

When Anthropology Meets Contemporary Art

Notes for a Politics of Collaboration

KIVEN STROHM, *Université de Montréal*

Decolonization obliges us to reconsider the relationship between the observer and the observed.

—Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe, “Rethinking Fieldwork and Ethnographic Writing”

If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is speech coming out of their mouth.

—Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics” (translation modified)

Ethnography has always been collaborative. To varying degrees the anthropologist in the field has always relied upon a “cooperative relationship” with those being studied to explain, to confirm, and even to proffer their own observations and interpretations. The trouble is that this collaborative relationship has habitually been expunged in the ensuing ethnographic text—Malinowski’s oeuvre being the favorite example—leading to the false and misleading impression that the ethnographic subject is passive and anthropological knowledge a mere matter of data collection. While much has changed in anthropological practice since the late 1960s, from an acute reflexivity and various calls for experimentation to the more recent call for engagement, in the last decades there has been a growing consensus that if anthropology is to address responsibly the crisis of representation and its myriad of ethical and political challenges, one promising route, though not the only one, would

be to highlight, systematize, and prioritize the collaborative nature of ethnography. Indeed, if one of the key challenges facing anthropology lay in exposing and overturning the vexed authority of the anthropologist as ethnographer—an authority tacitly permitting representations that too often turned out to be distorting, if not repressive and dominating—how better to do it than to embolden and broaden the collaborative nature of the ethnographic project itself? That would be a working *with* that displaces the conceits of ethnographic authority.

The focus in what follows is not on the merits or potentialities of collaboration, nor is it a consideration of specific collaborative ethnographies. Neither is my goal to assess collaboration and its role in the “refunctioning” of ethnography (Holmes and Marcus 2005).¹ My aim, rather, is a critical consideration of what I see as the guiding principle of the recent collaborative turn, namely, collaboration as an ethical commitment. In particular, I wish to inquire as to whether this proclaimed ethical focus has not limited the impact of collaboration in its contribution to a critical anthropology; that is, an anthropology that allows for politics. To begin I present this guiding principle of an ethical commitment, its background, and its claims. I then offer a critical examination of this principle and its potential shortcomings in terms of collaborative ethnography by arguing how this commitment presupposes a claim of inequality that risks depoliticizing practices of collaboration. This is followed by a discussion of equality as a presupposition and as political gesture by turning to the writings of French philosopher Jacques Rancière. In the section that follows I draw out the implications of equality for politics through a consideration of two books presented and edited by Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright that explore collaborations between art and anthropology.

Although Schneider and Wright nowhere mention or discuss equality, I want to suggest that arguments they put forward for collaborations between anthropology and art nonetheless presuppose an equality that, in turn, allows for politics. Specifically, Schneider and Wright highlight how art practices can challenge anthropology by providing “new ways of seeing,” which I argue presents a unique opportunity for taking collaborative practices to their full political potential. Turning to my own fieldwork with Palestinian artists in Israel, I take on Schneider and Wright’s project by outlining how my experience was met with an assertion of equality that reconfigured the ethnographic encounter.

Resonant with the work of anthropologists in Latin America, one of the key points I put forward is that a politics of collaboration is fundamentally about decolonizing anthropology, its knowledge, and its methods: the disruption of the boundaries between anthropology and its other.

The Collaborative Turn in Anthropology

As collaborative methods have come to the forefront of anthropological research in recent years—not only in terms of historically underscoring the collaborative nature of all ethnographic work but, more significantly, to redress the various challenges facing contemporary ethnographic practice—there has been a near consensus that the central issue in this effort is that of an ethical commitment (see Fluehr-Lobban 2008; Lassiter 2004, 2005). According to Luke Eric Lassiter this ethical commitment is “a guiding principle . . . that transcends all other agendas, including the more general scientific principle that all is, or should be, knowable” (Lassiter 2004: 1). Similarly for Fluehr-Lobban, collaborative research, by including participants as active partners in research, is “‘ethically conscious’ research” (Fluehr-Lobban 2008: 175). While Lassiter and Fluehr-Lobban are undoubtedly among the most vocal proponents of the ethical imperative of collaborative research, there is arguably little disagreement over its centrality among those advocating a stronger and more emboldened collaborative approach in anthropology.

There are two principal claims behind this particular ethical framing of collaboration. Given the asymmetries of class and privilege that characterize the ethnographic encounter, and the various misrepresentations entailed, there is the ethical responsibility on the part of the anthropologist (1) to consult with the subjects of research in order to verify, validate, and even adjust their interpretations; and (2) to be socially relevant—that is, engaged with the world of which they are part, which is to say, to plan their research projects with the subjects of research. Indeed, it is on the basis of these two principles that the project of a collaborative ethnography is considered first and foremost an ethical commitment. Moreover, it is on this basis that the ethnographic subject is refigured as a “consultant” or “co-intellectual” (Lassiter 2004) in the ethnographic process—co-establishing the research question, collaborating in interpretations, and in some cases co-writing the ethno-

graphic text itself. Significantly, both of these claims prescribe a set of normative conditions upon which ethnographic research is to proceed, and not surprisingly, they share many aspects with the Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association.²

In starting from the premise of the disparities of class and privilege in the ethnographic encounter, the ethical commitment posed by Lassiter and Fluehr-Lobban unmistakably presupposes a claim of inequality between the anthropologist and the subjects of research, an assumption of inequality that the ethical responsibility of the anthropologist is meant to remedy. In other words, within and implicit in the ethical commitment of anthropologists to conduct and behave themselves in a responsible manner with regard to their ethnographic subjects, there is a presumption of inequality that this ethical posture is meant to overcome.

