrealism as a 'virtual community of thought assembled by and through this medium, a poetics of relation' (Eburne 2022: 153), I was also aware that, in the process of mapping, it would be important to focus on movements cutting across the various sub-groupings associated with surrealism.

A focus on collaborative practices provides just such a transversal lens. Since the research on *Surreal Continuum* coincided with the beginning of my work in the Research Unit Collaborations at the University of Potsdam⁴—an interdisciplinary and trans-academic project aimed at researching emergent as well as persistent forms of the social and the political—I decided that one of the first maps I would produce for the HKW project would investigate intersectional collaborations that were in some way related to surrealism. I did not set out with a clear-cut definition of what I would consider as a collaborative practice worth studying. I perceived the research process to be explorative in the sense that it might intuitively lead it me to a better understanding of the kinds of collaborations I might be interested in further investigating in the context of the Research Unit. A general curiosity driving my engagement with the research material was the question of *who had to work with whom* for their work to take up transformative potentials? Transformative could mean that they may have created new artistic forms or had an impact on the smaller or larger communities to which they were committed. Transformative could also mean that their work still circulates and is discussed in the contemporary moment. Instead of focusing on some of the main figures of the movement, I also chose to focus on constellations that were in some way connected to figures that had appeared in previous maps I made and were less well-known in canonical surrealist scholarship.⁵

An important implication of this overall focus on collaborative constellations is that, at a basic level, it brings about a shift in attention away from celebrating the genius of individual artists and towards appreciating the group dynamics inherent in creative work. Instead of remaining within the paradigm of 'influence'—which, for example, plays an important role in discussions of surrealism's influence on the Négritude movement (Edwards 2009: 33)—a collaborative perspective on the surrealist archive puts a stronger focus on moments of conversation and exchange, a process of reciprocity. A mantra dear to Édouard Glissant (2005) says: 'I can change in exchange with one another, without denaturing or losing myself.'⁶

What the Map Shows from a Bit of Distance

The following is a description of the overall constellation shown by *Collaborators Dance* (see Figure 1).⁷ Each of the colorful rivers or nerve-like structures on the map refer to a particular collaborative constellation. The names of the individuals involved are indicated at the root-like beginnings of each structure. The choice for this kind of organically swinging or meandering shapes to visualize human movement through space and time comes from a



desire to move away from Western conceptions of flat space and linear time. Instead of the predominant idea that human beings can be shown as dots on a map, this map suggests that the trajectories of human beings may also be visualized as rivers flowing into one another, thereby troubling a sense of singular subjectivity that is expressed in statements such as ‘one’s work or his work or my work’ (Moten and El-Hadi 2008, original emphases). In the course of the different tributaries flowing into one another, it becomes hard to tell who is behind what work of art. The notion of showing human beings like rivers is also expressed by Catherine Malabou (2012):

‘In the usual order of things, lives run their course like rivers. The changes and metamorphoses of a life due to vagaries and difficulties, or simply the natural unfolding of circumstance, appear as the marks and wrinkles of a continuous, almost logical, process of fulfillment that leads ultimately to death’ (p. 1).

The changes in the direction of the differently colored shapes are not arbitrary but respond to pieces of biographical information written along the waves. In some cases, the twists and turns refer to a change in location, to different degrees of intensity, and at times they measure the changing degrees of proximity and distance between the actors of a particular collaborative constellation—as in a dance choreography to which the title alludes. The drawing thus mixes different modes of mapmaking, where the importance of geography, or the metaphorical ‘territory,’ is replaced with other indicators that matter.

Figure 1. Moses März, *Collaborators Dance*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

 Click [here](#) to see the image in high resolution

What the Map Shows from Up Close

Since a detailed description of each constellation on *Collaborators Dance* is beyond the scope of this article, I want to zoom in briefly on an exemplary constellation, namely the one between Léon-Gontran Damas and Robert Desnos, drawn in red crayon in the bottom left section of the map. This is meant to provide a better understanding of some of the dynamics shown by the individual shapes and to give some insight into the kind of research materials on which the map draws.

I was aware of the friendship between Damas (1912–1978), who hailed from French Guyana, and the French-Jewish poet Desnos from my earlier research into the tradition of Black Study in the Francophone world as part of a Chimurenga library installation in 2021 (Chimurenga 2021). As part of the exhibition, I produced a diagram on the basis of Damas's biography (Dumas 1999) (see Figure). When I learned about Desnos's reputation as a 'prophet of surrealism' according to Breton (Adès 2017), and read in *Black, Brown, & Beige* that Damas had said 'If I have become the man that I am, I owe it to surrealism' (Rosemont and Kelley 2009: 128), my curiosity to revisit this friendship was sparked. How were the figures of Damas and Desnos, important as they were to two different intellectual movements—Afro-Diasporic and Jewish-French poetic traditions respectively—connected? When exactly did they meet? How did they work together? How did they 'change in exchange' with one another, and what image could show the directions of their respective poetic-political projects?

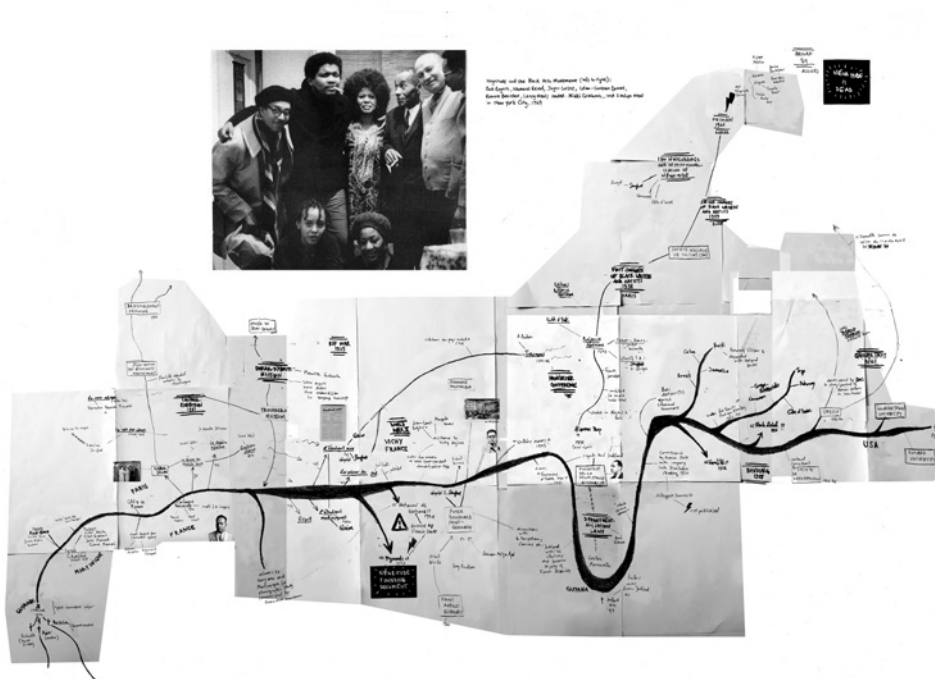


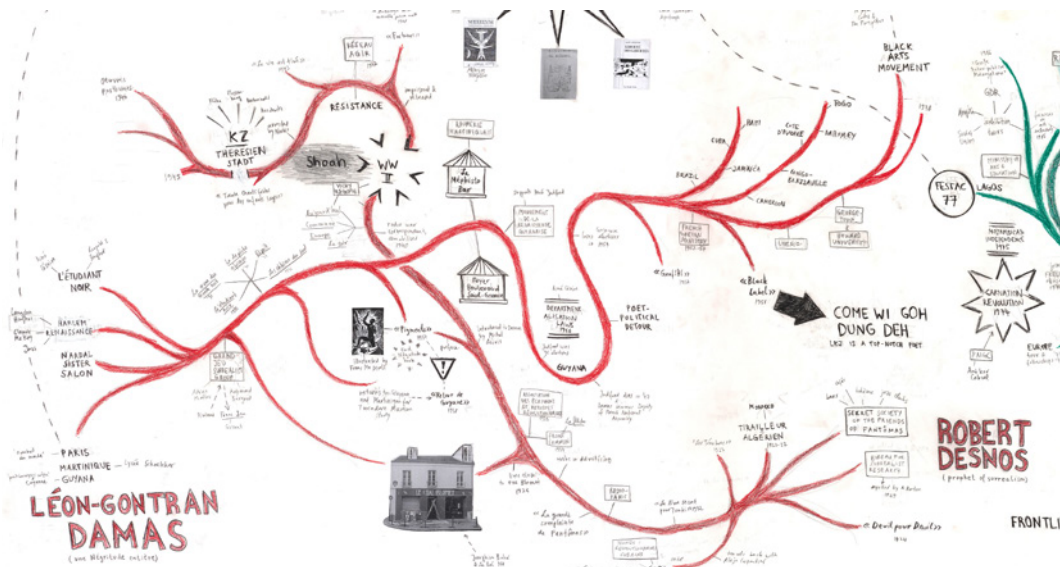
Figure 2. Moses März, *Je suis Damas n**** de personne!*, 2021. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the artist.



Click [here](#) to see the image in high resolution

For a response to this question, the fact that Desnos broke with Breton's brand of surrealism in 1930 and that Damas never officially joined the movement did not matter as much as the fact that they were both part of a 'community of ethical views' and shared sensibilities to which Rosemont and Kelley (2009: 3) referred with the words of the Czech painter Toyen as effectively tying together anticolonial and antifascist struggles in the early 1930s.

My intuition that here was an interesting story to map was confirmed by Kathleen Gyssels's (2016) work *Damas et Desnos: Franchisseurs de lignes*. Based on Gyssels's research, a first intersection, which the map shows at the bottom center of the red shapes, is an image of *Le Bal Blomet*—formerly known as *Le bal nègre* and made famous by Josephine Baker's performances (see Figure 3). The image of this night club highlights Damas's and Desnos's shared affinity to jazz music, which led them to frequent some of the same night clubs. As Gyssels (2016) notes, Desnos moved close to *Le Bal Blomet* in 1926 and led a lifestyle similar to Damas. From the journal of Michel Leiris, who allegedly introduced the two to one another, I learned that 'Desnos's life was in many ways identical to that of Damas's, "boring," scattered between jazz evenings and love affairs, both of them yearning for the end of Western civilization'⁸ (Gyssels 2016: 147).



Moving up from this first point, the one where the two red strands meet, the map shows how Desnos joined the *Front Commun* in 1934 and the *Associations des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires* in 1935. On the strand representing Damas's movement on the left, a set of newspapers for which he worked are outlined. A second connection revolves around Damas's 1937 volume of poetry *Pigments*, for which Desnos wrote a preface. *Pigments* is in fact regarded as the first book publication of the Négritude movement,

Figure 3. Moses März, detail of *Collaborators Dance*, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the artist.

Click [here](#) to see the image in high resolution

although it became overshadowed by the popularity of Césaire's (1939) *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, with a preface by André Breton. The decision for Desnos to write the preface to his friend's book might be seen as little more than a strategy for the book to reach a wider readership, owing to Desnos's larger reputation in the French surrealist circles. In contrast to such a one-sided dynamic between the older and the younger poet, the map does not create such a hierarchy between the two. Relying on the operative word 'friendship,' it assumes that the relationship between the two was not a one-way street or an instrumentalizing cooperation.

As Gyssels (2016: 141) notes, Damas's invisibility in accounts of Desnos's life is a troublesome omission that has contributed to the fact that there are no passages giving insight into Desnos's view of Damas apart from the preface to *Pigments*. Are there no records of Desnos speaking or writing about Damas, or did Desnos's biographers not consider Damas important enough to include him in their works? These questions point out an interesting limitation about mapping intimate relationships that underlie collaborative constellations and that tend to be difficult to trace in historical records. In any case, the event-driven research for *Collaborators Dance* did not allow for enough time to dig deeper. The map had to be content with a gesture working against a tendency to keep the stories of these two friends apart.

What Damas felt about Desnos is more widely known. He has been quoted as saying that 'Desnos influenced my career very very very much'⁹ (Gyssels 2016: 141). Moreover, Gyssels (2016: 150–154) points out that Desnos left a stylistic imprint on Damas, who worked in radio and advertisement like his fellow poet Desnos to practice reaching a wider audience with his work. For the map, the fact that the two were involved in the same struggle linking the fight against colonialism to the battle against antisemitism and fascism is more important than detecting dynamics of influence. As Damas said, 'we were comrades in the struggle, side by side with the Jews, with the Czechoslovakians, and the antinazis...'¹⁰ (Gyssels 2016: 141). This important commonality of their two life-works is what the intersection of their two red rivers indicates. While Damas's river eventually takes a turn to Guyana in the mid 1940s, where he becomes politically engaged for the socialist politician René Jadford ('poet-political detour'), and eventually moves to the US where he links up with the Black Arts movement in the 1970s, Desnos's line shows that he fights in the *résistance* against the Vichy Regime and is eventually arrested by the Nazis, leading to his murder in Theresienstadt. Following Desnos's passing, Damas dedicated the poem *Croyez-m'en* (Believe me) (1972: 85) to his friend.

What the Map Shows from a Bit of Distance

The Damas-Desnos constellation is just one of seven intersecting rivers shown on the map. They are connected to one another by virtue of being placed on the same page, but also via dashed lines drawn in grey pencil (see Figure 1).

Many of these relations only came to me coincidentally, during the artistic research process. This speaks to a general characteristic of artistic research, which Qiu Zhijie (2020) has addressed as follows:

'The beauty of drawing a map is to organize unexpected relationships, where more often than not abrupt connections play a role of integration. Things that I originally thought having no connections suddenly linked together, and the pleasure derived from that experience is the unique accidental sense of art' (p. 28).

Moving up from the red constellation, the diagram touches on the collaborative practice between the visual artist Wifredo Lam and the many verbal artists to whom he contributed cover designs (see the 'Cover Art by Wifredo Lam' cluster on the map) (Khalifa 2025)—as if he was the designated graphic designer of a whole generation of surrealist and Afro-Caribbean poets and writers.

Shown in purple, and beginning on the top left, is the collaboration between the poet-activist Jayne Cortez with the saxophonist Ornette Coleman and the drummer Denardo Coleman. This mother-husband-son combo eventually took the form of a larger band with changing personnel, *The Firespitters*, whose LPs Cortez produced and distributed herself on the Bola Press label (Kingan 2014). The quote at the top of the map, 'We're always mindful of the fact that it's supposed to enhance what she's doing' (Bern Nix), points out the shared objective of this musical collaboration (Kingan 2025: 152).

Shown in yellow in the center of the map are the merging rivers of Wolfgang Paalen, Alice Rahon, and Eva Sulzer, who together combined the skills of painting, poetry, theory, and photography, which provided the basis for Paalen's publication project *Dyn*, based in Mexico City. The journal's fourth and fifth issue, the 'Amerindian issue,' set out to engage seriously with indigenous art outside the paradigm of hierarchically structured modern art discourse. 'This integration would be the negation of all exoticisms' (Winter 2002: 160).

The green shapes at the bottom are showing the career of the Mozambican artist Valente Malangatana, who is among the most well-known African artists associated with surrealism, and his engagement with the anticolonial Mozambican liberation movement *Frelimo* (Frente de Libertação de Moçambique) (Navarro 2003). This entanglement is interested in the very immediate form of politically committed art that is prevalent in Afro-Caribbean anticolonial struggles.

In contrast to the other strands, the blue rivers at the very top represent some of the main stops in the careers of Ted Joans and Joyce Mansour before their collectively authored brochure *Flying Pyrinha* (Joans and Mansour 1978), which was published by Jayne Cortez's Bola Press—a connection shown by the dashed grey line running along the very top of the map.

On the right-hand side, the light-red strand represents the collaboration between the two Czech painters Toyen and Styrsky, and the

critic Karel Teige, whose 'Poetism' preceeded surrealism and who played an influential role in what became known as the 'Surrealist International.'

The light blue strand at the bottom left traces the entanglements of the careers of Asja Lacis, Walter Benjamin, and Bertolt Brecht. While these figures may be associated with surrealism proper to an even lesser extent than the other collaborators, Benjamin's essay *Surrealism: the Last Snapshot of European Intelligentsia* (1979) clearly outlines his interest in the movement. His friendship with Brecht involved a long-standing intellectual exchange that included a series of collaborative projects: a dynamic that was made possible when the theatre director Asja Lacis introduced Benjamin to Brecht (Wizisla 2017: 12–13). Lacis's role in this light blue weaving is meant to show that sometimes, just creating a connection that allows for a creative constellation to emerge suffices to be a good collaborator. In the absence of written records that divulge detailed information about a particular group dynamic, the map suggests a way of recognizing these invisible traces, if only symbolically.

Just as the map does not suggest that any of these collaborations are ideal types that could stand alone to represent the surrealist spirit of solidarity, the *Collaborators Dance* map itself is also part of a larger archipelago of maps in which it plays a particular role. Moments where the map refers to other maps are indicated by the bold arrows. The yellow arrow, for instance, points to a map depicting intertextual references in Glissant's work and entitled 'A Beautiful Set of Differences' (März 2025), and the red arrow is linked to a map entitled 'Art Market Art' (März 2024a), which traces the lines of argument in Karel Teige's essay 'The Marketplace of Art' (2022).

Zooming out of two-dimensional sphere of the paper or the screen and returning to the process behind most of my cartographic work—in this case the invitation by the HKW team with which I began this article—it is important to indicate the inherently collaborative characteristics of this kind of mapmaking as a tool to visualize the overlaps and connections between different 'geographies of knowledge' (Zhijie 2020). In the sense that my maps mostly emerge out of shared interests and an exchange of research material, they are not primarily an expression of my personal preoccupations, but rather a combination or collage of the collective concerns, stories, and visions shaping the 'community of ethical views' of which I am part. The practice of writing about this kind of work for an academic journal, as I do here, is a deliberate decision to mediate between the artistic modes of research developed by this community, on the one hand, and established forms of disciplinary knowledge production, on the other one, in the hope of fostering more fruitful collaborations between them.

Closing Considerations

I would like to close with some general comments about experimental mapmaking and the kind of artistic research method I have been describing, which is driven by a deliberate subjective, spontaneous, intuitive approach,

rather than a systematic, structured scientific inquiry that aims at being comprehensive (März 2025c).

A basic assumption driving artistic research is that there is something intrinsic to the artistic process—in my case the practice of drawing with pencil and crayons on large sheets of paper—that produces knowledge of a different kind than traditional disciplinary knowledge. This knowledge is not produced before the drawing process, or after it, but in the very process of drawing. Qiu Zhijie (2020), who has developed a mode of mapmaking close to the one discussed here, suggests that this knowledge is essentially a 'knowledge about relationship,' whereas 'knowledge that is divided into disciplines but not related is called science: the science of dividing disciplines' (p. 30). While I would contend that disciplinary knowledge also creates knowledge about relationships, I agree that the quality of these kinds of mappings largely depends on the strength of relations they render visible across the boundaries of established fields of disciplinary enquiry as well as their capacity to invite wider audiences to experience these relations. Finding the appropriate form to share a particular line of research is a crucial aspect of this work. It is thus closely related to the art of storytelling.

Not confining my interest in surrealism to academic discourses in art history, literary studies, or avant-garde studies, but reading across these fields and combining them with my own research interests allowed me to show a set of interpersonal relations running across the divisions of Surrealists, Afro-Surrealists, Women Surrealists, and Non-European Surrealists. On *Collaborators Dance*, a poet meets another poet, a singer meets a saxophonist, a photographer meets a dancer, a critic meets a playwright, and a painter joins a liberation movement. This largely confirms my intuition that this mode of cartography is well placed to trace relations across physical and imagined structures of segregation that are maintained by modern nation-state historiographies and the boundaries of academic disciplines. Since the genre of artistic research does not demand from the artist to be comprehensive, I instead chose to cover a lot of ground in a relatively short period of time by reading only a few sources on each of the figures that I wanted to bring into relation with one another. The economy of this kind of project-based artistic research, with a pre-set exhibition date in mind, does not allow for more in-depth research.

This might provoke a sense of dissatisfaction among readers who might bemoan the superficiality, factual inaccuracy, or reductiveness with which the life-works of the individuals shown on this map are represented. Of course, the map does not claim to do justice to the complexities and achievements of a person's life by drawing a curvy colored line of a few centimeters. Instead of claiming in-depth knowledge or expertise, producing this image, establishing this larger constellation was the main objective. In this sense 'the truth,' which the map offers, lies not as much in factual accuracy as in the bigger picture. *The map is the message*. Rather than formulating an authoritative statement on a certain subject, I perceive my maps to be more akin to research proposals, the opening up of a perspective on a field of

enquiry, visual essays-in-process instead of completed studies. By retracing lines representing different collective moves and movements made in the orbit of a surrealist universe, the map suggests that there might be a field of enquiry here, an archive that could be studied by those of us searching for decolonial practices and traditions of collaboration worth emulating across the intersections of art, activism, and scholarship.