This presumption of inequality takes various forms but is clearly manifest across the collaborative literature. Samuel R. Cook makes an allusion to this presumption of inequality when he states that collaboration, insofar as it is defined by the journal *Collaborative Anthropologies*, is “aimed at leveling the epistemological and ideological space between ethnographer and research community or consultants” (Cook 2008: 109). And again this presupposition of inequality is asserted by Fluehr-Lobban when she states, “The unequal-partners-in-research model, with its top down approach and hierarchy between researcher and ‘subject,’ is shifting substantially toward greater equity in the research relationship” (Fluehr-Lobban 2008: 177). While these examples are the most obvious instances where the presupposition of inequality is made explicit, I would argue that this presupposition, even if unspoken, can be found across many collaborative works, both ethnographic and theoretical. Indeed, I would go so far as to assert that it is the presumption of inequality that is the guiding principle of collaborative work in anthropology.

For many readers, the point I am raising regarding the presumption of inequality would appear to be both understandable and laudable; given the colonial context within which anthropology has developed as a discipline and the unmistakable power relations this still occasions today, how could the anthropologist presume otherwise? Citing Argentinian postcolonial scholar Walter Mignolo, Les Field and Joanne Rappaport note in their introduction to a special issue of *Collaborative*

Anthropologies on Latin America that as the product of colonialism and the condition of coloniality, the “geo-politics of knowledge” is “always already unequal” (2011: 4). This, as we have learned, is what anthropology defines as “the politics of representation.” Yet, in what would seem to be a counter-intuitive gesture, I want to argue that this presumption of inequality is deeply flawed insofar as it perpetuates the very colonial vestiges that anthropology has been working to undermine since the 1960s, and moreover, it reproduces the vertical relationship of anthropology with its other. To put it simply, I argue that we should consider presuming, or better, presupposing equality.

It might be objected, and fairly so, that the ideal of equality is precisely that, an ideal, and thus presupposing it risks masking and obfuscating existing political inequalities and, in turn, disregarding power asymmetries within the ethnographic fieldwork relationship. Lassiter lucidly draws attention to this dilemma in his *Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*:

Americans as a whole, of course, have long struggled with reconciling the differences between the ideal of equality and the very real consequences of living in an inequitable society stratified, at the very least, along lines of race, class, and gender. Americanist ethnography has, at least since its inception, toyed with the same paradox, especially as its subjects, assistants, informants, collaborators, and consultants have continually and consistently sought equal time and representation in the larger ethnographic project that has been undertaken primarily by middle- and upper-class Euro-American anthropologists. (Lassiter 2005: 46)

The awareness of this paradox, of how to live up to the ideal of equality in the face of real inequalities, is undoubtedly one with which many anthropologists have been struggling for years, particularly in the various attempts to decenter ethnographic authority (Clifford 1988a). It is precisely this paradox that leads to an ethical framing of the collaborative project and, more broadly, to the politics of representation itself.³ In this short passage Lassiter underlines how the ideal of equality is curbed or subdued by real inequality, be it racial, class, or gender inequality, among others. Although the ideal of equality in this instance is something that each person or community seeks, one senses that for it to be fully realized it must be given or provided; given that we live in

an unequal social reality, the ethical commitment and responsibility on the part of the anthropologist should be to ensure, as much as possible, the conditions by which to foster equality within the ethnographic process. Is this not precisely the goal of the ethical orientation of collaboration, a commitment and responsibility of the ethnographer to assure a level playing field or equity within the ethnographic process?

For the assumption that equality has to be given or provided by the anthropologist considering the very real inequalities within the ethnographic encounter, I want to suggest another reading. In the second half of the passage, where Lassiter states that “subjects, assistants, informants, collaborators, and consultants have continually and consistently sought equal time and representation” (Lassiter 2005: 46), he highlights the contours of an idea of equality as that which is not simply sought but asserted and verified by the ethnographic subject. In contrast to the belief that equality is something that must be ensured or protected (i.e., given to the other) via an ethical commitment on the part of the anthropologist, here the subjects of research assumes their equality.