1. The installation included a print publication (März 2025a) and an audio guide that can be accessed via the HKW website (März 2025b).
2. I am using the term 'mapping' to encompass a wide range of visualizations (Schaubilder). These include diagrams, charts and 'narrative structures' in the spirit of Mark Lombardi (Wegener 2012).
3. I am particularly thinking here of the Dekoloniale—Erinnerungskultur in der Stadt initiative in Berlin, with whom I have been collaborating during several events. URL: <https://www.dekoloniale.de/de> (22/06/2025).
4. Research-Unit Collaborations. URL: <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/en/research-unit-collaborations/> (19/09/2025).
5. Although I did not want to foreground the connection between André Breton and Aimé Césaire, or the dynamic between famous romantic couples such as Leonora Carrington and Max Ernst, they still feature on the map around the clusters 'Négritude as a Practice of Collaboration' (middle left) and 'Surreal Super Couples' (top right).
6. 'Je peux changer, en échangeant avec l'autre, sans me perdre ni me dénaturer' (my translation).
7. I am referring here to a version of Collaborators Dance that was included in the Spring/Summer 2025 print program (Haus der Kulturen der Welt 2025: 8–9). The version differs from the one exhibited at HKW and the one included in the self-published print magazine (März 2025a). The maps are always slightly edited depending on the audience they are addressing.
8. 'sa vie est à maints égards identique à celle de Damas, "plate," éparpillée entre les soirées de jazz et les affaires amoureuses, tous deux voulant l'effondrement de la civilisation occidentale' (my translation).
9. 'Desnos a beaucoup beaucoup beaucoup influencé ma carrière' (my translation).
10. 'nous avons été des combattants de lutte, aux cotés des Juifs, des Tchécoslovaques, des antinazis...' (my translation).

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Reflexive Essay

Collaborative Nuance: Citation, Difference, and the Friendship of Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy

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Collaborative Nuance: Citation, Difference, and the Friendship of Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy

Katie Grant & Maxwell Hyett

The works of Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy are each marked by the inclusion of friends and lovers, expressing a shared resistance to the norms of impersonal, impartial critique and scholarship. Following Barthes and Deguy's affectionate position, this article troubles the limits of scholarly citational practices by identifying latent collaboration in the sources and language shared among friends. The incomplete record of Barthes and Deguy's friendship is complemented by a brief sketch of their pursuits of nuanced, indecisive writing, especially evident in the handling of pre-texts like lecture notes and conference talks. The ongoing exchange between this article's co-authors—preceding and including this collaboration, and, similar to that between the two French thinkers, written and spoken in various forms and proximities—explains and performs the generative nature of Barthes and Deguy's joint commitment to difference, as shared expertise and political alignment are bracketed in favor of social postures and the possibility of playful connection. A reading of Barthes's late attraction to the haiku and Deguy's commentary on this development puts forth poetic or fictive language that is distinct from the arguments and language systems of philosophy, a significant matter as they each pursue nuance in mourning. Taking these systems to be presently and perhaps necessarily incomplete, the co-authors gesture to a collaborative practice that is drifting and active, privileging the social over 'loyalty to the idea' as the basis of creativity and community.

Keywords: citation, collaboration, friendship, Michel Deguy, Roland Barthes, writing

This text began as a traditional essay proposed as an offshoot of Katie Grant's doctoral research on mourning and weather, in response to Anisha Anantpurkar and Pasha Trefyakova's Call for Papers on 'Method as Play / Play as Method' (collaboration 1). In the spirit of this journal's issue on collaboration, it changed under the guidance of editorial advice from Pasha (collaboration 2) and led to me, Maxwell Hyett, joining the process (collaboration 3), as an echo of the relationship between Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy. Below is an experiment that aims to perform as much as explain the citational practice of making connections and actively thinking before and behind the polish of formal academics. In other words, this is a record of sharing information—not data, but logics and ways of thinking—that leaves fissures, which, for me, is a sign of something living and waiting to be taken up again.

We speak to the reader as well as to one another. In other words, 'It must all be considered as if spoken by a two characters in a novel play' (Barthes 1994: 1; Grant 2025²).

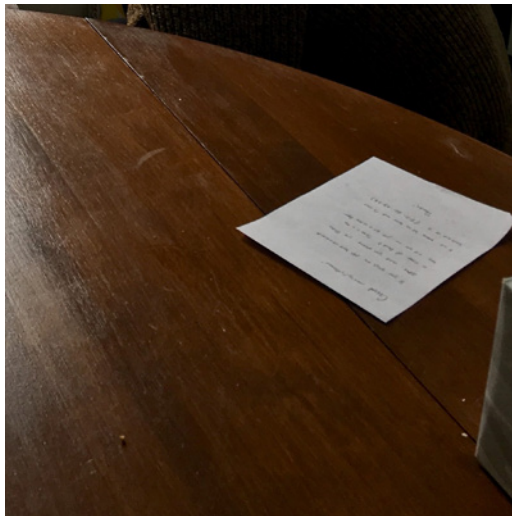


Figure 1. Katie Grant, a note for cohabitants at 416 Oxford Street, 2019. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

This collaboration is a delayed gesture of reciprocity, as Maxwell once asked me to contribute to a since-abandoned project inspired by a course on Byung-Chul Han. I lacked expertise but had sat in on the course because Maxwell and I were friends and, briefly, roommates. I doubt that this brief study of Han influenced me much, but I am realizing now that I have repeated Maxwell's invocation 'fissures' elsewhere and hear his voice in it. To cite him for the term ready to hand would be overdone according to scholarly standards. However, like Deguy's (1971) framing of 'the thought of poetry as the very work of poetry' (p. 407), I am interested in writing that self-consciously reveals the thought and work of collaborations such as these—not the deliberate language-sharing of intellectual and political allies, but the polyphonic expression of sources and language shared between friends.³

And I arrive already interested in the practices, efficacy, and myths of creativity. The modern 'genius,' for example, always begrudgingly stands on the shoulders of giants, while their legacy is more often than not carried forward by friends. The movement of thought, it is easy to forget, is often allegorical; it moves by association.

The friendship of Roland Barthes and Michel Deguy falls somewhere in the middle of this spectrum between warmth and utility. Although they belonged to the same post-war French intellectual culture marked by its keen skeptical writing on writing itself, among 'the star-names of the "time of theory,"' Deguy and Barthes are each recalled more often for their relationships with others from this milieu, including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and

Jean-Luc Nancy (French and Lack 1998: 245). The two nonetheless shared a working relationship on the editorial board of the journal *Critique* for sixteen years—positions that they, along with Foucault, inherited from Georges Bataille—and travelled to conferences with mutual friends like Derrida and Tzvetan Todorov, thus spending many hours together in the 1960s and 1970s prior to Barthes's death in 1980 (Marty 2018: 156–157; Patron 2004: 18, 23; Samoyault 2017: 272). When remembering their friendship, Deguy admits that he 'was not among the *closest*' (2001a: 485, original emphasis), and he is a marginal presence in reviews of Barthes's life and work, if he is mentioned at all. The estimation of Deguy's importance in connection with his more famous colleague is perhaps epitomized by his characterization as 'one of Barthes's admirers and disciples' (Thody 1977: 65), rather than a translator and well-published poet in his own right, whose essays Barthes looked forward to reading (Barthes 2018: 161). This qualified intimacy motivated my collaboration with Maxwell, too: mutual friends were accrued before our first meeting, when we were enthusiastically introduced by a well-meaning colleague at a bar and made to hold hands all evening. We have discussed politics sparingly; our research is complementary at most. But we have worried over friends together, and further negotiated our shared social world. A minor friendship organized by others has outlasted its original context but still rests on social qualities—postures, refusals, senses of humor and play—more than unified knowledge. By examining the analogous nuance between Barthes and Deguy, we can draw out that which takes place in the margins of scholarly texts, which resists the conventions of citation, and which constitutes a type of informal, unacknowledged collaboration.

In the literal sense of a marginal reading, I find evidence of the friendship discussed here in a footnote of an essay on Barthes's teaching in the United States. There, I learn that on at least one occasion, Deguy knew Barthes better than he knew himself, predicting that the latter would withdraw from a teaching appointment well before the resignation letter had been posted (Culler 2020: 56, footnote 57). Jonathan Culler (2020) gathered this from a similarly obscure source: an unpublished dossier on Barthes filed away in the State University of New York at Buffalo's library archives. This material element encourages an extension of my marginal reading, pointing to those circumstances underpinning a work that lie further beyond its main text, typically referenced at most in the bracketed spaces of acknowledgments pages and footnotes. For instance, despite his humble portrayal of their closeness, Deguy (2001a) shares a knowledge of Barthes's manner that betrays a familiarity, if largely spoken, relationship: his voice with its 'resonance and diction,' his 'gentleness,' his ways of laughing and smoking (pp. 485–486). Together with Deguy's (2001) reference to the images printed in Barthes's *Œuvres complètes* as 'his photo album and mine,' I find enough to take Deguy at his word when he says of Barthes that 'there was some "us" between us,' even if it was sparsely written (pp. 485–486). I imagine how this relationship would have been otherwise generative, with different focuses and preferences helping with the editorial division of labor at *Critique*, and we can guess at how shared time and friends

might have bred generosity between them as they exchanged opinions and ideas over dinner at 'good restaurant[s]' (Deguy 2001: 486).

The 'us' of Barthes and Deguy also includes a shared commitment to difference. I tell Maxwell in an email how 'my primary interest in Deguy and Barthes as a pairing is for their respective rejections of religion in mourning, and for Barthes's arrival at Deguy's specialty, poetry, when thinking about what kind of writing suits the mourning of his mother and corresponding *Vita Nova* project—a "new life" with a writing to match' (Grant 2025⁴). My research shows me how nuance becomes an object of postmortem desire as we attempt to remember the late beloved in their abundant singularity and protest against the prescriptive types of mourning, especially religious or clinical, that flatten the contours of their memory. These impulses are present in Deguy and Barthes—especially in the former's *To That Which Ends Not*, *Desolatio*, and *A Man of Little Faith*, and the latter's *Mourning Diary* and *The Preparation of the Novel* lectures—and add personal urgency to arguments that might otherwise be framed as matters of aesthetics, such as Barthes's evasions of genre and disciplinary boundaries, or Deguy's insistence on translation's endlessness. It is fitting that I am most attracted to Barthes's commentary on such nuance in the lecture courses that have been controversially committed to text, as this quality prevents the obfuscation of writing's fraught production and expresses instead the conditional manner in which thought is transferred onto the page. The final two courses are of particular interest, as *The Neutral* (1977–1978) recounts many themes and figures from Barthes's career—like the zero degree, Jules Michelet, and the lover's discourse—before *The Preparation of the Novel* (1978–1980) attempts to distill his thought project(s) into an active practice: the *vita nova* and an imagined but unfinished written work. At the start of the *Preparation* lectures, Barthes (2011) writes against the publication of his course from the previous year, arguing that difference is preserved in 'what happens only once and vanishes' (p. 7). However, in *The Neutral*, Barthes (2005) also imagines a writing that would not be decisive or 'arrogant,' but would rather share in the ephemerality of speech as it is produced by 'a breakneck [with] a stubbornness in practice, not in conviction,' where the physical intervention of writing disrupts any 'loyalty to the idea' (pp. 162–163). As the various preparatory notes, archived audio, and transcriptions of the lectures attest, Barthes's work is imbued irrepressibly with difference.

For Deguy, too, difference proliferates in writing, as 'the dictionary is at one and the same time the thesaurus, the treasury, and the enemy' (Deguy and Maulpoix 2003: 6). He provided an 'objective reminder of the differences' between writing, reading, criticism, and teaching at the conference that sprung from Barthes's conflict with Raymond Picard—with one of the mutual friends listed above, Todorov, who co-directed the event—where their circle aimed to organize their thinking on 'the teaching of literature' (Deguy 1971: 402).⁵ It is difficult to say if this 1971 speech, 'Enseignement—Philosophie—Poésie,' has been faithfully reproduced in the book of conference proceedings, considering that Deguy's presentation on Barthes

from November 2000, 'R.B. par M.D.' has since been published in three variations (Deguy 2001a, 2001b, 2007). Some editing seems to be apparent especially in the second half of the 1971 talk, where it is thick with citations. It alternates between references integrated into the prose, like 'à la page 58' and 'la note de la page 43' (Deguy 1971: 411–412), and the bracketed page numbers of written scholarship, like '(p.119)' (p. 413). This gives the impression that Deguy fluctuated between a systematic close reading of Picard, signaled by his thorough citations, and the omission of un-poetic data which would hamper his spoken delivery but could be added later. This should not be taken as a matter of uncertainty or contradiction, though. The accumulation of difference in the reproductions of both 'Enseignement—Philosophie—Poésie' and 'R.B. par M.D.' is consistent with Deguy's ethical project and is foreshadowed in the earlier talk, where he says: 'A sentence is an alloy, more or less refractory; it must not break at its first handling' (Deguy 1971: 408).⁶ The capacity for difference in language manifests materially, as Deguy and Barthes oscillate between the speech of interviews, lectures, and conference presentations, and the writing of published texts.



Figure 2. Katie Grant, a reflection from the kitchen window, 2019. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

It thus seems inevitable that a phrase would appear differently after being 'handled' by these two thinkers. They exert their writerly influence on a passage from a speech by Leon Trotsky (1979): 'Comrades, we love the sun that gives us light, but if the rich and the aggressors were to try to monopolise it we should say: "Let the sun be extinguished, let darkness reign"' (p. 332). In an interview peppered with uncertainty, first televised and later transcribed, Barthes (2015) recalls the speech and says,

'Someone ([Georges] Gurvitch, I think) once quoted this quip by Lenin or Trotsky (I don't remember which <...>) "And if the sun is bourgeois, we'll stop the sun." <...> What Marxist today would dare to proclaim: "And if death is bourgeois, we'll stop death"?' (p. 43).

Deguy is attracted to this notion, too, and cites it in his talk on 'R.B.' and in *A Man of Little Faith*. In its first instance, the citation is rigorous: Deguy (2001a) quotes at length, gives a page number for Barthes's *Œuvres complètes*, and omits the uncertain reference to 'Lenin or Trotsky' (p. 492). In the latter, more recent publication, however, the speakers of Trotsky and Barthes are melded together. Deguy (2014) writes: 'Trotsky, cited by Roland Barthes, said: "Will there not be one day a socialist revolution against the horror of death? <...> And if death is bourgeois, we will *stop death*"' (p. 53, original emphasis). In Deguy's retelling, either Barthes's hypothetical Marxist of today is given the name Trotsky, or else the person named Trotsky is given the words of Barthes's anti-death Marxist. It is possible that in the meantime, Deguy had located the Gurvitch or the Trotsky, finding the correct attribution but citing them badly. It could also be that he assumed the correct speaker from a knowledge of Barthes's Trotskyite roommate at the tuberculosis sanatorium (Barthes 2015: 9). In any case, Deguy's altered citation can be contextualized by a reading of the friendship between Barthes and Deguy, with their written alloys bending and twisting with the introduction of difference.

Can you tell me more about how Barthes came to poetry through Deguy? And what constitutes a new life and new writing in this context?

Barthes wrote very little about poetry, relative to his interest in literature more generally, and this seems to be a sore point with Deguy as he reflects on their friendship after Barthes's death. Deguy (2001a) says at a colloquium dedicated to Barthes: 'In today's conference I am identified as a poet. Let's begin with this. Barthes doesn't like poetry' (p. 488). In broad strokes, Barthes deals more with the novel and criticism, and Deguy with poetry and translation, but theater was a shared interest, and they are both extremely sensitive to the role of the writer.

Barthes had a long-held interest in Zen Buddhism (Briggs 2011: 409–410), and he comes to poetry this way, becoming more intensely attracted to haiku late in life. This is somewhat similar to his de-faithed Christian aesthetics, though,⁷ as he does not take up Buddhism as a spiritual practice or even one of mindfulness, and what he likes most about haiku is its graphic quality, its 'aeration' from the white gaps or 'plugs of air' on the page (Barthes 2011: 25–27). It might seem incompatible with Deguy the poet to emphasize so much the formal quality of the poem rather than its text—and contradictory also to Barthes's obsession with language—but what Deguy repeats often about the poem, and of his style as a poet, which blends verse, prose, and theoretical writing, is that they do not aspire to the authority of philosophy. In other words, 'the poem is less credulous than philosophy' (Deguy 2014: 41), and Deguy calls even his most rigorous theoretical writing 'pensive prose' to suggest an element of fiction, artfulness, or being creative rather than decisive (Deguy and Maulpoix 2003: 7). Deguy is thus satisfied with Barthes's apprehension of haiku's ephemeral nature and how its formal elements indicate that the poetic

language is not binding or prescriptive—it is rather ‘a disappearing language that favors a certainty of reality’ whose reader uses its aeration to drift away, unbound by logical constraints (Deguy 2008: 61).⁸

Barthes (2011) seeks a new life following his mother’s death, the ‘decisive fold’ or irreparable cleavage which demands a writing that would favor this drifting and avoid the domination of aggressive language systems (p. 5). Haiku is one of his models for this. Another strategy he suggests to this end is quoting from memory rather than going back to a source (Barthes 2011: 300), since he is interested in how fragments can be carried forth with the trace of ephemeral truth that is lost to commentary and critique. Similarly, Barthes (2005) discusses mourning and weariness, arguing that new paths can be found after moments of rest, paths that are freer and more productive than the language systems trapping one with their inner logics, like those of Marxism, religion, and psychoanalysis (pp. 20–21).

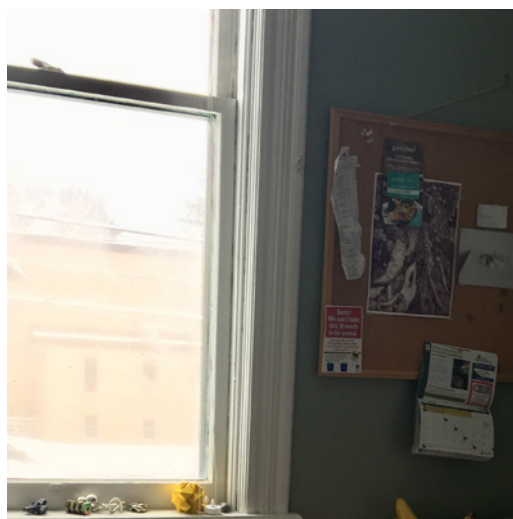


Figure 3. Katie Grant, puzzles on the windowsill and a bulletin board of fragments, 2019. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

*What I see here is an approach to writing as an act of thinking rather than a record of thought, though the act obviously generates the record too. The haiku is an interesting point because it seems to act as a springboard for contemplation. It is neither the conclusion nor the bridge to the conclusion, but a ‘hey, that’s weird’—which is my favorite kind of comment, something inspirational and aspirational. As you have noted, there are numerous Western theoretical traditions that seem intent on stilling these thoughtful waters in order to ‘know’ them. This reminds me of McKenzie Wark’s (2020) introduction to *Sensoria*, which is basically a series of book reviews or summaries attempting to ‘capture’ the state of contemporary theory. It has really stuck with me because she argues that the general shape of contemporary thought seems to be incomplete, which is to say that the project of Enlightenment systemization has failed and we now seem to be trying to grapple with the consequences of perhaps never being able to ‘truly’ ‘know’ but just project, gesture, and assume*

portions of the knowledge we need to operate in the world, in our world. As you suggest later in this document (Grant 2025⁹), it seems like this may require a different relation, maybe a more personal relation to metaphysics.

Mourning, including compulsions to mourn more globally (as you read in Deguy), is a compelling call to feeling, and I wonder about the way in which emotion rolls around the planet like a weather front. There is a kind of harmony there with Immanuel Kant's notion of beauty as a subjective universal—something that must be arrived at individually and subjectively but understood as a sharable experience. We often feel things together; sometimes we even empathize. Though mourning, in particular, casts us closer to sublimity, as individual experience overwhelms us at more-than-human scales. Perhaps this can be useful for articulating the creative potential of putting faith in friends and their difference; perhaps the space between individuals, new ideas, and different perspectives is sublime, such that it requires an undulation between understanding and discomfort with the fundamentally other. Something ought to come out of that fluctuation.

I think I am now seeing your project more clearly with the idea that 'writerly mourning' (Grant 2025¹⁰) is or can be the underwriting and overwriting of religion. Through writing we can potentially create new narratives that escape or complicate religious structures, so that mourning can be a 'practice' in the sense of becoming proficient. To put this a different way, the actual experience of confronting death and loss is messy, forking, and may require some process of becoming equal to religious habit, in which a purportedly more bespoke practice can emerge amongst loved ones.

For now, you mentioned that part of this citation passed between Barthes and Deguy had to do with play, right? Where do you see play fitting into these quotes?

In remarks leading up to his defense of Barthes contra Picard, the literary historian who wrote against Barthes's *On Racine* and related essays critiquing 'academic criticism' (Samoyault 2017: 285), Deguy (1971) says that it is not scholarly reading that is the 'most decisive reading,' but 'reading-thinking, which we can call hermeneutics or writing <...> which makes works in a singular genealogy' (p. 406).¹¹ For Barthes (1987), this genealogy includes his friends, as he insists on his right to affectionate, *partial* criticism and the inextricability of his reading and friendship (pp. 91–92). In the vague memory of Trotsky, Barthes's (2005) affectionate reading means that 'loyalty to the idea' is superseded by loyalty to Trotsky the person, or perhaps to Barthes's old roommate who discussed him (p. 163). It seems that in his ephemeral writing where movement outweighs rigor, the repeated choice to carry forward the source's author instead of its content means that Barthes prioritizes a 'playmate' or collaborator.

I also see the quality of the Trotsky citation in all of its haziness as analogous to the verse form that allows Deguy to be artful, fictive, or playful rather than to engage in the arguments and positions of philosophy. More generally, the shifting of the citation as it passes from Barthes to Deguy

suggests to me that this haziness, drifting, and fiction may be better fostered or energized in the informal or less-formal spaces that Barthes and Deguy shared together. A good portion of the background for my thinking here comes from lecture courses and conference presentations whose reproduction in text has been tenuous, but I think it unwise to discount such things.