This idea is more forcefully present, though hidden, in the opening passages of Lassiter’s *Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography*, where he discusses an exchange with Ralph Kotay, a Kiowa elder and singer and Lassiter’s interlocutor or consultant (see Lassiter 1998). In discussing Kotay’s demand, “I don’t want anything else said above this,” Lassiter writes: “In asserting his desire to be heard, Kotay sent an implied moral message about the nature of my commitment to him and his community” (Lassiter 2005: 11).⁴ Kotay’s desire to be heard, according to Lassiter, is not about “representations being on equal footing” but about the “power these interpretations have in defining Kotay and his community to the outside” (11). It is, in other words, about “who has control and who has the last word” (11). While Lassiter’s assessment of this discussion with Kotay is not wrong, I would argue that anterior to this moral message is Kotay’s assertion of his own equality as a speaking subject. Put simply, in his “desire to be heard” Kotay, before making any moral or ethical demands on Lassiter, is affirming his equality—an equality, moreover, that precedes the anthropological responsibility to ensure or protect it.

The assertion of equality announced in Kotay’s “desire to be heard” arguably resonates across much ethnographic work in different guises, especially as those with whom anthropologists work continue to con-

test and disrupt the conceits of ethnographic authority. The decision of the anthropologist to respond to this assertion of equality in moral and ethical terms, however, risks missing and even burying the fundamentally political thrust of this verification of equality. This is underlined when Lassiter concludes at the end of his discussion that Kotay's demands are "not just profoundly political, but also profoundly ethical" (Lassiter 2005: 11), leaving the reader with the impression that the political thrust of Kotay's desire to be heard is simply a matter of a politics of representation.

Equality and Politics

In this section I want briefly to unpack this understanding of the relationship of politics and equality as it is elaborated in the work of Jacques Rancière before turning in the subsequent section to two recent books that explore the collaboration between anthropology and contemporary art, in which, I argue, the presupposition of equality is at work. It is my contention that although the manner in which Rancière defines politics is germane to the reading of these two recent books, both nonetheless fail to embrace the political dimension within these collaborations, in particular the implications of collaboration as the practical experimentation of equality. However, to appreciate this argument it is first necessary to elaborate the notion of equality and its relations to politics.

If anthropology is to take accusations of misrepresentation and its distortions seriously, accusations that come from those being studied, it is the voice of the ethnographic other, in affirming their equality, that becomes a potential political gesture and threatens to break with the hackneyed notions of a "politics of representation" wherein politics is reduced to power. What is this equality being asserted, presumed, presupposed? The most fully developed discussion of equality, as I am invoking it here, is to be found in Jacques Rancière's recounting of the story of the schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*. At the time of the Restoration in France, Jacotot was exiled to Belgium, during which time he undertook to teach French to Flemish-speaking students, whose language he himself did not know. In the process of realizing that his pupils were capable of learning French by themselves, a process not unlike learning

a mother tongue, he developed the idea of a universal education premised on the principle that all people are equally intelligent and that the problem in education is therefore not the transmission of knowledge but to “reveal an intelligence to itself” (Rancière 1991: 28).

All Jacotot has with him is a bilingual copy of Fénelon’s *Les Aventures de Télémaque*, which he asks his students to read and write a paper on, in French. Surprised by the quality of his students’ work, Jacotot resolves that there is an equality of intelligences and that the obstacle for students is not a matter of “a lack of instruction, but the belief in the inferiority of their intelligence” (Rancière 1991: 39). Taking his cue from Jacotot, Rancière makes the claim concerning equality that it is a “point of departure, a supposition to maintain in every circumstance”; that is, the supposition of the equality of all speaking beings.

In the discussion of the equality of intelligence, Rancière notes that it is not the equality of manifestations of intelligence that is the issue (i.e., knowledge) but rather the equality, or non-hierarchy, of *intellectual capacity* (1991, 27).⁵ In this sense equality is not something that can be observed or measured, and neither can it be considered a goal or future state (see also Rancière 1991: 46). Rancière makes the crucial point that equality must therefore be approached as it is practiced and verified; that is, it has no value in itself but only in its effects or what he calls its practical experimentations.

Importantly, the principle of the “equality of all speaking beings” does not make equality an ontological principle.⁶ Precisely because its value is tied to its verification and practice, in itself equality is empty and without content. There are two points to clarify at this juncture. First, at a banal level, equality is a presupposition to the degree that it is the condition for understanding between two or more people (see Rancière 2004: 52, 1999: 16). Put simply, in order for me to understand you, and vice versa, we must both first assume our equality as speaking beings (versus beings who produce only noise). This presupposition of equality should not be a surprise for many anthropologists, as it clearly underlines not only the practice of a collaborative anthropology but also anthropological practice at large. In this sense equality is not necessarily political. On a second level, however, equality is the source of politics to the degree that in its verification and practice it exposes a “wrong” between the parts of society or community.

The wrong that ties equality to politics, and that is the basis for the

verification of equality, is not simply a contestation of competing views over interests (e.g., the wages of workers). Rather, it is about who gets to speak and make demands.⁷ To return to the assertion of Ralph Kotay, this presupposition of equality is verified and practiced when he states his demand to be heard: “I don’t want anything said above this.” Beyond the literal meanings of his statement is the rhetorical force of his assertion of his equality as a speaking subject. Put differently, the “wrong” is Kotay and his community having historically been excluded as participants in the ethnographic process—a community included as subjects of anthropological research but excluded as equal participants, as equal speaking beings, as beings able to make demands.

To be clear, this is a wrong Lassiter clearly recognizes and appreciates to the degree that the aim of collaborative ethnography is to redress such hierarchical orders within ethnographic practices by making ethnographic subjects equal partners or, as Lassiter prefers, consultants. The problem is that Lassiter frames the problem as ethical, a matter of moral commitment and responsibility, thereby masking and burying the politics of Kotay’s verification and practice of equality. But what exactly is being masked and buried? In other words, what is politics?

As I have already stated, politics is the verification of equality; there is no politics without the presupposition of equality, without the practical experiments of equality. In short, equality is the source of political action. But what is politics precisely? To the degree that Rancière’s conception of politics goes against what we usually call politics, some clarification is in order. In *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, Rancière makes the following reconfiguration of our understanding of politics:

Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police*. (Rancière 1999: 28)

It is important to keep in mind that in renaming what is typically thought of as politics as the police, Rancière is not using this term in its pejorative sense, as the pepper-spray-wielding forces of law and order. On the contrary, borrowing the term from Michel Foucault’s writings on the mode of government in the seventeenth and eighteenth

centuries (Foucault 2007), for Rancière the police (*la police*) refers to “an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task” (1999: 29). In this sense the police means an entity neutral and not reducible to control, repression, domination, or inequality or even an order of powers. In his later writings Rancière refers to the police order in terms of the partition or distribution of the sensible (*le partage du sensible*), which connotes a spatial quality, a point to which I return later.⁸

Having renamed the conventional understanding of politics as the police, Rancière thereby reserves the notion of politics to those acts of disagreement or dissensus with the police order. That is, politics happens in shifting bodies from their assigned place, of making visible what was once not allowed to be seen and making heard what was once only noise (1999: 30). Here politics is a disruption of the police order, a disidentification with its spatial and temporal ordering of bodies. Yet it would be a mistake to understand politics as simply opposed to the police order, as a completely separate and distinct logic that seeks its elimination. On the contrary, politics is uniquely the verification of equality, and thus an action (or practical experimentation) that runs up against the police logic in the name of an egalitarian logic. In short, politics is the processing or naming of a wrong in the name of equality through the dispute with the police order (1999: 35). Politics is dissensus.

So what does all this have to do with the politics of collaboration in anthropology? My argument so far has been that although Lassiter and other proponents of collaborative ethnography have diagnosed the problems facing anthropology correctly—from the conceits of ethnographic authority and its subsequent misrepresentations to the necessity of fully acknowledging the equality of the ethnographic other—the inclination to frame this within ethical and moral terms has inadvertently turned anthropology away from the political or disruptive potential of collaborative practices; that is, how collaboration as dissensus can potentially disrupt and reconfigure the anthropological *episteme*.⁹

My own conceit, evidently, is that we consider the anthropological *episteme* a form of the police, which is to say, a particular “order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a

particular place and task”; in other words, an episteme that configures and distributes the ethnographic scene. Thus the issue is not primarily whether those represented by anthropology are represented in the way they wish to be represented—a politics of representation for which the goal would be to reach some form of consensual agreement and the re-assertion of the police order. Instead the point would be to understand how the anthropological episteme led to such a representation to begin with, and to allow for its disruption and reconfiguration by the subject of politics; namely, the ethnographic subject. This should be the practice of a collaborative anthropology.

How does arguing for the presupposition of equality differ from already existing collaborative practices of anthropologists who explicitly see their projects as political? It may certainly be contended that the collaborative work of a number of anthropologists working in and from Latin America—notably Luis Guillermo Vasco Uribe (2011) and Joanne Rappaport (2008), among others (see Field and Rappaport 2011; Field and Fox 2007)—has already put forward a notion of collaboration that attends to much of what I have so far said. As Joanne Rappaport states when talking about Vasco Uribe: “Collaboration is more than ‘good ethnography,’ because it shifts control of the research process out of the hands of the anthropologist and into the collective sphere of the anthropologist working on an equal basis with community researchers” (Rappaport 2008: 6).¹⁰

There are indeed striking similarities between these practices of collaborative anthropology and the ideas I have outlined, especially the emphasis on the transformation of anthropology and its decolonization that emerge in a collaborative practice based on the equality of all participants. These include Rappaport’s practice of “co-theorization,” which she posits as “the merging of differently situated theories” (Rappaport 2011: 27); Vasco Uribe’s emphasis on the dialectics of forms of knowledge (intellectual versus material labor), the transformation of fieldwork, and its epistemological status (Vasco Uribe 2007: 22); and Field and Fox’s contention that collaboration, in working “in the employ of the community,” has the potential to reverse “conventional power relations” within fieldwork (Field and Fox 2007: 9). In each of these instances there is an acknowledgment of the equality of speaking subjects, or better, the equality of intelligences.