Why do you think it is unwise to discount these reproductions? Can you give an example?

I think we should be attentive to these less-formal texts and pre-texts because of their propensity to show the social qualities of intellectual-creative life. Barthes's lecture courses have a distinct nuance, relative to his monographs, from the presence of his students or audience, who sometimes intervene. Deguy's presentations cited here show his thinking, but also his dedication to a friend. The citation that transforms as it moves from Barthes to Deguy shows how something of thought gets left behind as it is carried forward, but even these fractures reveal social nuances, like the trust that stands in for an exhaustive record of knowledge. Without discounting the value of rigor, which is arguably a defiant practice in its usage of focus and time, I think we ought to be transparent about the conditions in which these distortions or nuances arise in our work. Both Barthes, a 'breakneck' writer in mourning, and Deguy, an endless translator who honors difference, could be denounced for shoddy scholarship where they inaccurately or incompletely cite other writers. Their motivations for doing so, however, make their nuanced citations a matter of ethics and creativity rather than carelessness, with the desire for collaboration overriding fidelity to thought and reflecting a commitment to sociality and plurality. Barthes especially was criticized for refusing to organize politically based on identity, for instance denying any 'duty to say, to express, to write' his homosexuality as part of any 'generalization' or 'science,' while friends and acquaintances converged in more militant activism (Barthes 1979 cit. in Samoyault 2017: 480, original emphasis). Another kind of organization is brought to light, though, when Barthes and Deguy tell us about their friends.

As thought is allowed to drift and aerate, as you say, 'it serves as the foundation for community, common sense, and a shared reality. <...> Trust in your friends' citations so that you can play in the space between' (Hyett 2025¹²). I read Wark's (2020) introduction from your mention of her and find how she stresses the word 'common' but follows it repeatedly with 'different' or 'difference' (pp. 2–8). In Deguy (1993), the '*comme-un*' ('like-and-as-one') captures the moment when identity is troubled and likeness generates difference: 'nothing shows itself by itself except with, by, like, other things' (p. 82).¹³ I want these 'other things' to appear clearly, but I also want the labor of the 'showing' to appear in a nuanced portrayal of collaboration. We have shared sources that remind us of one another with little context, talked with the distraction of mechanical puzzles, and while catching up over tea and dumplings at a struggling restaurant with menus layered with washi tape instead of white-out, you asked my opinion of *S/Z*. I had not read it

recently, and I think I suggested some unforgotten Barthes that I thought you might like instead. This, too, could be called shoddy scholarship, as could the writing here derived from my fallible memory. I could have interrupted our conversation to give a more thoughtful answer, but the tea would have gotten colder, and it would have ended the play. Instead, the practice of asking, replying, and sharing repeats itself here as a collaboration inspired and generated by difference.

I wanted your answer, anyway. I imagine it will be different next time.

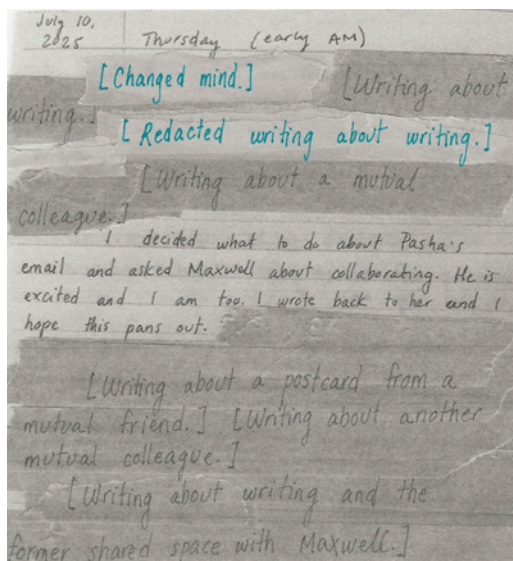


Figure 4. Katie Grant, mimicry of the restaurant menu with a diary page and tape, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

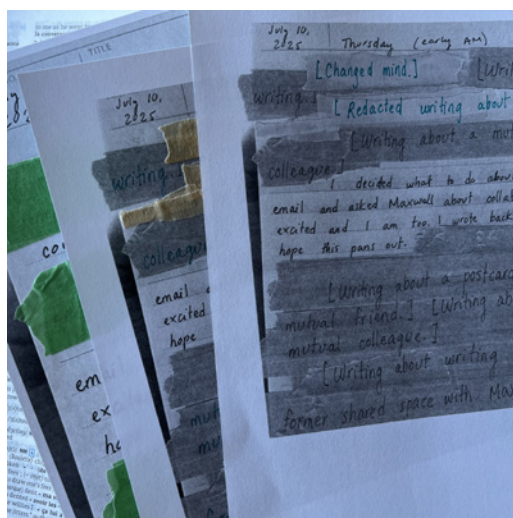


Figure 5. Katie Grant, layers of nuance, 2025. © All rights reserved, courtesy of the author.

1. CfP. 'Method as Play / Play as Method,' edited by Anisha Anantpurkar and Pasha Tretyakova, *The February Journal*, <https://thefebuaryjournal.org/index.php/tfj/announcement/view/11> (21/10/2025).
2. Grant K (2025) Author's intervention.
3. Grant's translation. '...la pensée de la poésie en tant que travail même de la poésie...'
4. Grant K (2025, 19 July) Personal communication, e-mail.
5. Grant's translation. '...rappel objectif des différences.'
6. Grant's translation. 'Une phrase est un alliage, plus ou moins réfractaire; il ne doit pas casser à la première manipulation.'
7. A reference to an e-mail whose contents were omitted here.
8. Grant's translation. 'Le haiku, poème bref de la co-présence et de la liaison instantanée, est langage évanouissant au profit d'une certitude de réalité.'
9. Grant K (2025, 8 August) Personal communication, e-mail.
10. Grant K (2025, 8 August) Personal communication, e-mail.
11. Grant's translation. 'Il est bon de rappeler que la lecture la plus décisive qu'attendent les œuvres n'est pas la lecture scolaire, ni savante, mais cette lecture-pensante, que nous pouvons appeler herméneutique ou écriture ... qui produit les œuvres dans une généalogie singulière ...'
12. Hyett M (2025, 9 July) Personal communication, text message.
13. Grant's translation. 'Rien ne se montre par soi-même mais avec, par, comme, d'autres choses.'

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Reflexive Essay

That Which Withers in the Age of Digital Production: Towards a New Model of Authorship

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That Which Withers in the Age of Digital Production: Towards a New Model of Authorship

Elly Selby

While authorship has historically tethered individuals to works for both credit and responsibility, its foundations in originality, genius, and singular authority have eroded in the face of technological, cultural, and disciplinary disruptions. Poststructuralist critiques reframed authorship as interpretation and circulation, while digital networks and user-generated content democratized participation, only to reintroduce anxieties around ownership and protection in the era of AI. Against this backdrop, I propose a reconceptualization of authorship as a social process involving humans and nonhumans, rather than an evaluation of form. 'Relational Authorship,' a new concept introduced in this article, departs from traditional authorial criteria of style, signature, and veracity by emphasizing accountability within distributed production. This article examines these outmoded formal criteria to establish the necessity of this new model of authorship. Drawing on Actor-Network Theory, poststructuralism, and post-humanist thought, the model situates authorship as socially and materially embedded, where contributions extend across audiences, institutions, and algorithmic systems. While in disciplines such as architecture authorial hierarchies are sustained through frameworks of liability and regulations, Relational Authorship critically considers how responsibility might be reconfigured in the company of humans, machines, and the networks that bind them.

Keywords: architecture, authorship, relationality, interpretation, actor-network theory, poststructuralism, posthumanism, artificial intelligence

Is authorship necessary in our current technological, social context? This question has been asked by many generations, and in many disciplines, but always seems to reemerge as new technologies and social theories destabilize our networks and modes of making. While this question will continue to be wrestled with perhaps for as long as we have the creative impulse or necessity to make, these ceaseless reappraisals suggest that the cultural tools and processes we use to produce work effect the way in which we recognize our own agency over an output.

Authorship originated as a means of tethering an individual to a work—an idea, a text, a painting, a building—for credit, but crucially also for responsibility (Foucault 2008). Authors are responsible for the work they produce, which is made plain in architecture through professional liability. While Michel Foucault may ask 'what matter who's speaking?' (Foucault 2008), disciplines like architecture have always been able to answer: 'life safety!'—

or ideally a pithier rejoinder. Of course, professional liability is not a wholly compelling or even believable rationale for the persistence of authorship—in architecture or in any other creative discipline.

A common argument for this persistence is hubris: an inherent desire to lay claim to our creative endeavors and original ideas, not to be held liable but to garner acclaim (Barthes 2008). The Renaissance notion of the genius of the author remains a cultural undercurrent, wherein there is value in producing novelty, and claiming that novelty as one's own (Gilbert and Gubar 2008). The myth of the *singularity* of this genius has been steadily deteriorated over the last century, revealing the collective nature of artistic and architectural production (Bourriaud 2010), the widening of participation through computational means (Caplan 2022), and broadening narrow definitions of who—or what—could be an author (Haraway 1988). These social and technical shifts and reappraisals have not, however, erased the question of authorship, they have just widened the pool of potential 'authors.'

The recent ubiquity of generative artificial intelligence models represents an inflection point for the resurgence of this question but perhaps can be traced further back to the turn of the 21st century. The Internet, anonymous and open-sourced platforms like Wikipedia, and the burgeoning of user-generated content seemingly ushered in a moment of widespread democratization of authorship, and a simultaneous and resultant destabilization of authorship as a rigid cultural construct (Carpo 2013)—Foucault's polemical question coming to fruition. What was perhaps not anticipated at the time was the *capital* represented by those uploaded, unprotected works—masses of multimodal data comprising human creative endeavors. After an era of ostensibly democratized production, an anxiety to claim authorship, and the *act of authoring* reemerged. This era of open, user-generated content has birthed a new era of publicly available generative AI and 'universal' large language models, yet the ethos has flipped: what began as a culture of sharing now breeds a culture of protection, as creators guard their work from being harvested by AI or exploited through it. In automating openness, AI has severed the very spirit of the Internet commons.

In his 1967 essay, *Cybernetics and Ghosts*, Italo Calvino gleefully anticipates his own literary supplantation by machines. Imagining a literature machine that can produce text in much the same way as any human author, he posits: 'the author vanishes—that spoiled child of ignorance—to give place to a more thoughtful person, a person who will know that the author is a machine, and will know how this machine works' (Calvino 1997: 16). This premonition is remarkable today, where we are grappling with this 'vanishing' and the reinforced role of readership anew. Of course, what Calvino does not seem to anticipate in the pronouncement of his replacement is that *machine* authorship is built on *human* authorship—that new norms of production will require the authorship of existing works, creating a tension between old claims to intellectual property and current glibness or nihilism around human production. A new model for authorship is needed that examines this disruptive destabilization of human attribution

frameworks but also recognizes the reality and potential agency of machine learning-enabled production.

The modern emphasis on aesthetic or formal originality—long central to definitions of authorship (Burke 2008)—sits uneasily with the mechanics of machine learning. While I contend that machine learning models are capable of more than mere mimesis, contrary to some ongoing debates (Carpo 2025), I also reject the idea that originality, as it can be perceived and recognized by human faculties, constitutes the essence of authorship. Visual resemblance and acts of copying remain insufficient grounds for authorship because they tether authorship to aesthetic or formal paradigms rather than relational or social ones.

This article advances an alternative: a model of authorship as a social process, constituted through the network of its interactors (authors), which I term ‘Relational Authorship.’ Such a model departs from formalist understandings of authorship that have historically underpinned attribution, remuneration, copyright, and interpretation in art, literature, and architecture since the Renaissance. To prepare the ground for this reconceptualization, the article interrogates three enduring formal notions of authorship—signature, style, and veracity—demonstrating their incompatibility with contemporary media and production methods.

Signature

The emergence of a signature on artworks signaled an end—or for the sake of this argument, a long pause—of anonymity in making. The signature on a work, visual or literary, signified that an author was staking a claim to it, thereby accepting any praise or censure of the ideas expressed therein (Foucault 2008: 236). A signature is both a form of authentication of a work’s origins, and an ethical contract (Burke 2008: 289). According to literary theorist Seán Burke, the signature ‘acts as the trace or track between a discourse and its departed subject,’ (Burke 2008: 290) allowing for an idea or representation to be tethered to its author, for ‘accountability and enquiry’ (Burke 2008: 290), extending beyond a literal, indexical trace.

Plato resisted the notion of a signature, arguing that the dialectical forum of speech guaranteed the perpetual presence of a discourse’s author to its audience, whereas written signatures were performative and allowed for irresponsible interpretation (Burke 2008: 285). While Plato could not have anticipated the wide dissemination of texts and images facilitated by the printing press, let alone by the advent of the Internet, his concerns of ethical discord, in a context where discourse circulates without a speaker and without the immediate relationship of the speaker to the content, resound today. This untethering of the author from their work is illustrated in Figure 1, wherein this relationship is destabilized as cultural technologies emerge.

In the context of architectural and art history, the emergence of signed work in the Renaissance incited a distinction between artisans and

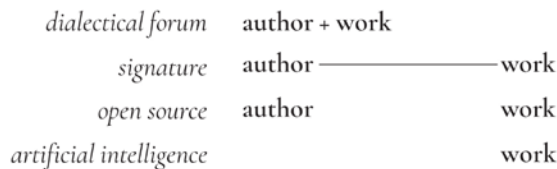


Figure 1. The untethering of author and the work, courtesy of the author.

artists, craft and art (Keizer 2015: 372). According to Renaissance art historian Joost Keizer, this hierarchical split establishes the myth of the singular genius of the author or artist, who possesses innate talent—*ingenium*—beyond technical ability—*ars* (Keizer 2015: 372). Signature then lent itself to the durability and memory of a name; the canonization of specific authors. The individualized status of a signatory facilitated the recollection and significance of the author to endure time and represent whole eras of making.

Production under the signature of a single author was essentially Leon Battista Alberti's notion of the architect: Alberti claimed the singular genius of the architect was superior to the technical skill of masons and trades, determining that the concept of a work of architecture was conceived of by the architect, channeled through the authorial act of drawing, and should be built by trades in its exactitude (Carpo 2011: 26). This act of translation from idea to image was intended to be the true likeness of the built work and was to be followed precisely by trades to execute the intention of the architect—the author. This concept conferred the architect as the singular author of a work of architecture, resulting in a similar valorization to that of the Renaissance painter, allowing for the name of that author—architect, artist—to be canonized and publicized.

Alberti's notion took hold and has roughly remained the nature of architectural practice until the present. Some key aspects have changed—the drawings of a building are now typically produced by a team of architectural designers and technologists, using very different tools—but the architect maintains authorship, authority, of that drawing, and the drawing persists as the method of translating an idea to an image, and from an image to a building (Evans 1986: 3-18). Art historians have attempted to place this practice of drawing into an ontology of fine arts to discern the authenticity of its copies—therein establishing the position of its authorial agency. Nelson Goodman and Gerard Genette have each described this act of producing an architectural drawing for construction as an 'allographic' art. In *Languages of Art*, Goodman distinguishes between artforms based on their ability to be forged: 'Let us speak of a work of art as *autographic* if and only if the distinction between original and forgery of it is significant; or better, if and only if even the most exact duplication of it does not thereby count as genuine...Thus painting is autographic, music nonautographic, or *allographic*' (Goodman 1968: 113). While architectural plans conform to notations, and when constructed are carried out by many people, they retain 'autographic' qualities in the form of a sketch by a singular architect translating their

ideas to drawing. Goodman clarifies that the notational systems employed by architectural plans remain allographic, stating 'although a drawing often counts as a sketch, and a measurement in numerals as a script, the particular selection of drawing and numerals in an architectural plan counts as a digital diagram and as a score' (Goodman 1968: 219). He goes on to specify that 'insofar as its notational language has not yet acquired full authority to divorce identity of work in all cases from particular production, architecture is a mixed and transitional case' (Goodman 1968: 221), between autographic and allographic, in that it does not readily fit into either category—the authenticity of a copy and the authorship of the final product is more ambiguous than a painting or a music score. While the discipline does not sit squarely into one of these two categories of artistic authenticity, the notational nature of architectural drafting and the authority of the architect conveyed by that of the architectural plan resists to some extent the incorporation of co-authors in the design of a building, including those that carry out the drawings, and those that occupy the building after construction.

The allographic distance of an architect's signed drawing from the built work inherently challenges an architect's authorial grasp on its products, hence the necessity of Alberti's claims. While cornerstones and mason's marks represent an attempt at asserting this signatory trace into the process of architecture, architecture's inherent lack of this signatory criterion on the artifact itself has long made it a discipline that is susceptible to authorial erasure—at least phenomenologically. In a digital context, this susceptibility is intensified by the generation of architectural drawings using computer-aided design (CAD), building information modelling (BIM), and machine learning—to which the notational nature of allographic works such as plans are particularly adaptable.

The signature overrode narratives of authorial collaboration. As we know from extensive existing research and documentation, many of these 'singular geniuses,' such as Rubens, operated large studios where teams of painters without authorial status would produce, at least in part, paintings in the style of the named artist, for the work to then be signed by the artist; 'only Rubens' signature could authenticate a work produced by his studio' (De Wachter 2017: 7). This silent collaboration allowed for further valorization of the artist's mastery and for a wider reach of the artist's work (De Wachter 2017: 7).

The anonymizing nature of Web2.0, Open Source, and platforms like Wikipedia demonstrate the deterioration of signature as a form of authentication, canonization, and dominance of the author. In 1969, Foucault seemingly foretells the transformation of authorship via anonymization, imagining a future where authorship is obscured. He posits a series of possibilities for a future without specific, individual authorship, which reads as a premonition for open-source media, asking: 'What matter who's speaking?' (Foucault 2008: 246). Foucault's disinterest in 'authenticity and originality' (Foucault 2008: 246) anticipates the erasure of signature, and therein, the singular genius of the author. What this argument presents, I conject, is however not truly an erasure of authorship in praise of anonymity, but a cry for a reframing of authorship itself. Foucault's

'who' is singular, and is imbued with valorized notions of genius, interiority, talent, and therein an onus on the reader of their discourse to unearth and revel in this latent ability. In his rejection, however, he is still concerned with 'where a work came from' and 'who controls it,' which constitute key functions of authorship (Foucault 2008: 246). He is therefore merely disinterested in evaluating a singular individual or examining a work for their indexical trace. Rather than attempting to evaluate authorship through the contents of a work—a discourse—and thereby valorizing and mythologizing an ostensibly singular author, authorship can be positioned as a relational process of multiple sources of production, and a discourse between interacting authors.

Briefly considering the role of the signatory in the context of generative AI, a machine learning model cannot, of course, enter an ethical contract with its audience, staking a claim to the ideas expressed within a work, but it can generate images and text. Beyond the anonymizing momentum of digital computation, machine learning adds to the contemporary 'ecology of production'—borrowing Susan Sontag's concept of an 'ecology of images' (1977), here referring to the networked, saturated, interconnectedness of digital modes of production—not merely the *concealment* of a signature, but a lack of a signatory entirely. The fugitive nature of the signature is embedded in the formal characteristics of an output which reinforces the deterioration of models of authorship that are predicated upon such aesthetic properties. This is made more explicit in the examination of the quintessence of formal evaluation: style.

Style

Prior to digital computation, stylistic individuality—expressed aesthetically, linguistically, spatially—asserted authorship. According to Contemporary Art theorist and historian Sherri Irvin, 'style' can be understood through Immanuel Kant's definition: '[Kant] suggested that the genius of an artist consists in nature's acting through the artist to create works governed by a new rule, or an organizational principle that has never been seen in earlier artworks. This organizational principle, or rule, is what we would call the artist's style'(Irvin 2005: 130).

This notion of an 'organizational principle' is similarly expressed by Keizer as the set of transformations experienced in the translation of nature to art: 'Style allows the artwork a double origin, both in the thing or person depicted and in the person depicting. It puts a new kind of emphasis on the authorship of images. Style names the transformation nature undergoes when it is translated into art' (2015: 380). Keizer goes on to characterize style as the deliberate choices made by an author: 'Authorship and style are presented as some thing controlled, the result of careful considerations on the part of the maker' (2015: 381). Style as the *choices* of an author, through an algorithmic set of principles—deliberate or intuitive to the author—emerges as a form of interpreting authorship in the Renaissance. Connoisseurship then arises, wherein authorship is determined through the analysis of a work's

characteristics which exemplify these principles—its style (Berenson 1996: 132).

The concept of relative consistency in style was maintained by Michel Foucault in his criteria for determining authorship, outlined in *What is an Author?* in 1969. According to Foucault, an author—here referring specifically to literary authors—can be determined through a ‘stylistic uniformity,’ which is allowed to alter through maturity, evolution, or outside influence (Foucault 2008: 238). While this text by Foucault essentially concedes Roland Barthes’ 1967 claim of the ‘Death of the Author,’ (Barthes 2008: 130)—wherein Barthes challenged the social significance of authorship and hierarchical dominance over audiences or ‘readers’—Foucault confirms that style persisted as a means of determining a source, at least until this poststructuralist rejection of authorship.

It is this algorithmic, consistent nature of style which makes it susceptible to deterioration today. Its capacity to be reduced to a set of rules—*aesthetic choices, linguistic cadence, formal tendencies*—allows for latent clustering by machine learning models or codification by programmers into algorithms to generate new works ‘in-the-style-of’ an author. Prior to digital computation and specifically the emergence of transformer and diffusion model-based machine learning (such as ChatGPT, DALL-E, and Midjourney), ‘autographic’ works—those whose copies are considered forgeries, such as paintings (Goodman 1968: 113)—were an easy target for style-based imitations, with the practice of connoisseurship as an attempted foil. In the contemporary context, digital imitations can be made by any Internet user in a matter of seconds and shared globally simultaneously. Generative AI instantiates a new sociological phenomenon via the tenuous authorial involvement of the users of these programs. Autographic and allographic forms alike can be imitated at a rate which bypasses questions of authenticity. Instead, ‘style transfer’ suggests that style is now unrelated to contemporary authorship, as it is untethered to the deliberate or intuitive choices of the author. Whether using machine learning to emulate known styles, or to reveal stylistic patterns invisible to human cognition (Steinfeld 2021: 7), style becomes an operative site of machine learning. If authorship is dependent on the specificity style and therein choice, then ceding choice to AI or reducing human agency to selection within a finite set of options—akin to an ‘optometrist algorithm’ (Bridle 2019: 101)—erases style as a criterion of authorship.

In the digital, individuality of work itself is undermined by its basis in binary code, allowing for infinite copies, while the Internet and social media platforms allow for ideological copying and encourage mimetic behavior and generation through visual and aural memes; a new practice of imitation (Carpo 2023). The singularity of a style is replaced with an expectation of replicability, while authorial singularity itself is challenged by the simplification or predilection of collective authorship through the Internet (Simone 2019). While formal mimesis has problematized attribution through practices of reproduction, the mimesis of ‘truth’ has paradoxically constituted authorship through the final outmoded aesthetic criterion: veracity.

Veracity

Veracity as a principle of authorship has a paradoxical trajectory, wherein technology influences both the rise and fall of this criterion. The capacity of an author to render faithfully the subject of their work established their authority, and the mastery of optical tools facilitated this dominance. The advent of linear perspective, starting with Filippo Brunelleschi circa 1425, introduced mathematics to images (Payne 2015: 3). Beyond apparent accuracy, the measurability of these images signified their 'truthfulness' (Edgerton 2009). Artists *created* reality in their perspectival images, which, until this time, was a verb reserved for theological contexts (Lepenies 2018: 592). Shortly after Brunelleschi, Alberti's treatise, *De Pictura* (On Painting), disseminated the technique of linear perspective throughout Europe (Lepenies 2018: 587). Artists or those utilizing linear perspective became authorities themselves, and their creative ownership—authorship—of those images became significant, as creators and authorities of religious narratives.

While veracity in images and other artforms reinforced the supremacy of authors, optical tools facilitated the democratization of image making long before the emergence of digital computation in the mid-twentieth century. The camera obscura aided eighteenth century Venetian school painter Canaletto in his creation of both faithful and capricious, realistic depictions of Venice (Steadman 2022: 103). The apparent veracity of his images garnered acclaim for the author, however the relatively recent discovery of Canaletto's use of the camera obscura called into question his merit as an author throughout art historical discourse (Hockney 2006). This critique of Canaletto's methodology implies that, among some academics and critics, authorship resides in the veracity of the work, and that technical aids discredit his authorial supremacy. While this analysis of Canaletto's merit suggests a disinclination within academic discourse towards the use and influence of technology in the fine arts, it also foreshadows the deterioration of this authorial criterion in the age of digital computation, and the creation of space for new evaluative criteria of artistic merit.

Beyond the untethering of veracity as a trademark of authorial *skill*, it is also uncoupled as a signifier of *truth*. William J. Mitchell articulated the dissolution of photographic authenticity via digital image saturation in 1992, prior to the widespread emergence of the Internet. Looking first at film photography, Mitchell describes the existence of a 'special bond between fugitive reality and permanent image that is formed at the instant of exposure' (Mitchell 1992: 24), establishing a causal relationship with reality, much like a fingerprint. Susan Sontag describes this connection, stating that a 'photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or death mask' (Sontag, cited in Mitchell 1992: 24). As Roland Barthes claims at the outset of his 1980 publication *Camera Lucida*, 'the referent adheres'—the photograph is never distinguished from that which it is representing (Barthes, cited in Mitchell 1992: 26). Inaccuracy in

Sontag's stenciling, the exploitation of a fissure in the 'causal bond,' is where photographic representation *without* veracity is born. In digital photography, 'the referent has become unstuck' (Mitchell 1992: 23), the audience is aware of the gap between the original and the representation. Mitchell outlined a series of questions to analyze coherence in photographs, a guide for deciphering doctored, inauthentic images (1992: 36), while Barthes argued that photography's level of functionless detail proved the unfiltered quality of representation (1992: 27). These twentieth century authenticating methods are futile in the ubiquity of digital images which was unanticipated in the early 1990s, and in the context of machine learning. Barthes' analogue tell—detail and resolution—has become the illusionary toolkit of AI.

Optical devices had a paradoxical effect on veracity as a criterion of authorship. In the case of linear perspective, this cultural technology amplified the supremacy and mastery of the author, while the camera obscura and photography eroded this criterion. This paradox has parallels with the concept of the 'AI effect'—wherein the benchmark of artificial intelligence is a moving goalpost that shifts to whatever function is momentarily beyond technological capacity (McCorduck 1979): once technology was able to mimic or even improve upon the human capacity for capturing veracity in images, it no longer constituted an act of human intelligence, of authorial prowess. This contradiction suggests a possible perceived tipping point of a technology or optical device, where it transforms from a constituent part of a process to a discrediting collaborator.

Towards Relational Authorship

The withering of these three criteria of authorship becomes clear when they are applied anachronistically to contemporary media. Despite their frequent invocation in debates today, their decline in compatibility is already visible in the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of computational and Information theory alongside poststructuralist interests in feedback and interpretation. While Cybernetics and digital media would later popularize feedback, the notion of reciprocity in production itself predates WWII. Walter Benjamin's *The Author as Producer* (1934) recognized writing as a chance to transform the newspaper into a bidirectional medium, where readers might also become authors. For Benjamin, authorship was not a mark of elite authority but of labor: a worker's capacity to intervene politically through form (Benjamin 2005: 772). Such reciprocity between producer and audience marks an early indication of what I call Relational Authorship.

The emergence of computation after the war accelerated this shift. By the 1960s, as computers entered popular consciousness, critical texts such as Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* (1967), Michel Foucault's *What is an Author?* (1969), and Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) reframed authorship as less a matter of interior genius and more a question of interpretation, circulation, and meaning-making. Audiences—sometimes

quantified through data, polls, or participation—were increasingly seen as co-constructors of a work's significance. This echoed Claude Shannon's *A Mathematical Theory of Communication* (1948), where information is defined through transmission, reception, and noise. Poststructuralist theorists such as Barthes, Calvino, and Foucault thus repositioned authorship as a function of externality and readership, not self-contained originality.

In contrast, the humanist model of authorship had anchored itself in the interiority of the autonomous subject, a necessary response to premodern traditions where the author was merely the channel of divine discourse (Burke 2008: xviii). Poststructuralism destabilized this humanist insistence on singular agency, renewing older notions of 'scriptors' while extending them toward the audience as a constitutive force. This trajectory can now be extended further still, beyond the human, to include computational and machinic contributors—post-humanist authorship.

The rise of feedback-driven art in the 1960s and 1970s illustrates this shift. MoMA's *Information* exhibit (1970) foregrounded audience participation as a condition of artistic production, while theorists like Umberto Eco in *The Open Work* (1962) and *The Role of the Reader* (1979) emphasized the openness of interpretation. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) similarly underscored reception as meaning-making. Notational practices by artists such as Sol LeWitt and Carolee Schneemann distributed authorship further, establishing instructions, scores, or participatory structures that transformed the audience into active co-authors. Such work unsettled the authority that once secured artists' dominance since the Renaissance. Eco saw this openness as dismantling the hierarchy of artist over audience, aligning with contemporary aesthetics of contingency (Eco 1989: 4).

Yet authorship never disappeared; artists still retained attribution, canonization, and responsibility. The anxieties of this era show how relationality coexisted uneasily with the persistence of identity and control. Architecture, by contrast, demonstrates how certain disciplinary structures resist such flattening. Its regulatory frameworks, professional accreditation, and networks of liability tether authorship to legal and fiscal responsibility. Unlike a painting or text, architecture's capital requirements and client structures enforce hierarchies: the Architect (capital A) remains singular, chosen through evaluative systems of merit, reputation, or power. Patronage, whether historical or contemporary, continues to consolidate authority. This limits the possibility of flat authorship in architecture and suggests instead that authorship here must be understood as distributed yet constrained—malleable rather than effaceable.

Architecture's scale, capital intensity, and regulation sustain hierarchies, but they do not preclude participation. Goodman's hesitation in classifying architecture points to the need for a new ontology of authorship. Relational Authorship offers such a framework: a model that acknowledges the plurality of contributors, embraces the asymmetry of roles, and includes nonhuman participants in processes of design and production. Authorship thus shifts from being judged through formal outputs to being traced through the processes of conception, however opaque or black-boxed those may be.

A new model of authorship necessitates accepting the deterioration of the truth and authentication systems we have culturally in place based on a historically established hierarchy of authors over audiences. While acknowledging this shift is destabilizing in the context of accelerating uses of generative AI, this conceptualization may facilitate greater democracy in the production of media: it suggests a potential for gradation over discretization of information, knowledge, and history, that acknowledges multiple truths and perspectives—which have been suppressed since the ‘Enlightenment’ and the Scientific Revolution (Tuhiwai Smith 1999).

In *Latour for Architects* (2022), Albena Yaneva situates architecture within the relational networks that underpin its production, emphasizing the inherently public and social character of architectural outputs—a perspective resonant with Jeremy Till’s reflections on the social life of buildings. Using Actor-Network Theory (ANT), Yaneva highlights how architecture is constituted through webs of human and nonhuman actors, where production is contingent upon interactions across these networks rather than emanating from a singular, autonomous author. Building upon this insight, Relational Authorship adopts ANT’s relational lens while making a crucial distinction: not all actors are authors. By foregrounding a narrower, accountable notion of authorship within these networks, the model maintains the ethical imperative of responsibility while acknowledging distributed participation.

Jane Bennett’s notion of ‘vibrant matter’ complements this framework by illustrating the potential agency embedded in material and nonhuman assemblages. Just as Bennett urges recognition of distributed agency, Relational Authorship considers how authorship—and thus responsibility—can be spread across heterogeneous networks without dissolving accountability entirely. As she asks, ‘Should we acknowledge the distributive quality of agency to address the power of human-nonhuman assemblages and to resist a politics of blame? Or should we persist with a strategic understatement of material agency in the hopes of enhancing the accountability of specific humans?’ (Bennett 2010: 38). This question foregrounds the central tension in contemporary authorship: how to distribute influence and responsibility without erasing traceable accountability.

Traditional models of authorship, oriented around formal outputs, presuppose not only singular authorship but also a form of objectivity. Relational Authorship reconceives this ‘objective’ ideal through the lens of accountability, drawing upon Donna Haraway’s concept of situated knowledges: only partial perspectives can claim any semblance of objectivity (Haraway 1988: 583). In this view, accountability arises from acknowledging the limits and context of one’s knowledge while remaining open to interpretation and critique. Expanding the dyad of author and audience into a network of specific, relational contributors enables us, in Haraway’s terms, to ‘become answerable for what we learn how to see’ (Haraway 1988: 583), thus reconciling responsibility with multiplicity.

This approach is not equivalent to relativism. While relativism often implies equality of perspectives and closure, relationality emphasizes

specificity: each authorial claim is examined within its networked context, including opaque or 'black-boxed' elements such as algorithmic systems. By aligning with situated knowledges, Relational Authorship neither elevates nor diminishes particular contributors but rather structures the relational and accountable distribution of authorship across both human and machine actors.

Although untested in legal or political contexts, the framework implies that accountability should mirror the distribution of agency within a networked production process. In the context of generative AI, this distinction becomes crucial. Agency does not reside solely in the algorithm or in the human author but in the interplay between them. Drawing on Karen Barad's *agential realism*, agency 'can never "run out" ... Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity' (Barad 2006: 177). By distinguishing between 'dead' and 'living' agency—a conceptual dyad borrowed from Marx—Relational Authorship acknowledges instances where authors retain authorship without active control over their work. Accountability, in this model, is tied to living agency: recognizing our relative agency entails accepting corresponding responsibility.

Ultimately, Relational Authorship positions authorship as a social, processual phenomenon rather than a static assessment of formal outputs. By tracing the contributions, labor, and interpretive work of multiple human and nonhuman participants—and attending to their potential invisibility, marginalization, or censorship—it creates opportunities to resist traditional forms of authorial repression. This relational ontology thus reframes authorship as both a means of attribution and a mechanism for distributed accountability within the complex, networked, and increasingly AI-mediated processes of contemporary creative production.

Conclusion

The persistence of authorship cannot be explained by liability alone, nor dissolved by poststructuralist critique, nor finally displaced by computation. Each technological and cultural rupture—print, photography, cybernetics, the Internet, and now machine learning—has destabilized our networks of making and recognition, only for authorship to reemerge in altered form. If nothing else, this persistence suggests that authorship remains necessary, but not in the guise of singularity, originality, or interior genius.

The question posed at the outset—*is authorship necessary in our current technological and social context?*—answers itself through the logic of improv, where collaboration and feedback drive creation: yes, *and*. Yes, authorship is necessary, *and* it needs to be reconsidered through a new framework that recognizes authorship as a social process—not a formal characteristic—that can include a network of authors that are both human and non-human.

Relational Authorship reframes authorship as a distributed, situated, and accountable process. It acknowledges that creative work now

arises through entanglements of humans, nonhumans, and institutions; that participation, interpretation, and training data constitute contributions; and that responsibility is best understood as partial, contextual, and shared. This model resists both the hubris of genius and the nihilism of 'death of the author,' positioning authorship instead as social process.

In architecture, where liability and regulation hold fast, Relational Authorship clarifies the plurality already embedded in practice while offering a means to address the integration of machine collaborators. More broadly, it provides a framework for cultural production in an era where openness has turned to protection, and where the commons is reshaped by automation. If authorship endures, it must be because it adapts—not as a tether to singularity, but as a recognition of relationality. In this sense, Relational Authorship is not a final resolution to Foucault's provocation—*what matter who's speaking?*—but a way to keep asking the question responsibly, in the company of humans, machines, and the networks that bind them.

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Reflexive Essay

Promises and Challenges of Collaborative Teaching: Crossing Cultural and Academic Boundaries

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Promises and Challenges of Collaborative Teaching: Crossing Cultural and Academic Boundaries

Sela K. Adjei & Douglas J. Falen

This is a retrospective essay about the experience of collaborative teaching across cultural and academic boundaries. The authors reflect on their miscommunication and the process of reconciliation as a model for the promises and challenges of decolonial collaboration. While obstacles remain to collaboration between African scholars and those in other countries, the authors argue that an open-minded approach allowing for vulnerability and personal growth presents a hopeful option for overcoming barriers and exposing students to new ways of learning in the face of enduring inequalities and differences. The authors offer an account of the history of their interactions, beginning with some uncomfortable exchanges and failed collaboration, but leading to more encouraging, collaborative teaching and scholarly endeavors that give them hope for centering African perspectives, challenging hierarchies, and providing meaningful learning to students in Africa and Europe/North America.

Keywords: Africa, collaborative teaching, decoloniality, pedagogy, remote learning

Since the start of the Covid pandemic, remote teaching has been a mixed blessing for academia. Although faculty and students are often frustrated with the muted interactions and the social disconnection that can accompany online instruction, many in higher education also recognize that remote teaching presents an opportunity for bringing people together in new pedagogical relations. Based on our experiences, we feel that remote instruction opens up possibilities for collaborative transnational teaching, and in particular for advancing the ideals of decolonizing academia. Despite the challenges of instructors working across racial, cultural, and educational differences, we argue that transnational collaborative teaching is a worthwhile endeavor because it requires instructors and students to move beyond their personal and professional comfort zones in the interest of decolonizing our disciplines and the academy. As we show, the relationships between people and academics in Europe/North America and Africa can be charged and complicated, but this only illustrates the important and necessary work that must be done across these lines. This essay offers an account of the history of our own interactions, beginning with some uncomfortable exchanges, but leading to more encouraging, collaborative teaching and scholarly endeavors that give us hope for the possibility of breaking down barriers, centering

African perspectives, challenging enduring hierarchies, and providing meaningful learning to students in Africa and Europe/North America.

The two of us first met in 2019, after Doug (Douglas J. Falen), a scholar of Benin, was invited to deliver a conference presentation on West African Vodun religion. In the interest of decolonizing the field, Doug was encouraged to co-author the piece with an African scholar. Doug was embarrassed to realize that he did not have anyone in mind, so he reached out to some colleagues and received a recommendation to connect with Sela (Sela K. Adjei), an artist and visual anthropologist who has done fieldwork on Vodun in Ghana. After exchanging emails and agreeing to collaborate on the project, we set to work. What followed was a frantic and awkward collaboration that led to bruised feelings and an echo of the colonial hierarchies that we were ostensibly endeavoring to combat. Over a year later, we reconciled and began exchanging ideas, sharing scholarly perspectives, and co-teaching some class sessions.

In this essay, we reflect on our collaboration and the promises of sustained scholarly and pedagogical partnerships. In preparing to write this commentary, we interviewed each other, and in the spirit of experimenting with new forms of transparency, co-authorship, and collaboration, we include in this essay some of our responses to the interview questions.

The Conference Abstract

Our story began with an attempt to propose a presentation for the 2019 meetings of the African Studies Association, but with only two days to complete the abstract. In the draft abstract, Sela provided a critique of some established (white) scholars in the field. In editing the abstract, Doug, pressed for time, removed a key sentence containing that critique and failed to offer any justification. Hurt and angry, Sela withdrew from the project, and Doug was also forced to abandon the presentation.

Sela: What do you think made me lose interest in collaborating with you the first time, and was there any reasonable justification for my negative reaction to our failed collaboration?

Doug: I think you felt offended and dismissed because I had made some edits to our conference abstract without discussion or explanation. This was probably exacerbated because you had critiqued some writers for what you considered to be racist scholarship, and in deleting those passages, I was silencing your voice and your critiques. This made me appear to be protecting the work of racists and placing myself into their camp. For my part, I had a range of emotions when I received your angry response. Initially I was hurt as well, as I felt that my actions were not intended to silence you or defend a particular position. I considered your reaction to be emotional and disproportionate to the error, and I was offended at being so quickly

lumped into the category of 'racist' when I thought I was trying to assert an objective approach to Vodun. However, after taking additional time for reflection, I recognized how repeated slights and exclusions could generate frustration for someone who already felt as if academia was biased against you. Ultimately, I came to see your reaction of outrage and condemnation as entirely reasonable and understandable. I wish we had taken more time to discuss the abstract and our goals for the presentation, and to share our views of the scholarship we were addressing. And because we did not know each other prior to that effort, we had no common ground and had not built trust. But in the end, it was probably my own blind spot to how these issues affected you that had contributed to my carelessness.

This failed interaction highlights not only the historical power imbalances between Euro-American and African scholars, but also the way professional and personal sensibilities are intertwined. As we see, an important aspect of Sela's scholarship is correcting and re-centering the extant scholarship on Vodun in particular, and representations of Africa more generally. For Doug, the experience demonstrates how white scholars like him from North America may adhere to standards of 'objectivity,' which ultimately allow them to support colonial scholarly traditions that avoid or silence the issues raised by activist scholars. Hiding behind a purported quest for 'objectivity,' or avoiding what they call an 'emotional' response, often serves as an excuse for failing to tackle injustices or correct wrongs.

Frustration and Separation

Although Doug sent a couple of emails containing a combination of apology and defense, Sela's feelings were too raw, and he saw no further need to respond. Sela pondered over the issue for another long period and simply could not contemplate collaborating with a fellow scholar who failed to acknowledge the historical trajectory of epistemic violence in Vodun scholarship that Sela had tried to highlight in the proposed conference abstract. Sela's spirit felt crushed. As a result, he was hesitant to work with Doug again. A few chapters in Sela's doctoral research (2019) were premised on tackling and undoing centuries of epistemic violence in Vodun scholarship. This included offering a scathing critique of the very same scholar Doug had unconsciously 'shielded.' In one of their final email exchanges which gave Sela much clarity on the kind of issue he was being confronted with, Doug candidly expressed how emotions and personal interests could obstruct how we constructed and processed knowledge. It was obvious Doug was quite familiar with the scholars in his own academic circles and had had an earlier 'not-so-friendly' encounter with the same scholar whose ideas Sela was criticizing. Though Doug did not mention this, Sela got a sense that his critique had been promptly deleted without discussion because it would have been misread as a personal affront to said scholar, further escalating

the situation for Doug to deal with on his end, long after their collaborative presentation. Doug's actions, in Sela's view, reflected an unconscious and internalized reflex that inadvertently preserved hegemonic epistemological structures within Western academic institutions. Sela's interpretation of Doug's response was accurate, because, though Doug was willing to include critical perspectives in a presentation that allowed the space to contextualize it, he was uncomfortable using confrontational language directed at a senior scholar in a conference abstract.