Yet if there is a difference, and there is, it is the position accorded to

equality and its relation to politics, how equality “works” as a non-normative, non-ethical condition and presupposition of politics. The conception of politics within these works is very different from the idea of politics I have so far put forward. In short, the politics of collaboration is the commitment to the struggles and causes of those with whom the anthropologist is working, not a disruption or suspension of the anthropological episteme, as I have argued for previously. As Rappaport explains, “what is at stake in collaboration is the bridging of epistemological and methodological differences *in the service of a political agenda*” (2007: 31, my emphasis; see also Hale 2007). In focusing on the decolonization of anthropological knowledge and its production (i.e., fieldwork), my concern here is on politics as a disruptive force within the anthropological episteme.

When Anthropology Meets Contemporary Art

To begin to ascertain more clearly what is at stake in framing collaboration as politics, I want to turn to two recent books edited by Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright on how collaboration between anthropology and art offers a chance for developing alternative strategies of practice for both (Schneider and Wright 2006, 2010). For anthropology in particular, this means “new ways of seeing” and “new ways of working with visual materials” (2006: 25). While neither of these books explicitly engages the notion of politics, nor the concomitant idea of equality, I argue that such a reading can and should be made nonetheless. In fact, to the degree that Schneider and Wright frame the collaboration between art and anthropology in terms of seeking “new ways of seeing,” I propose that such a reading be understood as an extension of their project. Further to demonstrate the inherent politics within Schneider and Wright’s project, I then turn to my own fieldwork with Palestinian artists living and working in Israel and the challenges they posed for my anthropological work.

Dialogues and exchanges between art and anthropology have a long history, from French ethnology’s relationship with surrealism in the 1930s (Clifford 1988) to the avant-garde inspired experiments of the writing-culture debate in the 1980s (Marcus and Fischer 1986) and, most recently, the “ethnographic turn” within contemporary art in the early 1990s (see Foster 1996; Coles 2000). However, given the prolifera-

tion of misunderstandings and the subsequent growing distance between the two over the last few years, Schneider and Wright argue that this relationship is in need of renewal. Indeed, despite the borrowings between anthropology and contemporary art in recent years—mostly a one-way street of artists broadly using ethnographic methods in their processes or occasionally wrestling with theoretical concerns from anthropology—these are clearly different disciplines, with their own rules and methods, their own practices, and their own histories, institutions, and academies. Yet in spite of these obvious differences, which Schneider and Wright argue can nonetheless be “productive points of departure” (2006: 3), there are deeper affinities between the two, specifically the shared and common object of culture or, in short, the representation of others: “Artists and anthropologists are practitioners who appropriate from, and represent, others” (2006: 26).

In sharing a common object of representation, Schneider and Wright see the bringing together of these two practices, through dialogue and collaboration, as a unique opportunity to elaborate alternative strategies of representation, particularly for anthropology. Indeed, if too many of these past collaborations have not been sufficiently explored for how each discipline can extend the other’s practices of representation and perception, the principal aim for Schneider and Wright is to “stimulate new and productive dialogues” between the two by exploring their border zones and encouraging their crossings (2006: 1; 2010). Yet, with anthropology still occupied with experiments for dealing with its “crisis of representation,” Schneider and Wright are clearly (and justifiably) more concerned with how artistic practices directly challenge the simple textual-based realist paradigm that dominates anthropological representation (2006: 4).¹¹ In particular they are interested in exploring how dialogues and collaborations between artists and anthropologists might provide anthropology with the necessary strategies for going beyond its trenchant aversion to the visual as either “dangerously seductive” (Schneider and Wright 2006: 6–8) or “ancillary to anthropological knowledge” (2010: 2).

What precisely do Schneider and Wright see contemporary art offering anthropology? My objective here is not to provide a standard review of the two books edited by Schneider and Wright, a recounting of chapters and their findings; rather, I look at what they see anthropology gaining through its collaborations with contemporary art. In par-

ticular I am interested in what I see as their two central insights, one from each book, and how these are articulated and connected. Thus although they were published four years apart, I approach both books as part of the same project and read them together as one argument.

Schneider and Wright put forward two central aims regarding the strategies to be gained for anthropology in its collaborations with contemporary art. First, by working with contemporary artists, anthropologists are provided a unique opportunity to appropriate visual representational strategies that break with traditional anthropological modes of representation. In other words, by adopting the visual strategies of contemporary art, strategies not confined or overdetermined by traditional textual forms of representation, anthropology is invited to consider art as more than an object of research—as something with which to think radically (2006: 9) and, one hopes, through which to be exposed in turn “to the unforeseen and unexpected” (2006: 25). The second aim is that in so doing, anthropology will be furnished with “new ways of seeing,” thereby responding to the call for experimentation in representational practices in anthropology laid out by Marcus and Fischer in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique*.