This whole experience reminded Sela of a forward that Walter Dignolo had written recounting a familiar hegemonic trend in Western scholarship over the centuries. In the forward to Hamid Dabashi's (2015) book *Can Non-Europeans Think?*, Dignolo (2015) reflected on how Santiago Zabala's (2013) essays on Slavoj Žižek intersected with Dabashi's (2013) original essay that had inspired the book. Dignolo (2015) stresses how Dabashi (2015) picked up, in the first paragraph of Zabala's essays on Žižek, an unconscious dismissal that has run through the history of the colonality of power in its epistemic and ontological spheres: the self-assumed Eurocentrism described and mapped from European perspectives and interests. Prior to this observation, Gayatri Spivak's (1988) essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* and Edward Said's (1988) *Orientalism* had challenged the entire intellectual community to accommodate multiple voices to reorient their mind in the manner in which non-Western cultures were observed and documented. In *Yurugu*, Marimba Ani (1994) deconstructed the ideological structures that supported white supremacy and boldly challenged Western intellectual hegemony. Similarly, Frantz Fanon's (2004 [1961]) *The Wretched of the Earth* served as a precursor in the decolonization toolkit for colonized territories in all aspects (political, epistemological, cultural, and psychological decolonization). In it, Fanon (2004) diagnoses epistemic trauma in African people while prescribing 'decolonization' as an act that 'triggers a ...psycho-affective equilibrium' in the pursuit of new humanism and humanity (p. 148). His African critical theory—which envisions philosophy in relation to humanities and social sciences as a means to social transformation—proposed a new humanism and humanity founded on decolonization, thus moving beyond Eurocentric ideals of humanity.

Several decades on, despite the widespread campaign and advocacy of decolonizing knowledge and academic institutions (see Asante 2000; Carter et al. 2021; Cossa 2021; Falola 2022; Mbembe 2021; Wiredu 1998; Zeleza 2021), Western scholarship still lacks a firm grasp of intellectual diversity and is devoid of the multiplicity of voices in shaping how we view and address global issues affecting humanity. In José Cossa's (2021) Cosmo-uBuntu philosophy, this notion of the center, mainframe, or a one-dimensional lens or 'box' through which knowledge production is framed is replaced with a multi-disciplinary approach to justice in education. This effort represents a wakeup call for non-Western scholars to delink from hegemonic knowledge regimes, imposed cultural narratives, and racist knowledge production methods. What Cossa essentially argues in the Cosmo-uBuntu

philosophy is the dismantling and decentering of hegemonic educational frameworks. Cossa presents this philosophy as a non-discriminatory and non-hierarchical approach to understanding humanity that derives from the African uBuntu cosmology, which is described in the motto: 'A person is a person because of, or unto, other persons.' Cossa proposes a simple thought experiment with his 'metaphor of the box' (Cossa 2020): he asks his audience to imagine a box and the vast space surrounding it. This one-dimensional metaphoric box represents modernity; the surrounding space is the world exterior to modernity's direct total influence. The box and the outer space are central to our interrogation and understanding of citizen, citizenship, global community, and global citizenship because these concepts, according to Cossa, convey and perpetuate a binary sense of insider/outsider persons, center/peripheral persons, and emerge out of a colonial reality of who is and who is not a human. Citizens are humans who live within the confines of the rights reserved for humans; noncitizens or aliens are lesser than humans who live outside the confines of the rights reserved for citizens. So, Cosmo-uBuntu is the voluntary embracing of uBuntu as a foundational value system to reassert our full, respectable citizenship as humans (Cossa 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022).

Sela and Doug's interaction over the conference presentation reproduced the hegemonic exclusions and hierarchies that Cossa—and Sela—have been working against independently. Moreover, they contributed to a continued divide and a sense of incompatibility. After the failed collaboration, Doug was crushed, feeling guilty for his poor handling of the situation, and devastated by the thought that he had recreated a colonial encounter. Sela felt his efforts had been undone. Sela's sensitive ego felt bruised, and he overreacted in his long, angry email, questioning Doug about why he was 'shielding' scholars whose racist notions of Vodun Sela had critiqued. Sela reflected deeply on their failed collaboration and shared the experience with a trusted academic mentor who encouraged him to ignore such issues and grow another layer of thickness on his skin to be able to withstand the inevitable misunderstanding in self-expression and in the knowledge production process itself. Sela had just emerged from a stressful doctoral program at the time and had very little patience to tolerate any racist inclinations, having read and disputed all the mind-numbing colonial era texts he had reviewed for his dissertation. Coming from an African Studies background, Sela was fully aware of the racially charged nature of ideological clashes between Western and non-Western scholars, but he acknowledged being quite inexperienced in dealing with such a tense collaboration with political undertones. He equally felt a deep sense of personal guilt because his actions and emotional response to the situation went against the Zen and Stoic principles he had earlier studied and to which he adhered.

Over a year later, still nursing feelings of shame and grief, Doug made another effort at reconciliation. He emailed Sela to apologize and asked if he would consider exchanging ideas. To his surprise and delight, Sela graciously accepted the apology, and since then we have corresponded

regularly. Doug sent Sela a copy of his book on Vodun (Falen 2018), and we began a regular correspondence thereafter.

Sela: What pushed you to take the radical decision to make that very last effort to reach out to collaborate again, even though I completely tuned out after our failed collaboration?

Doug: In the immediate aftermath of our failed collaboration, I sent an email to apologize for my clumsy and insensitive decisions, by explaining that I was making hurried edits at midnight before a deadline and that I had not intended to ignore your critiques. After receiving no response from you, I realized that my apology probably rang hollow and sounded defensive. For weeks afterwards, I felt sick with guilt and was so disturbed that I had trouble sleeping. I may have sent another email during this time to apologize again but still never received a reply. This experience continued to haunt me for another year, and it was one of the great regrets of my life up to that point. This is why I took another chance to reach out. I came to see our encounter as both a personal and professional failing, and even as emblematic of the inequalities that I had committed to combat. I thought that if I did not make the effort to overcome our differences, I would be surrendering to the idea that racial, national, or other differences were insurmountable. As an anthropologist, I refuse to believe that people live in utterly incommensurable worlds, or that they cannot find common ground through good-faith efforts. That's why I made that last attempt to reach you. I was delighted when you answered and agreed to engage in dialogue.

Doug: After our initial failed collaboration, what made you change your mind and agree to begin communicating with me a year later?

Sela: I think it's the newfound respect I developed for you after your relentless effort to reach out to me again and genuinely acknowledge the problems we had encountered during our initial attempts to collaborate. How you candidly expressed an appreciable level of remorse and made that final request for us to start collaborating again with a clean slate. After nearly a year, I had forgotten the whole issue, I wouldn't have guessed you'd ever reach out again, so I was quite moved. At that point, it no longer mattered to me who was right or wrong, I was more concerned with who was trying to make peace. You made the reconciliatory move, and I appreciate your efforts. Thanks.

Joint Teaching

As a first effort to build a bridge and work together, Doug invited Sela as a guest lecturer, via Zoom, for his global learning seminar, entitled 'Race and the Other,' during the fall 2021 semester. The class was about racial constructions and postcolonial relationships between former colonial and colonized

nations. Sela gladly accepted the invitation, presenting four lectures on the following topics: 1) skin-bleaching practices in Ghana; 2) artistic depictions of colonizers; 3) racial mimesis in Vodun religious iconography; and 4) an anti-racist philosophy in African music videos. These lectures were an opportunity for students to hear directly from a scholar residing in Africa about topics that were important to him and that reflected his perspective on racial identity and hierarchy. The centering of the experiences and perspectives of someone from a formerly colonized country is precisely the mission of decolonial teaching. Students told Doug that they appreciated Sela's contributions, hearing different points of view, and learning from Sela's unique perspective. One student noted that they especially appreciated when there were group discussions involving both Sela and Doug. We both discovered that we shared a number of similar interests and concerns (such as racial inequality, hegemonic power, problematic portrayals of Africans, resistance, and music). Through sustained dialogue and collaboration, our interactions helped us to appreciate one another, recognize our shared humanity, and build respect and trust. We also re-initiated our failed collaboration by presenting a co-authored paper together at the African Studies Association conference in November 2022 and are currently finishing an article we have written together. The collaborative teaching also inspired us to imagine more substantive co-teaching, which would ideally include jointly designing course content and providing more meaningful long-term interactions in which instructors, as well as students, work together. In 2023, we participated in a workshop sponsored by the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) initiative, learning to co-design collaborative courses. Then in spring 2024, we carried out our plan by co-teaching a month-long COIL module that connected students at Sela's and Doug's home institutions, which allowed our students to interact and work together on common projects. In recent comments, some of Doug's students recounted that this collaborative course was one of the most challenging, interesting, and memorable courses in their four years of college.

Doug: Did you benefit from the opportunity to visit my class? How?

Sela: Definitely, co-teaching with you was worth it. The knowledge-sharing was mutually beneficial. For me, it was quite rewarding and insightful in a sense that I felt a deep level of appreciation not only from you, but from the students as well. I was also rewarded with a decent honorarium for each lecture.

Doug: Has the collaborative teaching experience changed your teaching strategy?

Sela: I would say it has not really changed my teaching strategy but improved and broadened my understanding of collaborative teaching and the many positive opportunities it presents. Our racial and educational backgrounds also introduced renewed perspectives of the various topics we chose to discuss.

The positive feedback your students gave after my final presentation showed how my thoughts and contributions were valued. It gave me interesting ideas for developing more effective collaborative teaching strategies to nurture new minds.

Our collaborative teaching was limited by certain technical and logistical challenges. Among these were internet disruptions, classroom camera placement, poor audio, and the difficulty of scheduling synchronous meetings across distant time zones (in addition to the problem of reverting from daylight-savings to standard time in the middle of the semester). Some of these difficulties are unavoidable, but they could be mitigated with planning.

Decolonizing Academia

There are pedagogical strategies for decolonizing academia, such as including readings, theories, and perspectives from formerly colonized nations and other marginalized groups. However, we argue that team-teaching is another useful approach that builds on the notion that direct and sustained contact between peoples can bridge divides, generate respect, and potentially disrupt the colonial hierarchies within academia.

Doug: Have our interactions changed your view of academia, and of decolonial possibilities?

Sela: Not precisely. I'm very much aware of the endless possibilities of collaborative teaching, research, and the intellectual pursuit of decolonizing hegemonic academic regimes. Early in my own research journey, I encountered important publications by Kwasi Wiredu (1995) and Birgit Meyer (2012), both of whom have been keen advocates of renewed perspectives, anthropological paradigm shifts, practical approaches and methodologies for trans-disciplinary and collaborative research, specifically in conceptual decolonization, philosophy, art, and material religion. I'm currently collaborating with Birgit Meyer and a host of other European scholars on a number of research projects that aim at harmonizing and bridging the academic gap between scholars in the West and scholars based in Africa. You are not the first American scholar I've collaborated with. Over the last decade I've also encountered and collaborated with several non-African scholars like Bea Lundt, Meera Venkatachalam, Curtis Andrews, Jill Flanders, Matthew Rarey, Lucien Loh, Yann LeGall, and I've interacted with Walter Dignolo in a virtual seminar on decolonization. I can see that Western scholars are becoming more aware of the dangers of 'theorizing from the West.' Perhaps the reverberating sounds from the 'academic echo chamber' are creating a boring monotonous sound in the ears of discerning scholars. This repetition has pushed many to seek fresh, dialogical approaches that center marginalized epistemologies instead of defaulting to

the same narrow framework. In the last few decades, there's been a gradual shift, and impartial scholars are able to spotlight biases, epistemic violence, and inadequacies that have been normalized within academic institutions. For instance, I recently met Bénédicte Savoy, an art historian who applies what she refers to as 'factivism' in her provenance research to educate and overturn narrow-minded perceptions among her Western peers concerning the restitution of looted African artworks illegally held in European museums. Radical approaches to levelling academic fields already paved the way for collaborative decolonial possibilities between Western scholars and scholars of African descent. So, I would say our interaction has merely expanded my outlook of decolonial possibilities in different directions.

Doug: What theories or ideals do you think we share or don't share?

Sela: It's interesting that our ideals and academic pursuits are too similar for us to be misunderstanding each other or engaging in any personal intrigue. You teach about race, racism, colonial aftershock, and other inequalities in all your courses, and critical race theory (CRT) is equally fundamental to your pedagogy. The negative impact of racism and white terror domination are central to the theoretical frameworks your pedagogy is hinged on. Apart from being a researcher interested in these same issues, I focus my professional art practice on racial inequality, police brutality, black power, and resistance against oppressive regimes like white terror domination. I would say the ideals we share lie in dismantling the hegemonic structures that reinforce various kinds of inequalities across the globe. We need more collaboration and understanding because of our shared research interests in Vodun, anthropology, critical race theory, and the decentering of hegemonic knowledge systems.

Sela: Would you say you've had a paradigm shift about the 'positionality' of Western scholars in the 'hierarchy' of knowledge production in academia?

Doug: While I have grown from this experience, I would not describe it as a paradigm shift in my views of academia or my theoretical approach. My anthropological training and my interactions with scholars and students had already shaped my understanding of hierarchies in academia and beyond. I have participated in workshops on decolonial pedagogies, and my teaching and scholarship endeavor to valorize the ideas and perspectives from Africa. Although I was not as familiar with postcolonial thought and theories during my graduate training, over the course of my career, my teaching and scholarship have been profoundly shaped by the works of people like Edward Said (1978), Lila Abu-Lughod (2013), Frantz Fanon (2008 [1952]), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1988), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2004), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), Filomina Chioma Steady (2002), Jemima Pierre (2012), and Johannes Fabian (2014 [1983]). However, there is a difference between teaching decolonial theory in the abstract, and the lived experience

and ethical choices inherent in human interaction. For me, the experience of making a personal mistake and seeing how quickly even well-intentioned and theoretically educated people can offend others by silencing their voices and recreating colonial hierarchies was profound and eye-opening.

These uncomfortable moments are some of the most productive learning opportunities, both for us and for our students. Learning about abstract concepts of decolonial thought must be paired with interactions and practical applications of these ideals. Our goal of engaging in decolonizing collaborative teaching merges with the benefits of student collaboration (Surr et al. 2018) and builds on evidence that immersive collaborations between professionals helps to promote anti-racist ideas (Cahn 2020).

Sela: What has this whole experience taught you about collaborative teaching with scholars from different racial, social, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds?

Doug: This experience has reaffirmed that people can establish meaningful connections and understanding across racial, social, national, and other divides. This is the explicit mission and promise of anthropology, but in many ways, it is the goal of all the liberal arts. Ideally, learning is more than the acquisition of facts; it means encountering new ideas and sometimes having experiences that make one uncomfortable, prompting one to think in new ways. But as ethnographic fieldwork demonstrates, deep learning usually requires long-term contact and interaction with others. This is why I am interested in additional collaborative teaching opportunities, especially those involving jointly designed and jointly taught courses, rather than merely an occasional guest lecture. Interacting with you and hearing how much my students appreciated learning your perspectives leads me to think that a fully collaborative teaching effort holds the promise of bringing together instructors and their students, sharing ideas and breaking down the racial and colonial barriers that continue to shape the world.

Doug: What has this experience taught you about collaborative teaching with scholars from different racial, social, cultural and intellectual backgrounds?

Sela: This experience offered me a rare glimpse of the emotional and political weight we carry into collaborative spaces, especially when those spaces are shaped by deep-seated inequalities in academic recognition, disciplinary hierarchies, and historical wounds. It has shown me that while shared values and intellectual interests provide a strong foundation, meaningful collaboration requires patience, trust, and a willingness to sit with discomfort—both one's own and that of others. Our initial miscommunication revealed our individual trajectories of academic expression and differing thresholds of what was considered acceptable critique, especially in relation to power and race. Working through that rupture—and witnessing your effort to reach out after

so long—helped me understand that real collaboration sometimes required one to dispassionately confront uncomfortable feelings. It's about choosing to stay in the conversation, even when things fall apart.

Having the opportunity to speak directly to your students, to share my own thinking about art, religion, and racial politics, and to hear their questions and reflections, gave me a sense of awareness that co-teaching across differences could humanize abstract debates and create openings that no textbook could achieve on its own. I learned that my own expectations and frustrations, however justified, had to be carefully examined—so that I could remain open to reconciliation. That process, though difficult, was a great learning curve that was deeply therapeutic. It forced me to revisit my own assumptions, especially about how quickly or easily trust could be built or broken.

Ultimately, this collaboration has affirmed that intellectual humility and mutual respect are core human values—essential to the practice of scholarship, especially in cross-cultural settings and multi-racial learning environments. I must admit that I have become more attentive to the fragility and possibility of shared work. I can now understand how collaborative work in academia can unsettle fixed positions and introduce new concepts for understanding one another. If we are serious about decolonizing our disciplines, we must be willing to move beyond our individual differences to genuinely do this work together, again and again, even when it is uncomfortable. Most especially, when it really feels unsettling, that's the new learning ground for us all.

Conclusion

What we propose in this essay is a modest, first step in the effort to generate meaningful collaboration and respect between scholars and students from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Our experiences do not suggest that the work of decolonizing academia will be quick or easy. Indeed, our own transformations have been incremental and represent less of a paradigm shift than a tentative optimism for the possibilities to come. To be sure, divisions along disciplinary, theoretical, racial, and class lines will remain significant obstacles among the most well-intentioned instructional partners, but there is genuine reason for hope. In our interactions, we have attempted to practice humility and introspection, while applying Cosmo-uBuntu philosophical principles, which recognize alternative knowledge systems and non-Western frames of reference. In this spirit, our experimental approach here, involving a non-traditional format of humanistic interviewing, reflects our efforts to decenter traditional ways of knowing. We argue that these techniques can contribute to decolonizing academia.

In a nutshell, this whole experience exposed Doug's and Sela's fallibility as scholars who both acknowledged their intellectual shortcomings and agreed to put their misunderstandings behind them to focus on

more productive intellectual ventures. This encounter was a great learning experience for Sela because it presented a clear picture of the challenges, endless opportunities and promises of collaborative teaching irrespective of age, class, race, gender, rank, or intellectual abilities. In Sela's view, scholars can learn from each other if they put their personal interests and ideological differences aside and focus on collaborative teaching and knowledge-sharing hinged on mutual respect. For Doug, the experience has been an important part of his learning process, building new sensitivities to the ethical considerations of working across national, disciplinary, and racial differences. Although the goal of lifelong learning has always involved acquiring new 'knowledge,' Doug has grown in the domain of interpersonal understanding and reflexivity. In particular, he has become more sensitive to the pain felt by Sela and others whose cultures have been described and dissected by scholars from Europe and North America.

In an era where critical race theory is currently under attack in the American educational system, collaborative teaching and knowledge-sharing has become an imperative pedagogical intervention in global institutions with racial diversity and multicultural demographics. Yael Sharan (2010) has argued that putting collaborative teaching and learning into practice creates a culturally sensitive pedagogy and cooperative learning environment, where learning is made relevant for all. Taking the bold decision to co-author this essay on our experience presented both Doug and Sela with an opportunity to create more racial awareness and to acknowledge the various forms of inequalities plaguing the global academic community. But it has also given us new energy and hope for future collaborations and mutually beneficial learning experiences for our students.

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Reflexive Essay

Dis_ability, Ethnographic Methods, and Collaborations over Distance: Intersectional Complications

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Dis_ability, Ethnographic Methods, and Collaborations over Distance: Intersectional Complications

Isabel Bredenbröcker & Tajinder Kaur

Based on their chapter 'On giving, taking, and receiving care: Fieldwork and dis_ability,' collaboratively written for a handbook entitled *Inclusive Ethnography* (Procter and Spector 2024), India-based anthropologist Tajinder Kaur and Germany-based anthropologist Isabel Bredenbröcker reflect on writing about dis_ability and ethnographic methods from their respective points of view and experience. Their conversation, conducted entirely in writing into a shared Google Doc over a period of two months, takes core methodological takeaway points of the chapter as a starting point to think about how we can write and think together over distance: Isabel and Tajinder have never met in person. What challenges do we face when writing and thinking from intersectionally different perspectives for a global academic publishing market? What solidarities can be learned anew and differently through these kinds of collaborations? These challenges, particularly when combined with disability studies and anthropology, require special attention. Working together, Kaur and Bredenbröcker show that writing across intersectional differences—whether in lived experiences, geopolitical contexts, or disciplinary approaches—requires an ethics of care that goes beyond strategies of knowledge production.

Keywords: collaborative writing, disability, Germany, India, intersectionality



Listen to this contribution, read by Tajinder Kaur and Isabel Bredenbröcker, [here](#).

You are hereby invited to read and follow a written conversation conducted between us, Isabel Bredenbröcker and Tajinder Kaur, between March and May 2025 over Google Docs. This dialogue emerged as part of our preparation for a joint presentation and as a continuation of our earlier collaborative work. Google Docs offered a medium to have a conversation in writing that was not possible to have on video or voice call most of the time while preparing our co-authored chapter (Bredenbröcker and Kaur 2024). This was due to bad signal in one or both places in which we respectively were during the writing phase. So, our attempts to meet and encounter each other while making words and ideas match were also shaped by frustrations about distorted voices over WhatsApp and prematurely ended attempts at conversations. The chapter was authored by sending word documents back and forth via email, with additional commentary. Here, no

real time conversation was needed. As a platform for editing documents collaboratively, Google Docs offered a technology for written exchange outside of the back-and-forth of emailing. The fact that a product for co-writing offered by a big global tech company was the tool of choice for us is due to there not being a workable alternative that was easy enough to implement at the time. Google, as we are aware, does not guarantee data protection but also has moved far away from its initial motto 'do no evil' to actively profiting from the genocide in Gaza, according to a report by the United Nations (which is equally true of Microsoft, the company providing Word, another program that we used for writing our manuscript) (Albanese 2025). This lack of alternatives remains an invitation to create better co-writing platforms and programs (and some, like Proton, are on their way but fee-based and not fully fine-tuned yet). It may also show a need for support and education on how to access these alternatives, something that is time-consuming and requires a change of habits. When communicating across distance, these things become especially hard. While we prepared for a joint (hybrid) presentation¹ in the colloquium series 'Collaborations and Solidarities in Troubled Times'² at the Institute for European Ethnology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, in May 2025, we used this written mode of reflection and writing with/to each other to prepare our talk. Going beyond the chapter we had previously co-authored together, this exchange, which could only be referred to in parts during the presentation, examines the challenges and benefits of blind-date co-authorship across distance and between intersectional markers. Both of us were matched and asked to co-write, without having met or knowing of each other before, by editors of the textbook *Inclusive Ethnography* (Procter and Spector 2024), in which our chapter later appeared. Intersections that became meaningful during our collaboration were found at the crossroads of the co-authors being based in the 'Global North' and the 'Global South,' being female and gender queer, being regarded as white or racialized, speaking different versions of English and other mother tongues, living with a disability and working on disability, and, lastly, having different levels of experience and positions within the hierarchical structures of academia (and its locally different traditions). In discussing the specific case of their collaboration, Isabel and Tajinder touch upon core issues that remain a challenge in academic collaborative work. You are invited to follow the written conversation as it unfolds. It will not explain concepts and ideas in the way that an academic article does and is at times repetitive, in attempts to confirm the authors' own readings of a situation. As such, the conversation is a true record of getting to be on the same page and discussing collaboration as academics. The audio has been minimally altered and cut. Here, you can read the original text (with additional contextualization in brackets where needed), which at times slightly differs from the spoken version. Nevertheless, it also serves as a transcript.

Isabel:

Hi Tajinder! This is our space to have a conversation—in written form—about the process of collaborating on the article. I thought we may do it by asking each other some questions, which we also can respond to ourselves. Do you have any questions you'd like to ask or any observations to share?

From my part, I'd like to ask how it was for you (based in Delhi, India) to be paired with me as a researcher in a different country (based in Berlin, Germany) to co-author a piece? After all, this suggestion came from the editors of the volume, to which we had both proposed individual contributions on the topic of disability. So, we were in a kind of blind-date-academic-writing situation. What were your thoughts on and expectations about the article in general and on the collaboration as such?

I was quite unsure about my proposal for the contribution (as a single author) in the first place, for the text would reveal a lot of personal information about myself, pertaining to my chronic illness and something that I myself only reluctantly (and mostly with regards to rights in official settings) had come to view as a disability. Before, I had made sure only to share this information verbally and in confidential settings, as I was reasonably scared that my work environment and also even colleagues would treat me to my disadvantage should this information be public. I am still unsure, in case I would be offered a professorship position in Germany, what it would mean for my employment conditions, as 'Verbeamtung,' a permanent position as a state worker (which is standard for professors in Germany) does not always become available to people with health issues of this kind.

This was my initial proposal:

'Ableism and ethnography: Making fieldwork accessible

This chapter reflects on what a disability is and how, if looked at from a critical standpoint, thinking about disability and ableism is something that concerns everyone with a body facing an extended period of ethnographic research. Starting out by investigating the ableist history of ethnographic research and the narrative that it has produced, namely of the strong (although temporarily disgruntled) ethnographer-hero, the chapter connects this to the auto-ethnographic and phenomenological turn in research, which has also revealed the value in reflecting on personal abilities and the lack of them. Consecutively, the terms disability and ableism are discussed from an intersectional perspective. What defines a disability: legal documents, visible impairments, experience, invisible impairments? What defines ability in turn, and how may one's own subjective position be productively addressed in the tradition of auto-ethnographic reflection as a means of empowerment and deepening one's own analysis?

The chapter also addresses how institutional support networks in academia exist alongside ongoing structures that produce shame, discrimination, and fear of disadvantage or imposter syndrome around disability. Proposing

different ways of dealing with these difficulties, the chapter discusses the conundrum of whether to reveal or protect sensitive information about oneself when working with a disability. The chapter draws on experience of the author in navigating fieldwork and its institutional contextualization with a chronic illness and discusses work by colleagues with similar experiences. These reflections provide concrete examples from field research and the challenges that it may pose to working outside the ableist mindset. The chapter concludes by calling for different models of collaborative and supportive ethnographic research that leave ableist expectations behind—for every body.'

So, I was already feeling a bit unsure about the whole idea of writing about this in general. Hence, the idea of being asked to co-author with a person I did not know was something of a surprise to me, but not an unwelcome one. In the past, I have co-authored many different formats with larger and smaller groups of collaborators, from artist collectives to student groups to one-on-one formats. In all instances, though, there was a direct personal meeting and joint work on a topic that informed these collaborations. In our case, this was different. But given my prior commitment to doing collaborative work, I was interested in taking this challenge. My first and biggest question was how we would make up for the lack of being able to meet, talk, see each other, and so on.

As a reminder of how it started, this is the email I received from one of the editors of the volume, asking me if I would like to collaborate with you:

'Hi Isabel,

I hope you're well. Thanks so much for your patience while we came to a decision regarding your contribution to our textbook. We really loved your abstract for the chapter and despite the high number of submissions wanted to find a way to include yours. Our idea was to ask if you were willing to collaborate with another contributor to put your two pieces of work into conversation with each other. We were quite inspired by the quality of contributions and wanted to use them to add a conversational element to the textbook, namely centring the fact that we are not proposing the 'right' way to do fieldwork, but simply making the point that fieldwork is itself a collection of conversations and varied approaches.

With that in mind, would you be willing to consider co-authoring? I attach here the abstract of the author with whom we'd like you to work. Our idea for the chapter would be to host a conversation between your work conducting research with a disability, and with Tajinder whose work is about conducting research with people with a disability. The decision is totally yours, but we think the overlapping themes work well together.

Do let me know what you think.

All the best and thanks again for your patience.'

Ok, this was already a long first impulse and question as well as an answer to my own question. I leave the floor to you here.

Tajinder:

Let me rephrase your questions for myself... You'd like to ask how it was for me to be paired with you as a researcher in a different country to co-author a piece? After all, this suggestion came from the editors of the volume, to which we had both proposed individual contributions on the topic of disability. So, we were in a kind of blind-date-academic-writing situation. What were my thoughts and expectations on the article in general and on the collaboration as such?

This was my initial abstract for the book chapter:

'Disability and caregiving: An anthropological reflection on lived experiences of women with physical disabilities in Delhi, India

*"Oh god, why are you giving me so much pain, my body is not
taking my side" (an informant)*
"Who will take care of our children or their future after us?"
(a family member)

Care is a significant aspect of human nature because at some point we all need care or support from our family members or companions either because of biological needs or emotional needs. However, multidimensional nature of disability studies and caregiving situates disabled body in the domain of dependency, caregiving, and constant support from the family or caretakers. The article focuses on five case studies of women with physical disabilities, based on the ethnographically informed fieldwork in Delhi. (Intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships). The objectives of the study are, first, to examine the lived experiences of women with physical disabilities with their primary caregivers' using narratives and how they negotiate delicate power relations connected to their caregiving and childlike dependency on parents and other kinship ties. Second, it sheds some light on guilt, shame, or stigma associated with their disability; and which further hamper their interaction with able-bodied environment and third, physical and mental well-being of a person with disability is dependent on the support provided by the family members, as, according to Murphy (1990), 'distortion of interaction of the disabled with the family members may be frequent ... for it infects the very haven to which most people return for support protection and love' (p. 213). The role of state and civil society is crucial in this because there are no such formal segregated care systems in India and are mainly dependent on kinship ties. People with disability are already marginalised by society and can further be disempowered by the nature of care (Ghai 2018). The findings reflect on the restriction of their social inclusion in the mainstream and their contribution in the society. It also emphasizes on the narratives of disabled women that how they are vulnerable of feeling ashamed and guilty, which further tend to isolate them and their family members from community-based activities or formal settings.'

At first, I felt confused and surprised by the opportunity, but it was not unfamiliar to me. Before our book chapter in the SAGE volume, I had authored book chapters with my supervisor and engaged in many collaborative initiatives. It was limited to either within the department where I am pursuing my PhD or outside of it, not on an international level or involving the individual I cannot meet. Initially, it was challenging due to the online setting, leading to misunderstandings regarding our writing methods and network issues; however, Isabel always ensured that our discussions and notes remained accessible and memorable. We were required to stick to a sequence of emails, which was frequently frustrating yet essential. We ultimately adapted to these (written) forms of online communication and successfully authored our chapter.

Upon reading Isabel's abstract, I was uncertain about my ability to engage and contribute to the text. Isabel's narratives highlighted the significance of the ableist viewpoint from a critical standpoint, encouraging me to reevaluate my abstract and confront the ableist notions that I want to question and have always observed in both academic and personal contexts.

Isabel's essay was autoethnographic, incorporating personal elements from their life; sometimes, I had to take a step back to comment on any individual story, whereas Isabel provided exceptional evaluations of my writing as I worked with disabled women and reflect upon my fieldwork experiences. Initially, I was uncertain about how to respond to Isabel's text, as they were managing it personally, and I feared that my academically immature remarks could misinterpret their story. Nevertheless, we successfully concluded our chapter through our efforts and commitments. And if we got stuck somewhere, we usually left it for the editors to decide.

As one of the editors stated in the email included above, '[t]here's no right way to do fieldwork; fieldwork is a collection of conversations and varied approaches.' This collaboration illuminated the diverse methodologies available for sharing and documenting our experiences, even testing the research approach of 'anthropology at a distance.' This term describes a research method that allows us to interact or study any culture/society without being physically present (which was there in my mind in the initial phases). The Second World War, during which the term was coined, constrained anthropologists, but nowadays, geographical boundaries have been mitigated by technological advancements.

I have added some questions for you all at once to make it easier for us to communicate more. Let me know if that's okay or convenient for you! You can answer these questions, and then I will respond.

How did the fact that we didn't get to talk to each other in person change the way we built trust or had essential conversations?

Isabel:

We did get to talk to each other, but things that we take for granted these days, like undisturbed internet-based calls with video, proved harder to come

by than expected. Often, connections were not ideal, and we had to forego video while dealing with sound quality that was making it hard to understand what we were saying. This created an additional experience of distance for me. Other times, we were traveling or doing fieldwork, something that at times also meant that communication was harder than usual, as in certain locations, internet was not to come by at all. This, I think, just comes to show that the brave new world of a global technological utopia is only an illusion and, actually, location does matter—as do technical infrastructures and devices. This also partially relates to inequalities between what we term ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ countries, a perspective that we are actively addressing in our chapter. I guess there is another story that could be written about our collaboration, one which discusses the places we went to during writing and exchanging as well as the ways in which we were able to connect as we did (you can read more about this in Bredenbröker and Kaur 2024).

In terms of building trust and having essential conversations, distance and technological disruptions are a real impediment. An added challenge to speaking about personal experiences was putting these into text, merged with another person’s experience. As an anthropologist and academic teacher, I am aware of the importance of experience and frames of reference that come with the many factors determining our personal background. Collaborating with a fellow academic and author based in India and working on India-related field research, I was particularly alert to try and offer as much space for possible differences in experience, expectation, and also academic convention. I myself have not visited India, hence I am lacking any real insights into what to watch out for in that regard—in other words, I do not have a frame of reference for being attuned to these things regarding that specific background. As a postdoctoral researcher, I was, in addition, also aware that I was asked to co-author with a PhD candidate, meaning that I may have more experience in conducting and editing writing projects. I felt some pressure on me to pass this experience on in the best possible way—without being a teacher and without reproducing academic hierarchies but still using my experience to elevate the quality of the text. Writing for a publication with a big international publisher is, despite the experience I just mentioned, still a somewhat stressful endeavor for me. Next career steps and tangible job opportunities somewhat rely on publishing on this level and doing it well. In our collaboration, we were both writing in English from a non-native speaker’s point of view—or, rather, relating to different versions of the English language. I normally work and operate in English, having studied in the United Kingdom, but this comes with a specific understanding of how to write, how to use language as a tool, and how to structure a text—something that was essential in my training during my MA in England. The very nature of the conditions of our collaboration meant that different usages of language, in terms of writing and creating an argument, were happening: they were part of our different backgrounds. I did find this challenging, as I had the impression that the editors of the volume, who had arranged our tandem, had (knowingly or unknowingly) put me in a position where the

responsibility for streamlining our writing output—making it a piece that worked in an international volume by a large academic publisher—was with me. As my training in academic research and writing has largely conditioned me to think and write for exactly such outlets, it felt like I had been given the responsibility to look after this. That may not have been the editors' intention after all, but I do want to raise the question here of how we can practice care for each other as thinkers, people, and authors across such boundaries and facing what feels like high stakes in a competitive academic market. I did get frustrated about this at times, as I felt it was at the limits of my capabilities to fill this role. And I attempted to raise this with the editors—but am still unsure if there could have been a better way to figure out new forms of writing and collaborating between us two, ignoring the felt pressure of the system. I am glad that you, Tajinder, experienced the process as generally positive. This gives me hope that communication and exchange with these kinds of dis_abling conditions—difference of experience and distance in a hierarchical system—is possible after all.

May I direct the question back at you, Tajinder? How did the fact that we didn't get to talk to each other in person change the way we built trust or had essential conversations?

Tajinder:

Our limitation of not meeting in person shifted my trust-building process from physical interaction to a form of textual and emotional interaction across time. Our collaboration relied mainly on fragments: emails, comments, silences, and pauses. Poor internet connectivity, disrupted calls, and periods of complete digital unavailability—particularly during both of our fieldwork in-between (as I remember)—rendered communication difficult, as you also noted. Instead of perceiving these as limitations, I now think of them as 'gaps' that made me think and made us more sensitive to care in other forms: slowing down, rereading, reflecting, and keeping open to each other's silences and intensities. From my perspective, trust was not something that was automatically given; it was carefully and cautiously cultivated. Our field contexts and cultural backgrounds also mattered. While you were reflecting on chronic illness and writing in Germany,³ I was moving through crowded streets in Delhi, navigating the city as an anthropologist and doing fieldwork with women with disabilities, enduring the temperature of 42 degrees Celsius at that time. Our embodied contexts shaped our dialogues, and this was evident not just in what we wrote, but how we wrote—slowly, messily, and with vulnerability.

As we argue in the chapter, collaboration must not be treated as a mere methodological add-on; rather, it should be reimagined as an intellectual and ethical endeavor, particularly when writing across 'Global North'/'Global South' divides. I agree with your observation that there is a need for an additional article to address further the issues and possibilities

that emerged through our collaboration. Your reflection on feeling positioned as the one responsible for 'streamlining' the chapter also prompted me to reflect on my own strengths and limitations. I became increasingly aware of the hierarchical dynamic between us, given our respective positions as a postdoctoral researcher and a PhD candidate. This awareness compelled me to exercise greater caution and sensitivity in each step of the writing process, recognizing the potential to inadvertently hurt sentiments, especially when collaborating with a scholar engaged in autoethnographic work.

Furthermore, linguistic dynamics shaped my engagement with the writing. English is not the first language in India; rather, it exists alongside a vast diversity of regional languages and dialects. In academic and professional contexts, however, Hindi and English are predominantly used. I was conscious of the expectations associated with academic English (dominated by British and North American use of the language), particularly in the context of contributing to an international publication (by a British-North American publisher), and I also tried to fit into that category. Although I sought to meet these standards, the process was often exhausting. Nonetheless, Isabel's constructive feedback and supportive engagement made the writing process considerably more comfortable.

Let me now ask the following. What compromises did we have to make when we tried to combine autoethnographic and fieldwork-based perspectives?

Isabel:

It took me a good while to come up with a narrative and structure that would bring these two things together. This seemed especially hard to me because I could not relate to the field context you were describing. I wanted to make sure that our respective material would speak to each other without erasing the important specificities of each of these narratives. I do think that we managed to do this well when writing in a shared Google Doc. But the territory covered—fieldwork in India with disabled women, experience of German academia and fieldwork in locations such as Ghana and South Africa—was really very broad. It was good to get the editors' feedback on our writing process; it was also really helpful to keep in mind that our target audience was, after all, students who were in the process of learning fieldwork methods and applying them. Hence, I was always guided by the idea that very concrete recommendations and examples were best to offer guidance and advice to our readers, who were in a process of learning.

The biggest compromise, as far as I can say, was the limitation of space. As we are speaking and reflecting here, there could have been much more said about the backgrounds and situatedness of our perspectives—something we managed to touch upon only in passing. I am also not sure we have fully explored things we have invoked. I, for example, identify as a non-binary person. While I believe this is mentioned at the beginning of our

chapter, where we attempt to situate ourselves somewhat, it is also easily lost in the processes of writing and of imagining another person. To me, however, it is very important to consider situated perspective and things relating to the body, such as dis_ability, and what that means in terms of conducting fieldwork. Tajinder's fieldwork deals with women specifically. There is probably more to be said in how gender identity and dis_ability need to be considered alongside one another. This and other aspects I addressed earlier are the reason why I proposed to talk about intersectional complications in this contribution. Intersectionality points to the idea that different marginalized perspectives may allow for a supportive practice of care and empowerment. Yet, they also mean difference, of course: as a white scholar based in a central European country, I have privilege that also needs to be considered. I also tried accounting for that in our chapter.

A question to you, Tajinder: how do you feel about including your own perspective and background in reflections on fieldwork and ethnography? Is this something you have been taught and encouraged to do in your training until now? Has this been a new aspect that the chapter and my contribution may to some extent have added to your writing practice?

Tajinder:

Bringing together our different ways of producing knowledge—my fieldwork with disabled women in Delhi and your autoethnographic reflections based on living with chronic illness and disability—was not easy. In fact, the challenges we faced also made our collaboration very meaningful. Unlike traditional writing, where people often work from the same field site or within the same academic discipline, we were working across different places and life experiences. This made writing our chapter a slow and thoughtful process.

The autoethnographic mode that you introduced, with its deep attention to embodiment and institutional care, prompted me to critically re-examine my own positionality: not only as a researcher but also as someone with limited training or awareness around queer subjects and non-binary identities. Your approach pushed me to reflect more deeply on the assumptions I carried into the writing process, particularly those shaped by my earlier academic and cultural experiences. In much of my previous academic training, these issues had either been marginalized or entirely absent. This gap became particularly visible, as you can see in the Google Doc where you thoughtfully corrected my use of gendered pronouns such as 'her' and 'she,' replacing them with more inclusive terms like 'they' and 'their.' These editorial interventions were not simply grammatical adjustments; they served as important reminders of the need for greater sensitivity and awareness in how we represent identities through language. I realized through this process that in many academic spaces I have been part of, especially within my regional and national contexts, there is still very limited exposure to non-binary and queer-inclusive writing practices. The conventions of academic writing

in which I was trained often continue to default to binary gender norms, leaving little room for representing the diverse ways people experience and articulate their identities. Working with you helped me see how important it is to challenge these norms and to cultivate a writing practice that is more inclusive, respectful, and reflective of the communities we engage with in our research. At the same time, I recognize that moving towards such inclusivity requires ongoing learning, openness to correction, and a willingness to step beyond the comfort zones that traditional academic training often establishes.

One of the biggest compromises we made, I also feel, was the limited space available in the chapter to fully situate our identities and contexts. For instance, I wanted to write about the intersectionality of gender with caste, class, or tribe, which plays a crucial role in the Indian context. In connecting to the colloquium's focus on troubled solidarities, I think what we practiced was not ideal collaboration—but a realistic one. One that recognized structural hierarchies in authorship but also tried to subvert them by making room for both your discomfort and mine, for both forms of writing and knowledge. In this way, our chapter became like a patchwork: not perfectly put together, but carefully made, with shared effort, honesty, and respect for each other.

My next question: what does our chapter do that goes against the usual rules of traditional writing?

Isabel:

I think we have a lot of relatively unconventional things going on in our text: first of all, the writing without meeting and ultimately making the text the encounter we are having. Then, the broad range of experience and perspective covered, combining many specific ethnographic and autoethnographic details into one narrative that aims to instruct anthropology students. Ultimately though, we are still sticking to the form requested by the editors of the volume, which includes, for example, boxes with definitions of terms or citations. We are also not going against the basic conventions of academic writing: that is, we are not using fictional narrative, a highly unconventional structure, or other forms of style that are beyond the scope of established academic writing. In total, though, I still believe that speaking about disability remains a topic that requires more work and public attention, especially when it comes to personal experience. And here, it does not really matter whether the personal experience is that of a person with a disability or a person working on and with disabled people. Ultimately, it was very interesting for me to try to understand Tajinder's perspective on working with people with disability, in a country that I have never been to and where the conditions for living with disability are different to Germany. The question of representation—and who can speak for whom—becomes relevant: a classic of anthropological thought in the decolonial-feminist school. Moreover, I was surprised to see that as a person with a disability, I was somebody

that a fellow scholar was seeking to represent adequately. Having done an important part of my fieldwork in Ghana as a white German person, I am very much used to being in danger of misrepresenting people while making myself as invisible as possible in order to be best attuned to other people's experience.

How is it for you? What does our chapter do that goes against the usual rules for traditional writing, from your perspective?