One of the two key insights to which Schneider and Wright draw attention in pursuing these aims involves how contemporary art allows for, and even celebrates, an ambiguity or free play between text and image, discourse and figure; what they refer to as an “aesthetic resistance” to anthropological modes of disambiguity through contextualization (2006: 12). Here Schneider and Wright direct the reader’s attention to the “ethnopoetic” artwork of David and Susan McAllester, *Hogans: Navajo Houses and Songs* (1980). In this piece, ritually sung house blessings, as presented in their original recordings, are exhibited with images of the intimate interiors of Navajo homes, presented alongside literal translations of the songs.

As Barbara Tedlock notes, this artwork disturbs the viewer/listener looking for “smooth translations” (quoted in Schneider and Wright 2006: 12). Interestingly, Tedlock also adds the idea of juxtaposition to her discussion of the photographs by Susan McAllester in the work, noting how they present an “equal reverence for Navajo traditionalism and acculturation” (Tedlock, quoted in Schneider and Wright 2006: 12). The idea of juxtaposition, she continues, “shocks and slows down the viewer who desires either social commentary on Navajo property

or else romantic pictures of strictly traditional hogans” (2006: 12). According to Schneider and Wright, such juxtapositions and the lack of smooth literary translations, mainly on account of their lack of proper contextualization, have made the message of the work ambiguous in the eyes of critics. However, rather than dismissing the work on this basis, Schneider and Wright argue that we should consider how ambiguity creates “productive tensions” between image and text (and, I would add, between images themselves).

A closely related point is raised and elaborated upon by Christopher Wright in his contribution to the second book, “In the Thick of It: Notes on Observation and Context.” He argues that questions of contextualization create a tension between art and anthropology, with the latter dismissing the former’s claims to anthropological understanding on account of its failing to contextualize its subject adequately (Wright 2010: 72).¹² As the basis for disqualifying artistic claims to anthropological practice, for Wright this accusation is “effectively a policing of boundaries” between the professional anthropologist and the amateur outsider. To be sure, Schneider and Wright argue that the anthropological aversion to ambiguity curtails the “productive tension” between image and text within art practices (2006: 12), which, Wright again notes, effectively excludes “raising any productive, or difficult, questions for the [anthropological] discipline” (2010: 72). Put bluntly, what is foreclosed is precisely the possibility of “new ways of seeing.”

The second key insight comes from the second book and focuses on the idea of “incompleteness” (Schneider and Wright 2010: 19–21): “A lot can be learned from the open-ended, ‘incomplete’ procedures in the arts” (2010: 19), especially insofar as the “inherently open and processual character of the artwork” can encourage critical discussion around the tendency in anthropology to produce texts that “frequently enclose forcible completion” (2010: 20). Turning to George E. Marcus’s discussion of “incompleteness as a norm” (Marcus 2009: 28–29), Schneider and Wright put forward that anthropology should embrace incompleteness as a “positive norm for ethnographic practice,” one that imagines ethnography as an “open and ongoing ‘archive’” (Schneider and Wright 2010: 20).

This norm of incompleteness is exemplified in the final essay of the second book, a series of collaborations between an anthropologist, an artist-anthropologist, and an artist. By framing their collaboration

within the experimental space of visual anthropology Anna Grimshaw, Elspeth Owen, and Amanda Ravetz were able to explore a series of collaborations, both successful and unsuccessful, in which the difficulties of crossing the boundaries between the disciplines became palpable, where the space between was “a critical rhythm of blockages and flows” (Grimshaw et. al 2010: 160). In recognizing that their collaboration was more about the process of “making” versus objects made, the project came to reveal the importance of the open-endedness and ongoing nature of collaborative work (2010: 148). Thus, in opening this critical space where “‘making do’ in each other’s worlds meant allowing well-worn priorities, assumptions and habits to be disturbed” (2010: 161), Grimshaw, Owen, and Ravetz sustain an incompleteness within their collaborative practice.

My own research with Palestinian artists has undoubtedly made me sensitive to the differences and meeting points between anthropology and contemporary art. While my research was not initially collaborative, my conversations with artists often became exercises in exposing the limits of our respective practices, and I was forced to open myself to “new ways of seeing.” For example, in my conversations with Sharif Waked, a multimedia artist living and working in Haifa, I found my early efforts to position him and his work often thwarted and undermined. Sitting one evening at a local café in Haifa we were discussing the recent acquisition of one of his works by the Guggenheim in New York City. At one point I asked him how he had been identified in the label accompanying his work: Palestinian? Israeli? Arab Israeli? Israeli Arab? Palestinian Israeli? This, to me at least, seemed a poignant political question for Palestinians living and working in Israel and now being represented within the global art world. My question, however, seemed to annoy him. Without looking at me, he replied, “I don’t know—Palestinian, Palestinian-Israeli, Palestinian and Israeli . . . it doesn’t matter.”