Tajinder:

While working together on our writing, we combined autoethnographic and fieldwork experiences in a way that challenged the idea of having just one field or one fixed research site. Instead of telling one single story, we made space in our chapter for different places, different time periods, and different identities. While adhering to some academic conventions, like structured citations and defined boxes for additional information (as required by the editors), our chapter foregrounded personal experience, vulnerability, and relational ethics in ways that often remain hidden in traditional academic texts.

While I have always known my fieldwork is shaped by who I am, I was not taught to write my experiences with disabled women into the text explicitly, in the way you did. In Indian academia and much of 'Global South' ethnography, the norm of 'neutral observation' or detached positionality still dominates. Additionally, my experience frequently mirrored the burden of having to 'prove' the ethnographic validity of my fieldwork. I grappled with the fear that my voice might be perceived as too narrative-driven, too emotional, too biased, or unintentionally reinforcing ableist perspectives. Your writing style encouraged me to foreground my vulnerabilities, not as distractions from analysis, but as sites of knowledge production. That was both empowering and unsettling. Thus, what our chapter did against traditional writing norms was not only stylistic but knowledge- and power-related, which can be useful for the students who will be reading our chapter. We allowed pluralities of experience without forcing them into a single coherent master narrative. We acknowledged and foregrounded power asymmetries within our collaboration itself, not just in the field.

So, let me ask you: have you ever felt like your voice or point of view was overshadowed or had to be changed for the sake of 'balance'?

Isabel:

I was and still am quite aware that, as a researcher who already holds a PhD and has more experience with publishing in international anglophone academic contexts, I have an advantage in that field. Yet, it is very important for me to meet collaborators on eye level and try to break with academic hierarchies, which are always present in the institutions where we work. Over

distance, this is difficult to address, tackle, and talk about, as it would require having an explicit conversation about this. At the same time, though, what we actually wanted to do was write an article, which is best approached by getting down to writing. I did mention this pressure of performing in a highly competitive market before, so I will not go into a lot more detail here or repeat myself, but I felt that the balance I had to keep in a very mindful way was between passing on my knowledge in terms of edits, suggestions, and corrections while not overwriting your own voice, Tajinder. In the end, this did not overshadow my own point of view at all; it just meant that I felt some responsibility on my shoulders that I did not really want there. You recently sent me a message reminding me to finish my work on our dialogue and on the abstract for the talk here. That message included a short notice that in Indian culture, one respects elders, and you here considered me an elder, which is why you wanted to wait for my final approval. I think I responded with something like a 'thank you,' because this is also a great compliment, but I also emphasized the wish to work on eye level. I think if we had been able to meet in person or even just have better face-to-face digital communication channels, we could have resolved this partially by having a stronger interpersonal relationship. Maybe we are something like academic pen pals with a task, and this forum gives us the chance to reflect on what else was part of completing this task. I also want to show respect for your cultural background and things that are important for you, such as respecting elders. At the same time, and I also practice this in teaching, I think that respect should be a given in any relationship we have, hence seniority should not play a role so much, as it then can stand in the way of speaking your mind, engaging in open-ended discussions, and asking questions.

I would like to direct this question back at you. Have you ever felt like your voice or point of view was overshadowed or had to be changed for the sake of 'balance'?

Tajinder:

You're absolutely right that it's tricky to unpack and negotiate hierarchy over distance, especially when our primary focus is rushing into drafts and deadlines with diverse backgrounds in academic and cultural contexts. We have also overcome the barriers such as who takes the lead on what sections, how we signal when we're offering a suggestion versus imposing an edit, and so on. This reduced the possibilities of overshadowing our point of view. And I agree about the engagements related to open-ended discussions and asking questions.

So, what problems did we encounter when we tried to put our ideas about disability and care into words that academics or students could understand?

Isabel:

I think a big challenge, at least for me, was to write general entry-level instructions for learners of ethnographic methods in the first place. We are usually taught to write academically, meaning to theorize, abstract, and argue. I can imagine that at the PhD level especially, you would be very focused on producing this kind of text, which is what is required when writing a PhD. It is, however, not required in such a format for learners. And most importantly, we had to keep our intended audience in mind while writing. Does this include our readers? Does it motivate them to read on? Does it provide hands-on support and practical recommendations for students and other practitioners? As we were merging autoethnographic reflection from my end and ethnography-based material with some autoethnographic reflection from your end, this consideration of our readers was a lot to think about. At the same time, it was also helpful as a perspective for editing and making our contributions speak to each other.

What do you think and how do you feel about this, and were there other problems we encountered?

Tajinder:

Yes, I agree with you. Too much theorizing from either of us could obscure the practical takeaway; too many anecdotes might lead readers to question the underlying methods. Additionally, another hurdle that we encountered during our writing process was striking the right tone. We wanted our voice to be supportive and encouraging, rather than prescriptive or authoritative. Academic writing often positions the author as an expert dispensing wisdom; by contrast, we aimed to position ourselves as fellow learners who have grappled with similar challenges. This required softening some of our language—changing ‘one must’ to ‘you might try,’ for example—and acknowledging uncertainties or variations in ethnographic practice.

In what ways can other people learn from the way we write together across countries and differences? How might digital collaboration keep changing or redefining ethnographic power?

Isabel:

I think it requires a guide for such kinds of collaborations, possibly written in the exact way in which we are communicating here right now, and possibly contributed to by more people than just the two of us. This guide, or these helpful points, can raise awareness and tangible advice for speaking from different backgrounds, methodologically addressing power imbalances in the writing and editing process, and overcoming distancing factors. I think it is also important to share the fact that, while you are saying that digital

tools have made us more connected these days, they are by no means always available to everyone and at the same quality. For example, we often struggled with bad signal and sound quality during internet-based calls. These barriers are very real and also require us to find other ways of building relationships of trust. I think that while we engage in a professional space, it is absolutely crucial that as a professional practice, we are able to establish such relationships. Otherwise, difficult writing projects—as those across distance are—suffer, and we end up with a frustrating experience. Instead, I think these are worthwhile endeavors, and it would be great to have experience and advice to build on that can then inform future exchanges of this kind. What do you think, Tajinder?

Tajinder:

Yes, I agree with you, Isabel. I think a guide based on how we actually talk and write together—like this contribution—would really help others, those who want to work across countries and differences. Working together like this has shown me that power in research doesn't just sit with one person. It shifts between us, especially when we're writing together and learning from each other. Even though we're not in the same place, we can still build trust and share ideas in meaningful ways. What makes our writing special is not just the topic, but the way we support each other and stay open to learning. That, I think, is the real strength of this kind of collaboration. And yes, we should write down our experience, so that others—especially young researchers—can learn from it.

1. There was no funding to pay for a trip to Berlin for Tajinder, very much a reality in the academic everyday, yet to be pointed out here as a general lack of support for 'Global South' scholars and student researchers (both MA and PhD students). This is, of course, also a product of recent funding cuts for disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, which make departments struggle to make ends meet.
2. 'Collaborations and Solidarities in Troubled Times,' colloquium SoSe 2025, organized by Alice von Bieberstein and Elisabeth Luggauer, Institute of European Ethnology, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, https://www.euroethno.hu-berlin.de/de/das-institut/instituts-kolloquium/institutskolloquium-archiv/copy2_of_institutskolloquium (21/10/2025).
3. Actually (which Tajinder could not be aware of due to distance and lack of direct means of communication), Isabel was writing most of the article during fieldwork in Cape Town, South Africa, while experiencing an uncomfortable MS attack.

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Isabel Bredenbröker (they/them) is an anthropologist working between academia and art. They hold a postdoctoral faculty position at the Institute for Anthropology and Cultural Research, University of Bremen, Germany. Isabel's work focusses on material and visual culture, specifically the anthropology of death, plastics and synthetic materials, anthropology of art and museums,

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Reflexive Essay

There Are Some Things Just Not Worth Doing Alone: A Reflection on Peer Mentorship among Librarians That Centers the Whole Person

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There Are Some Things Just Not Worth Doing Alone: A Reflection on Peer Mentorship among Librarians That Centers the Whole Person

Christina Bell & Gina Levitan

In this reflexive essay, we assert that truly collaborative work is built from supportive peer networks that are about more than professional development or successfully navigating the field, particularly in academic librarianship. Academic support departments and services like the library, tutoring, and the writing center have long encouraged students to develop supportive, collaborative relationships as part of their success. We now seek to consider how we can encourage similar structures for professionals that extend beyond the demands of professional growth to an ethos of professional care. This reflexive essay will present our experiences creating and sustaining such supportive peer networks at several levels of our careers. We will discuss what has and has not worked for each of us in both staff and faculty positions and how we propose that early career scholars cultivate their networks for sustainable, ongoing care and success.

Keywords: burnout, collaboration as care, librarianship, peer networks, whole person approach

In this reflexive essay, we share and contextualize our experiences of creating and sustaining supportive peer networks as a tool of professional collaboration and one of professional care.

The two of us met in graduate school and have been collaborators and friends but never actual colleagues. We are both white women who inhabit other intersectional identities: one is first generation/working class, cis, queer, and neurodiverse, while the other is a first-time parent, cis, able-bodied, and comes from a family where many members have pursued advanced degrees in higher education. Our research and career experience comes from the perspective of librarianship and its interdisciplinary nature in the context of the United States of America. We met in a dual degree program, where we focused both on the professional degree in librarianship and a second theory-based program in humanities and social thought (one which has since rebranded itself into something else entirely). While our work now is in libraries, our backgrounds are in the humanities, and we have always found a strong connection between the two. As we occupy roles best defined as 'midcareer,' our work centers largely on the multidisciplinary nature of research on peer support, lateral mentorship, burnout, and associated challenges, and collaboration at all professional levels as resistance to these challenges.

Higher education has shifted focus to a 'whole student' approach to teaching and learning but has not yet applied the idea of wholeness to

those whose labor upholds the institution. Collaboration, lateral mentorship, and peer networks are at the heart of professional success in the academe today, as they both influence one's career advance and function as a resistance tool against the neo-liberalization of the 'institution' writ large. The collaboration needed to survive exists within the things that keep you sane in your career—and not necessarily in the systems that, as we have been taught, will help you thrive professionally (authorship, conferences, etc.).

We believe the solution to the problems of burnout and overextending ourselves at work is found in your peers. But how does a peer network accomplish this? In our experience as academic librarians and college faculty (and perhaps this is something the reader has experienced as well), the role of the peer network is not to 'accomplish' anything. There is no quantified 'return of investment'—just an antidote to the isolation typically felt at work. Instead of constantly trying to reinvent the wheel, a peer network helps connect you to all the different types of already existing wheels that might fit your particular problem. Such support takes many forms: the monthly happy hour with a safe colleague to decompress from the usual workplace drama; the group chat that shares advice as much as baby and pet photos; the informal mentors who leverage their experience to help with no expectation of return—and become friends.

In what follows, we present how we avoid the inevitable burnout-induced crash by challenging vocational awe in workers and the aspects of the 'neoliberal university' favored by administration, first with a professional context of care and then with the establishment of a peer network.

A Professional Context of 'Care'

What does 'care' mean in a professional context, and why does it matter when we talk about authorship, the humanities, and higher education? When we first approached this question, it became clear to us in our reflection as both librarians and former humanities students and scholars that collaboration was the thread that brought all of this together. In a professional context, then, care is the act of creating community, connecting with peers, establishing peer mentor relationships, and forging supportive relationships. Specifically, a context of care in our profession represents, for us, a solution for burnout, devaluation, and demoralization—something that we know to be common not only in librarianship but throughout the higher education landscape, particularly in the humanities. We have witnessed a common experience of devaluation, when the general public has continued to question our usefulness, when the conversation has been that our work is not needed as much anymore, and when we constantly hear that new technologies will make our work obsolete (Noonoo 2019).

We do not define 'network' as a verb (that is, as a means for professional gain), but as community. We may use terms like 'community,' 'support,' 'mentorship,' and 'network' interchangeably because, for us, they

are all inherently linked to the types of collaboration we see as essential for success. Corporate-speak contextualizes networking and network building as a purely professional endeavor, necessary for status and growth (Cole 2019). However, we situate a network first as a community of care, one from which many kinds of collaboration can grow. It is also important to note that in the community of care, the care comes first; if some kind of professional development is to follow, that is an added benefit. It is not the defining principle or motivation for encouraging those networks in the first place.

The labor done in higher education is largely misunderstood and decontextualized by the wider world. Particularly in the United States, efforts to exert government control over the work in the academe—whether it be pedagogy, research, or curriculum—is further driving the burnout already exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is especially potent in library and information-related fields, and we hope that by outlining some of the available research here, we can show how it can resonate across disciplines. The many disruptions we have all faced in recent years have highlighted the gendered nature of work deemed as ‘care,’ whether personal or institutional. In the academe, women are more likely to take on service roles with affective labor responsibilities and spend more of their time engaged in this work, which carries additional burdens for BIPOC women (Docka-Filipeck and Stone 2020: 2160). Yet, women still hold less than half of the permanent positions in the professoriate (Berkeley Economic Review 2024).

From its professionalization in the modern academe, librarianship has been a ‘pink collar job,’ a largely feminized profession that sits alongside nursing, childhood education, and office support work as primarily service-oriented (Drabinski, Geraci and Shirazi 2019: 104). At the same time, traditionally masculine jobs are defined as ‘productive’ in a way that the so-called women’s work is not. This is seen in higher education, where men are more likely to grow as faculty engaged in productive research, while women align to teaching, mentorship, and service roles (Higgins 2017: 70–71). Roxanne Shirazi (2017: 88) takes this a step further and defines academic librarians as existing in a *reproductive* role in the academe—that is, as supporters of the *productive* work of others. This work is further devalued, as it does not fit the pinnacle of academic production: the ‘publish or perish’ model of knowledge creation (Shirazi 2017: 89). We see an imbalanced gender representation in who does ‘caregiving’ or affective labor in academic settings, both in the professoriate and service roles like librarianship (Docka-Filipeck and Stone 2020: 2160). This work goes largely unrecognized and unsupported, placing a greater burden on large sections of our workforce. This labor is outward (directed at students and colleagues) and inward (directed at the self), and even buzzy articles that discuss burnout and self-care acknowledge that the tasks of self-care can contribute to further burnout issues (Petersen 2019).

Burnout and Vocational Awe

The term 'burnout' entered the popular English-language lexicon in the 1960s and was first employed by teachers, social workers, and hospice caregivers (Wood et al. 2020: 4). The fact that burnout was first attributed to service professions, and largely feminized ones, demonstrates how little has changed over the last fifty years of feminist movements. Burnout is a syndrome resulting from unmanaged workplace stress. It is defined by three overlapping dimensions: 'feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job, and reduced professional efficacy' (World Health Organization 2019). Burnout is not a specifically gendered issue, but research indicates that men working in librarianship specifically experience it at much lower rates than women or nonbinary people, and burnout rates are higher in younger professionals (Wood et al. 2020: 12).

Burnout is commonly assessed using the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), developed by the psychologist Christina Maslach in 1981. Her research is most commonly applied in the high-stress worlds of health sciences and mental healthcare but has broad applications regardless of the occupation (Maslach and Leiter 2016: 104; see also Krasner et al. 2009: 1285). The themes of burnout outlined in the inventory carry over into the world of libraries and higher education. For some authors, we see it in overwork, the imposter syndrome, and low wages (Andrews 2020; Brown and Setfoducato 2019: 10–11; Geary and Hickey 2019; Lacey and Parlette-Stewart 2017). In other research, burnout also contributes to not only a 'weaponization' of work culture (Williams and Fife 2022) but also a cheapening of our labor (McLure 2021).

In 2017, Kaetrena Davis Kendrick (2017: 847) published a phenomenological study on low morale among academic librarians (spoiler alert: it is very common), expanding on other forms of qualitative research on burnout to understand the underlying and ongoing experience that drives workers to breakdown. The following year, Fobazi Ettarh (2018) gave a name to one of the defining characteristics of librarianship with her framework of *vocational awe* as 'the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique.' While Ettarh assigns the term 'vocational awe' to libraries, there are many ways in which the concept applies across higher education. Pre-pandemic, Davis Kendrick and Ettarh, both of whom are Black women and librarians, succinctly described what would be significant yet common experiences for many in the coming years. Ettarh has continued this work through the pandemic and notes that COVID-19 responses in libraries lead to 'uneven expectations of labor' in asking librarians to be all things to all people while serving the public in a crisis (Ettarh and Vidas 2022).

The saying 'do more with less' is a perfect example of how burnout and vocational awe coexist and manifest in libraries. Budget cuts, staff cuts,

low wages, low turnover of total available jobs *and/or* high turnover within a given institution, toxic workplaces (bosses and patrons alike), unsafe working conditions (from the psychological environment to the physical safety of library workers), and so on—each of these systemic issues have been repurposed as awesome feats to overcome with pride and grit (Harwell 2008: 382). Librarians working at different types of colleges and universities experience different types of pressures (issues further exacerbated in public or school libraries): burnout and low morale are as persistent as the vocational awe that keeps us coming back for more. In higher education in particular, librarians exist in a liminal space in the institutions where we work because our position changes depending on said institution. At one college, a librarian can be classified as faculty (either teaching or non-teaching), or they can be at-will administrative staff (meaning they can be let go at any time—something we have seen recently with our colleagues at Barnard and Duke) (Davis and Elikins 2025; Lin 2025). We the authors have each held roles that reflect this to the letter.

When we entered graduate school in 2010, professionals were complaining that the 2008 recession had delayed the long-anticipated wave of retirements in libraries (Wilder 2009). Demographic data of academic librarians in the United States show that the expected downward trend in age did not happen then and still has not. We are now considered a ‘greying profession’ as much as a female one (Wilder 2017). When we consider these trends on age alongside the research on experiences of burnout, it is no wonder that younger generations of librarians struggle to find jobs and to grow in their careers, and experience higher rates of burnout given how little support is available. In our own experience as early career librarians, very few structured support systems existed, particularly at the institutional level. Many of the professional spaces required time and money that were not available to us at the time. We found ways to build our own informal support communities precisely because so few options for collaborative care, mentorship, or professional partnerships were available.

Sometimes those peer relationships are individual, like between us the coauthors, and other times those relationships grow into larger initiatives. One example in libraries is the group We Here, founded out of a collection of informal networks to create more cohesive support for BIPOC workers (We Here 2025). We Here is ‘described as a support group, collaboration network, and mentorship platform’ that provides educational programming as well as a support network for the BIPOC library community. Tellingly, they specifically call out that ‘people in the private communities are doing the work institutions and professional organizations have not yet built into the fabric of our professions and We Here hopes to uplift, celebrate, and embed this work into our professional worlds’ (We Here 2025). We the coauthors, as white women, are not We Here members, but we support their work because they call out the very problems we have also experienced and are doing work to support those who are most affected.¹

Organizations like We Here and informal peer networks both utilize the ‘whole person’ approach. The ‘whole person’ approach is one way

to better coalesce the necessary community support to achieve a stronger ethos of collaboration. This approach is typically used in teaching but can be applied to the professoriate and other workers in the academe. Also called holistic education, this method considers not just academic success as the measure of education but how students find meaning, form community, and craft their own identity as learners (Lauricella and MacAskill 2015: 56). To consider this at the professional level, our output as researchers is not the sole definition of our success: we also consider how we contribute to our professional communities in supportive and collaborative ways.

The 'Whole Person' Approach

Academic librarianship uses the concept of the 'whole person' in teaching and learning, but it has not yet applied the idea of wholeness to those whose labor upholds the institution: the librarians. In fact, when we started looking at available research focused on the workplace, the first articles we found analyzed how *management* should adapt the whole person approach as a form of leadership development (see Lester et al. 2017). While this may serve to benefit the workers under that leadership, the end goal is for the benefit of the institution and not the workers as people. What research is available on more holistic faculty wellness, even in a post-COVID context, considers the job market and job satisfaction above the actual grassroots networks of care formed to resist institutional demands (Cruz and Atterholt 2024: 35–36).

The whole student approach demands much from those doing the work, as it places equal emphasis on physical, emotional, spiritual, social, and ethical growth alongside intellectual development (Mintz 2017). What works at one library might not work at another, depending on the student population and their unique needs and contexts. We have seen this in our own libraries. A commuter student who can only come to the library after they have finished a work day has very different needs than a residential student who can come to the library after their on-campus courses. Students who have to juggle multiple responsibilities outside of their course load are going to need different points of access to practically everything at the library compared to students who do not. In approaching library services with the whole student in mind, however, we are able to provide exactly what our students need. And they thrive as a result.

If we are able to provide services that can fully encompass the needs of everyone in our communities—our students, staff, faculty—then we can start to fix some of the systemic issues that lead to burnout and low morale for all of us. If we have seen the whole student approach lead to greater student success and increases in all the benchmarks that our institutions (typically) ask us to quantify, then why don't we turn that approach inwards?

We propose that early career scholars and graduate students cultivate their networks for sustainable, ongoing care and resulting success. While this can be achieved at any professional level, doing so at the outset

helps to mediate many of the stressors that drive early burnout. This is especially true for anyone in an underrepresented identity who, despite the claims of many politicians, do not receive special consideration or material support to succeed as professionals in higher education. The challenges of competition and burnout in the academe are further exacerbated by race, class, parenthood, caregiving, disability, and many other intersectional identities. This is further complicated by the demand for assimilation into white, middle class working culture as a precursor to success in the academe (Crist and Clark-Keefe 2022: 3). We have each experienced this in our own ways, whether in learning how to communicate 'professionally' or finding opportunities for growth while lacking formal mentorship. We do not define success solely as professional achievement, in climbing the ranks of faculty or institutional administration, or in contributing to the scholarly conversation. So many of these markers are defined as individual accomplishments, when in fact we are more successful through community and collaborative care.

A Network for Care

Many months have passed since we submitted our abstract for this reflexive essay. In that time, the world has changed—and it has changed in a way where everything feels impossible to navigate. Perhaps this feeling of isolation is the point. History demonstrates how organizing is effective to making social change, and institutions have long resisted too much collective organizing to centralize resource management. Having to 'do more with less' is a classic problem in librarianship, but having to 'do it all, but on your own' is a classic 21st century problem. Across all levels of the academe, we have seen the lack of institutional support and the unequal demands for affective labor. While those of us in student-facing roles are tasked with implementing whole-person approaches to student success, that work is rarely turned inward. We are left to find our own means of support where and how we can in the absence of structural options. While there is an expectation that hierarchies of support are available, this has not been the case in our experience. This is why we advocate for lateral networks of care. It is these peer support networks that we can begin to reflect, dismantle, and recontextualize our labor.

When we were thinking about what to write for this essay, the only solution that we kept coming back to is that we would not have gotten this far without each other or without our peer mentors/support network. We made an incomplete list of all the things that we have recently reached out to our networks about:

- Does this email sound weird? I have to send it to my boss/students/the entire faculty.
- Has anyone used this type of module before? How did you build it?
- I have a student who is interested in A, B, C, and D. Any ideas on with whom they can be connected?

- I am having an issue with a colleague and need to talk to HR. How can I protect myself here?
- I just saw a CfP that looks really interesting. Does anyone want to brainstorm ideas or collaborate?
- I am working on a new article. Does anyone have citations on this topic?
- I have been asked to take the lead on this project, and I don't even know where to start. How do I ask for help? Where would you start?
- How are you?
- What do you think about this job? Is this a red flag?
- And so on, and so on...

These types of questions are pretty run-of-the-mill for any work advice column, and we are sure you could find an archived answer somewhere for each one. But the role of the network is not only to help you answer a question that you might not want to ask directly at your job (or of your job) but to be a place where you can ask questions in the first place. It is to provide the time and space to ask these questions, to seek advice or validation, or to be challenged in your own assumptions about this or that. Early in our careers, we sent many *Ask A Manager*² columns back and forth and tried to adapt the answers to our current predicaments, but in time we learned that as we grew our networks, the support we received from actual real-life people was better than anonymity on the internet. As we are now mid-career librarians, we have been able to serve as referees for each other, connect people across networks for a wider net of support, and watch each other grow as people who happen to be faculty and librarians.

We wrote earlier in this reflection that some time has passed between when we submitted our proposal to when we started creating this knowledge product. We have already indicated that a lot has changed—both personally and politically—for both of us, and we are sure for the reader as well. Regardless of how much changes, whether it be shocking or expected, we still feel the same about the importance of having peers to fall back on.

It is with the support of our peers that we have been able to have the confidence to apply for jobs we were unsure about, to say no to opportunities that looked too good to be true (because they were), to take a leap of faith and move into a new field (or to a new city), to speak up in a meeting when it was unpopular to do so. As we move into yet another unprecedented time for the world, and in particular in the United States (where we are living, working, writing from) and our institutions of higher education, we have learned that the greatest thing you can have to weather the storm is community. Simply for the sake of being around and with other people who understand your situation is enough to learn and grow without burning out or falling prey to any number of things. We have seen how in librarianship in particular, reflecting on the 'whole student' leads to better learning. If this approach is turned inwards, the results would be similar: more support leads to better learning experiences and outcomes.

We hope that we can all leverage our collective networks to advocate for better recognition of collaboration as a strength, not a stepping stone to individual (and isolated) opportunities. We do not have to perpetuate the notion of the solo researcher in the ivory tower, or the library carrel. The most impactful thing that has happened in our respective careers has not been the conference presentation, the article, or the book chapter. It is the networks we have established and the communities we have cultivated. They are the central pillar to the quintessential notion of thriving, not surviving.

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2. Ask a Manager (<https://www.askamanager.org/>) is a site run by Alison Green, who responds to anonymous complaints, queries, and more that are related to work culture in the United States. This site started in 2007 and has an extensive back catalog of advice entries ranging from how to let your job know you are taking parental leave (which in the US is complicated) to how to approach a coworker who chronically steals your lunch.

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Book Review

**Schuchardt K and Spieker I (eds) (2024)
Performanzen & Praktiken. Kollaborative Formate
in Wissenschaft und Kunst. Leipzig, Leipziger
Universitätsverlag. ISBN: 978-3-96023-610-8**

Jonas Tinius
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin

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**Schuchardt K and Spieker I (eds) (2024)
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Jonas Tinius

It has been a few years since anthropology once again turned to the question of collaboration, not simply as a research technique but as a modality of knowledge production. In moments of disciplinary uncertainty and public delegitimation, the issue of who produces anthropological knowledge, how, and with whom is crucial. After all, collaboration is a mirror of anthropology's self-reflection. How we collaborate defines what we can know, shaping and often creating what we consider a field and the work we do with it. One might even ask: can there be an anthropology without collaboration, and what does this mean for how we conceive the discipline? Discussions of this kind can easily result in unnecessary navel-gazing or patronizing methodological suggestions, but in the best cases they reflect on what anthropology is and can be. George E. Marcus (2000) offered an example with the practice of 'para-sites,' those awkward, productive, shared spaces between fieldwork sites and curated experiments, and so have some of the more serious discussions of multimodality, curation, and art, which do not assume that we already know what multimodal or artistic practice means (see Abu-Lughod 1985; Canclini 2014; Sansi 2015).

Performanzen & Praktiken. Kollaborative Formate in Wissenschaft und Kunst ('Performances & Practices. Collaborative Formats in Science and Art'), edited by Katharina Schuchardt and Ira Spieker, responds to these questions and probes what we think we know about collaboration. Despite questioning disciplinary boundaries, which is reflected in the broad range of its contributors' principal affiliations and professional identities, the book decidedly addresses German-speaking and also disciplinary debates on anthropology. This may appear contradictory given the theme of the book, but it is also a welcome and necessary contribution to a discipline that is changing its course. The ways in which art, performance, and, for a lack of better words, other forms of *practicing life* have been studied in anthropology have drastically changed over the last decades—in part through the conceptual opening of multimodality and what it tells us about how anthropologists work with other(s') forms of knowledge production.

The volume stems from a 2022 conference at the Institute of Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology (Institut für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde, ISGV), organized in cooperation with the *Gruppe der außeruniversitären Institute und Landesstellen* (Group of extra-university institutions and regional offices) of the German Society for Empirical Cultural Studies (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Empirische Kulturwissenschaft, DGEKW).

It gathers thirteen essays plus an introduction under four thematic headings (*Positionierungen, Interventionen, Inszenierungen, and Kollaborationen*), which I found only moderately useful because these themes obviously overlap and speak to most contributions. That being said, the contributions' insistence on actually working through and clarifying these and related concepts in their respective accounts is for the most part very refreshing. Published in 2024 by the Leipziger Universitätsverlag in the series *Kleine Schriften zur sächsischen Geschichte und Volkskunde* ('Short Writings on Saxon History and Cultural Anthropology'), it offers, on the whole, an immensely rich portfolio of contemporary efforts to experiment across the boundaries of art, ethnography, and public engagement.

In their introduction, '*Performanzen und Praktiken—eine Standortbestimmung*' ('Performances and practices—A reappraisal of the field'), Schuchardt and Spieker frame the book around two principles aims: first, to explore forms of doing and presenting research beyond conventional academic modalities; and second, to analyze the heterogeneous '*Produktionsgemeinschaften*' (p. 7, 'production communities') and collaborative structures that such projects generate. This does not take place in a vacuum, and Schuchardt and Spieker draw inspiration in the performative turn in anthropology and some current discussions of multimodal methodologies. Collaboration, they argue, entails friction: a contact zone of deliberate irritations and misunderstandings (p. 14). For the editors, these frictions are productive. Failure, rather than success, can become a generator of knowledge events, provided there is the right openness in project design that allows for failure to happen. This is not in itself a groundbreaking observation, but the honesty with which contributors address it makes for entertaining and yet insightful reading.

Schuchardt and Spieker's overview also stresses that collaborative research should be understood in terms of process rather than its result: the volume focuses more on 'concrete working modi' (p. 15) and less on final products of research, though an immense number of projects is presented throughout the book. In this framing, collaboration becomes a condition of research rather than an optional method. Schuchardt and Spieker emphasize how projects require an ongoing negotiation between institutional, methodological, and disciplinary logics and constraints. Of course, this is, again, not a surprising observation, given that, for instance, accounts of 'the curatorial' have been calling for a recognition of collaborative forms of work and a questioning of the protocols of infrastructural and institutional labor for over ten years (see Rogoff 2013 or Sternfeld 2022). While Schuchardt and Spieker do not explicitly address extra-university infrastructures, the volume itself emerged from collaboration between the ISGV and the *Gruppe der außeruniversitären Institute und Landesstellen*, illustrating the reflexive, process-oriented work that anthropologists can do (and, as the editors also stress, have long been doing) beyond the seminar room.

The volume's thirteen chapters develop these ideas through detailed ethnographic and variously artistic experiments, which are on the whole

refreshing to read precisely because the reflections on process and forms of collaboration do not come at the expense of ethnography and descriptions of fieldwork. Alexa Färber and Alexander Martos's essay on the '*Realfiktion Klimarechnungshof*' ('Real-Fictional Climate Court of Audit') does so by interrogating the 'project logic' of research as a late-capitalist form of labor organization (p. 64). Building on Maria Muhle's notion of *pre-enactment* as a practice of 'possibility' rather than reality, they expand ethnographic method into a kind of future-oriented speculative performativity, or *Realfiktion*. Their contribution, like many others in the book, playfully uses different media within the text itself, such as field notes, screenshots, diagrams, Zoom-call photographs. While produced within the usual constraints of academic publishing (and its consequences for design, quality, placement, and so on), it does make the publication feel like a documentation of multimedia and multimodal processuality in its own right.

Michael J. Greger's '*Ich bin sozusagen das Dazwischen: Die Performanzen und Texte des Bodo Hell*' ('I am, so to speak, the in-between: The performances and texts of Bodo Hell') is an example of a discussion that itself plays with mode, narrative, focus, and conversation with interlocutors. Portraying the Austrian writer and performer Bodo Hell as a 'social seismograph' (p. 111), as an 'in-between' (*Dazwischen*), Greger explores the converging of artistic and ethnographic inquiry with life itself. It is moving how the essay works with literature, narration, and the appreciation of one person's lifeworld: Hell's performances and writings, the author argues, transform social sensibilities, from the preservation of natural resources to the valuation of traditional labor, into literature (p. 111). The piece exemplifies what many other contributions enact: a process of reflecting on the relation between fieldwork and form.

Several contributions also draw attention to the institutional conditions under which collaboration occurs. Simon Graf's reflections on the difficulties and potentials of applying jointly for research funding and the different paths that an artist and an anthropologist take throughout a project's lifespan and afterlife, for instance, reveal how the open-ended nature of artistic inquiry often conflicts with bureaucratic expectations and predefined notions of scientific accountability. Such attention to administrative frictions expands the notion of fieldwork to include the infrastructures that enable or restrict it, and we need more such analyses, especially when they offer solutions to constraints, or ideas for how to overcome unnecessary boundaries altogether.

The volume concludes with the only English-language text, 'Polyphonic Perspectives' by Tyyne Claudia Pollmann, an artist and professor for anatomy and morphology at the Weißensee Academy of Art in Berlin. In her discussion of student projects, including 'Visions4People,' a collaboration with her students and patients of the Charité Clinic for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, Pollmann argues that transdisciplinary artistic research is not a field seeking assimilation into mainstream scientific knowledge, with its predefined rules and fabricated territories, but one that develops local and temporal strategies which unfold their impact in the specific (p. 266). Her

brief mention of patients refusing to fill in student questionnaires in ways that are legible or useful (p. 272), for instance, offers a small and funny but also a critical lesson in how resistance and misunderstanding can open new epistemic grounds. Though it also begs the question that I have raised elsewhere (Tinius 2021)—as to whether anthropological discussions of collaboration do not have to consider more seriously the potential unwillingness of interlocutors to work together, and to take into consideration the desire for detachment as a significant and pervasive aspect of social life.

While the range of perspectives in the book is remarkable, the introduction could have engaged more explicitly and in greater detail with the existing traditions of multimodal and creative anthropological practice. Multimodality here sometimes still appears as an emerging horizon rather than as part of a longer conversation within visual, sensory, and experimental anthropology. Likewise, the editors' emphasis on performance sits slightly at odds with other artistic registers and practices explored in the volume, such as design, curation, or participatory art, to name but a few.

Still, the book's strength lies in the nuance and ethnographic depth of its contributions. Unlike many edited volumes on method and collaboration that remain at the level of conceptual reflection, this book offers richly textured narratives of research-in-practice and accounts that make visible the negotiations, frictions, and learning and unlearning processes of cooperation and collaboration. Another of its virtues is the variation in writing styles: some essays read as analytical articles, others as reflective diaries, dialogues, or visual-textual experiments. This polyphony enacts the multiplicity the editors and authors theorize.¹

Performanzen & Praktiken situates itself within a German lineage of collaborative anthropology and empirical cultural research while contributing to wider debates on practice-based and multimodal work beyond the discipline, strictly speaking. For anthropologists, curators, artists, and cultural practitioners invested in how collaboration produces knowledge and how frictions of working together can create productive fieldwork, this is a thoughtful and valuable resource. In the spirit of Marcus's para-site, the book invites us to dwell in the awkward, generative spaces where anthropology continues to reinvent itself through experimental practice.

1. Though the book could have done with fewer footnotes, which is itself a stylistic choice.

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Book review

**Donovan V (2025) Life in Spite of Everything:
Tales from the Ukrainian East. London, Daunt
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Victoria Donovan has dedicated her recent book, *Life in Spite of Everything: Tales from the Ukrainian East*, to the history and contemporary reality of Southern Ukraine, the macroregion collectively known as Donbas. The name 'Donbas' refers to the geological term 'Donets Coal Basin,' which is a part of the Great Eurasian Steppe. Donbas is divided into Greater, Lesser, and Eastern Donbas, but in contemporary political discourse, Donbas typically refers to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Ukraine (Naykova Dumka 2021). In Donovan's own words, 'Donbas, a region that has historically been located at the intersection of different empires, has been the focus of multiple colonisation campaigns and with them, many efforts to re-categorise and rebrand' (Donovan 2025: XIV). For this reason Donbas stands as one of the most complex, mythologized, and stigmatized subjects in Ukrainian history and politics (Portnov 2014, 2017).

Life in Spite of Everything represents an attempt to deconstruct the Soviet myth surrounding the region, engaging with the relatively recent Ukrainian tradition of grappling with Donbas's identity—a tradition that has emerged predominantly since the outbreak of the war in 2014 (Mykhed 2020; Studenna-Skruckva 2014; Vikhrov 2016; Zarembo 2022). A notable exception is Ivan Dziuba's (2015) trilogy, *Donetska rana Ukrainy* ('Ukraine's Donetsk Wound'), the first essay of which appeared in 2005. Its conceptual approach parallels such works as Oleksandr Mykhed's (2020) *la zmishaiu tvoiu krov iz vuhilliam* (which was translated into English as *I Will Mix Your Blood with Coal: Snapshots from the East of Ukraine*—see Mykhed 2025), based on the author's travels through the region and interviews with its residents. Written in a literary style, the book was among the first to foreground the voices of southeastern Ukrainians and is arguably the first work on the urban studies of the region. The focal point of Kateryna Zarembo's (2022) book is the grassroots activist movement representing the Ukrainian identity of Donbas. One may hope that Donovan's book will achieve similar significance among Anglophone audiences.

The book is rooted extensively in Donovan's fieldwork, which began with her initial visit to Severodonetsk in 2019. While originally focused on the history of labor migration, especially the enterprise of the Welsh industrialist John Hughes, Donovan began to recognize parallels between the histories of southeastern Ukraine and her native Cardiff, such as narratives of industrialization, language politics, and the cultural hegemony of more powerful neighbors (Donovan 2025: XII). Consequently, what began as a conventional historical analysis evolved into a more personal and engaged exploration of Southern Ukraine's history, one that seeks to reconstruct its

industrial and colonial past as well as trace its trajectory during the period of independence and the ongoing Russia-instigated conflict. As a result, Donovan's work resists easy categorization within a single disciplinary approach, despite her use of traditional historical-empirical methods and engagement with written, visual, and material sources, as well as with previous scholarship (e.g., Friedgut 1989). Significantly, the author also employs oral history and microhistorical methods, drawing upon interviews conducted with local scholars and activists: 'Local knowledge holders are instead centered in this book, unlocking the meaning of the region's special places and past experiences, peculiarities only people from and of this place could know' (Donovan 2025: XX).

In the late 1980s and early 2000s, foreign scholars often demonstrated greater interest in studying Donbas than their Ukrainian counterparts (Lindner 2006; Wilson 1995). At the time, research predominantly concentrated on the processes of industrialization: 'The Donbass is geographically within Ukraine, yet the Ukrainian population of the area plays only a marginal and largely reactive role in its history. For the Ukrainian peasant, industrial labor was a foreign way of life introduced by foreign *intruders*' (Friedgut 1989: 3, original emphasis). Among the early researchers who emphasized the region's multiethnic character and the complexity of its socio-economic relations was Hiroaki Kuromiya (Kuromiya 1998, see also Semkiv 2021). In her book, Donovan builds on these foundations, endeavoring to construct a polycentric narrative of the macroregion by posing the essential question: what is Donbas?

In pursuit of an answer, Donovan departs from the dominant Russian-Soviet historiographical paradigm, which posits Donbas as *dyke pole* ('wild field') (Naukova Dumka 2004), undeveloped territory whose 'real' existence commenced only with colonization, a narrative that systematically erases Ukrainian agency and the region's internal diversity (Zhukova 2021). In response, Ukrainian intellectuals have increasingly argued that Donbas is ultimately a myth concocted by Soviet propaganda (Stiazhkina 2014; Zarembo 2022: 22). Consequently, Donovan's book subjects this myth to rigorous critical analysis, primarily through the methods of urban and oral history. This approach empowers local knowledge and embraces the agency of local residents.

Life in Spite of Everything is structured into seven chapters that are organized along geo-economic and thematic lines. Through the prism of urban histories, Donovan elucidates key themes that are integral to the South, including the steppe's geology and development ('Mineral world'), the colonial past and Russian expansionism ('Colonial entanglement'), environmental challenges, and socio-cultural dynamics. For instance, the chapter 'Bright city' spotlights Severodonetsk and examines the creation of the chemical industry in 1930s southern Ukraine, the phenomenon of Soviet monotowns (single-industry urban settlements) and their precarious fate after the collapse of the USSR.

The following chapters portray another industrial and coastal city, Mariupol, and foregrounds two further themes: the Soviet valorization of

heavy industry and the enduring vestiges of such propaganda ('Cults'), as well as the ecological consequences of metallurgy and the activism of local environmentalists ('Pink skies'). According to the author, it is precisely this culture of grassroots activism that emerges as one of the book's principal focal points (The BEARR Trust 2025). Zarembo (2022) posits that the scale of social activism in Donbas can be attributed to the absence of a historically defined 'Ukrainian Donbas'; thus, grassroots movements became the catalyst for awakening regional Ukrainian identities within a national framework (Zarembo 2022: 40). Donovan's own research substantiates this claim: '...these were communities with a defined sense of their own identity and a clear vision for their region's future' (Donovan 2025: 169).

The final two chapters are devoted to the war that began in Donbas in 2014. The chapter titled 'Cultural front' examines the perceptions of and cultural responses to, primarily among grassroots activists, the Maidan revolution and ensuing Russian aggression, highlighting the role of museums, cultural workers, and artistic activism during wartime. A salient example is Masha Pronina, an artist, activist, and educator displaced to Mariupol in 2014; at the Platforma TU, a community cultural and artistic space, she championed artistic initiatives for marginalized youth, particularly LGBTQ+ teenagers (Donovan 2025: 177–181). Like many others, Masha was again forced to flee during the renewed Russian invasion in 2022.

The concluding chapter is arguably the book's most personal, as the full-scale invasion is interrogated through both the author's perspective and the lived experiences of individuals and institutions evacuated to western Ukraine. One of Donovan's most thought-provoking questions concerns the 'hierarchy of [war] suffering,' a dynamic which could, in the future, once more divide the East and West of the country (Donovan 2025: 220).

Donovan's book should not be regarded as a conventional monograph on the history of eastern Ukraine, nor does it provide a systematic and detached narrative. Rather, the author's overtly pro-Ukrainian stance, while explicit, does not diminish the scholarly value of her analysis. On the contrary, the incorporation of oral history and the results of extensive fieldwork, presented through vivid case studies and interviews, lend the text a distinctive accessibility and immediacy. Thus, readers are afforded not only an introduction to one of Ukraine's most multifaceted regions, but also insight into its heterogeneity: geological, ethnic, economic, and cultural; its intricate relationships with the rest of Ukraine; and the enduring stigma of 'Sovietness' (which it got mostly because of the prevailing Russophone population as well as consistent support for pro-Russian political parties).

For scholars and practitioners concerned with the history and culture of Eastern Europe and Russia, *Life in Spite of Everything* is an important contribution to the region's urban, oral, and microhistory, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of its economic and social structures, and a step towards the decolonization of knowledge about Donbas.

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