My anthropological fixation on identity, an especially complex issue for Palestinians in Israel, was a preoccupation that I had to abandon in my research, and Sharif was not first or the last to make this point.¹³ Some months later, when we met again at his home to discuss and view a series of his works, I asked him about his brusque response that evening and why he had seemed bothered by my question, to which he matter-of-factly replied that I should not get caught up in issues of

identity. I was opening my eyes again to seeing otherwise, as I was being forced to do with each of the artists I met. When showing me his works one afternoon, Sharif said little other than to point me in general directions about what I should pay attention to and what were for him the important points. What particularly caught my interest that day was Sharif's video piece, *To be continued . . .*, the work that was bought by the Guggenheim, and which we had discussed the first time we met. As Sharif started the video he gave me only a few details, the two key elements of the video, specifically the story read being *1001 Arabian Nights* and the video being looped. As I watched I was admittedly unsure what to look at: I listened to the story being told, closely watching the storyteller, the young man sitting before me reading the opening stories of *1001 Arabian Nights*, trying to imagine what it would be like to see this installation in a museum such as the Guggenheim in New York City. At one point, after watching for about ten minutes, Sharif passed to let me know that the video lasts 41:33 minutes, reiterating that it would loop. I slowly became self-conscious sitting there watching a video as he and his wife went about their day. Despite not watching the video in its entirety, I nonetheless was left with a vivid impression of the contradiction between the visual and the audible. But there was clearly more.

At first glance, what we see is the typical martyr video of a suicide bomber: the backdrop is green with a passage from the Qu'ran, verse 78 from *Sourat al-Hajj*, in white calligraphy, while in the foreground a gun lies across the table, with a young man (the well-known actor Saleh Bacri) seated facing us. His clothes are unremarkable: a greenish cap and a black sweatshirt with a green army-type vest over it. Our protagonist's presentation is unaffected, a near monotone and steady reading of a classic Orientalist text, with occasional pauses. There are occasional fade-outs, mostly between the stories, and on a number of occasions the camera zooms in for a few minutes and then back to its original position. In addition, a few times the narrator stops reading and looks directly at the spectator, for a short pause, after which he returns to his story.

On the surface is an obvious contradiction: the would-be suicide bomber preparing his final testimony, to be released as a document once his mission has been accomplished. We, the spectators, are now the witnesses. But this very act, the sure end of this young man, his finality and the finality of the video itself, is delayed and even suspended,

not only by the rhetorical force of the story he has chosen to recount but also in the looping of the video. The narrator, our protagonist, has become Scheherazade, and the viewers, we the spectators, have become the King.

Over the months that followed my visit to Sharif's and my viewing of *To be continued . . .*, I continued to think about the video and its explicit juxtaposing of two heterogeneous elements: a document of the final testimony of a suicide bomber alongside the retelling of a fictional story without end. This juxtaposition was, of course, intentional, but to what effect? The suicide bomber who is saved through the recounting of a story without end, whose conclusion must always be suspended for another time? It was tempting to think of Sharif's video in the context of suicide bombers and of the various ideas associated with their image in the West, especially when one considers that the audience for this piece is primarily the Western spectator. Was the juxtaposition with the *Arabian Nights*, therefore, a message telling us that even those taking up the martyr operations are unwilling agents and would do anything to suspend their fate? In other words, in direct opposition to the image of the suicide bomber as a brainwashed religious fanatic, as he is portrayed in the Western media, are we the spectators confronted with an agent, a person unwilling to follow blindly? This seemed an all too facile reading of the work.

Some months later I had another opportunity to view Sharif's video when he agreed to send me a copy. As I watched the video again, without interruption, without any pauses, I found myself brought into its juxtaposition of worlds, a world of documentary—that is, the martyr video genre—and a world of fiction, *Arabian Nights*. To be sure, the artwork as event, by bringing together these two worlds, effectively establishes a proximity between these heterogeneous elements and, in so doing, potentially creates a particular affect upon the spectator, an experience of defamiliarization. As I continued to watch the work I found myself forgetting about the visual message, the martyr testimony, the document with its prescribed identities, and instead I was pulled into the recounting (a reappropriation and self-orientalization) of the first book of the *Arabian Nights* and the multiple embedded narratives in which each story is a suspension, each conclusion delayed and suspended.

The narrative recounting as temporal suspension had the effect of

unsettling the spatial context represented in the documentary message: our protagonist, quite emphatically positioned and motionless in his assigned space of identification, that of the suicide bomber and terrorist, becomes oddly fictionalized as well, in turn allowing for a capacity previously denied, a new form of subjectivity and commonality, to be other than those identities prescribed.

This temporal juxtaposition of the inevitable end implied by the martyr video with the reading of unending stories from *1001 Arabian Nights*, reinforced through the looping of the video, is a transgression of identification in which the “Palestinian” no longer “fits” within his assigned places of identification. That is, it is a disruption of the regime of identification that assigns Palestinians a place in both time and space. Already surrounded by questions of identity, from checkpoints to ID cards and refugee documents that determine where Palestinians can go and live, what their rights are or are not, “*To be continued . . .*” disavows any assuredness of this identificatory system by creating a juxtaposition in which the would-be suicide bomber is not a suicide bomber since that the story he is recounting has no end, and therefore we as the viewers never know when he will undertake his task, if ever. At the same time, as an anthropologist, I too had my episteme suspended and interrupted, my desire for a closed and neatly concluded narrative of identities and resistances foreclosed.

At work in juxtaposition is an “aesthetic experience,” a free-play or non-hierarchical relationship within the artwork itself (Rancière 2004). While this aesthetic experience establishes an experience of equality, albeit not the same as the equality discussed earlier, what it allows, according to Rancière, is an opening for the reconfiguration of the distribution of the sensible or anthropological *dispositif*: what he refers to as the “politics of aesthetics.”¹⁴ On one level this challenges a certain understanding of how to represent and understand others. On another, there is a more radical critique of the anthropological episteme, the “*a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière 2004: 13).

In contrast to anthropology, in artistic representation there are no rules regarding how the other should be attended to or what the subject matter of the artwork should be—anything can be appropriated and represented. Thus, to take this a step further, aesthetic experience

is precisely what is enacted in juxtaposing art and anthropology in their collaborations. While anthropology and art might share a common object of representation, how they interpret and understand that common object is often at odds, the former traditionally seeking representations that leave no excess or supplement, while art purposefully exposes the incompleteness of any ordering.¹⁵ As Rancière explains, “Aesthetic experience eludes the sensible distribution of roles and competences which structure the hierarchical order” (Rancière 2006: 4).

What aesthetic experience activates, particularly in those moments of collaboration between anthropology and art, is a disruption and redistribution of roles and places of anthropologist and the other and, in turn, of what can be seen, heard, thought, said, and done in the anthropological episteme. I would argue that it is precisely in their juxtaposition that anthropology and art allow for a politics of collaboration.

“We are already equal”: A Politics of Collaboration

Shortly after I began my fieldwork in 2009, a Palestinian friend of mine told me, in English: “We do not ask for our equality, we are already equal.” With only slight variation, different friends repeated this statement on numerous occasions. It was a statement that set not only the tone of my research and my relationships with those with whom I worked but my understanding of the struggle of Palestinians in Israel. It is also a statement that was implicit in my conversations with Sharif, who refused to allow me to assert my authority via a regime of identification and, in so doing, affirmed his equality. As with Lassiter’s relationship with Kotay, I had been put in my place. Being ruptured was the spatial configuration of fieldwork, the classic Malinowskian *mise-en-scène*.

One of the central issues Vasco Uribe addresses in his *Rethinking Fieldwork and Ethnographic Writing* is the spatial configuration of the fieldwork, the separation and hierarchy that are maintained in the ethnographic encounter. It is also an issue that runs through collaborative practices generally: the desire to close the space that exists between the anthropologist and the other, between theory and practice, between the academy and the worlds within which anthropology works. As Vasco Uribe states, with a clear nod to the classical Malinowskian *mise-en-scène*:

Based on an erroneous notion of practice, the problem of space is frequently hidden, inexplicit, and peculiarly managed. A specific form of territoriality is created for the purposes of ethnographic research, in which there is a space reserved for practice and a different one for theory. But this is not just a case of conceptual differentiation: it is a spatial and temporal separation between the two, with one following the other in time, reinforced by mutual exteriority. One is the world of the “objects of study,” and the other is that of the researcher, the “subject.” (Vasco Uribe 2011: 21)

This spatial configuration, he maintains, masks a power relationship, a relationship in which knowledge production is under the stewardship of the ethnographer and anthropologist, while the other, the object of knowledge, is relegated to an observable “quantity,” an object of interest to be counted, ordered, and regulated. Vasco Uribe then goes on to argue that these power relations are not to be resolved in the text but in the material reality of fieldwork itself (2011: 31); that is, through the reconfiguration of the space of fieldwork, which is to say, its decolonization. While Vasco Uribe proposes to reposition knowledge production in the field, as a collaborative exercise, I would argue that it is through the presupposition of equality that this spatial configuration is disrupted and decolonized.

In arguing for the presupposition of equality, my aim has been to outline a notion of equality that is neither an ontological principle nor an ethical commitment. So what is equality in its relation to politics? As I stated earlier, following Rancière, equality in its relation to politics does not exist outside its practical experimentations. When Kotay makes his demand upon Lassiter, or when Waked produces a work that refuses the politics of identity, both are challenging and confronting the spaces they have been assigned and the orders in which they have been placed. In their asserting and affirming their equality as speaking subjects, a wrong is demonstrated, and those who are not deemed equal speaking subjects speak and make demands. Equality “exists,” therefore, when what can be said, heard, seen, thought, and done is disrupted and suspended. It is, in this sense, anarchic.

In the case of a politics of collaboration, such practical experiments of equality suspend and disrupt the border that maintains the distinction and hierarchy between the “anthropology” and its “other,” the

classic fieldwork *mise-en-scène*. When taking equality as an anarchic presupposition, what makes collaboration political is its reconfiguration of the border zone between the anthropologist and the ethnographic other, such that these identities are no longer assigned and determined. In other words, if the task of a critical anthropology has been to “make the Other present” (Fabian 1991: 223), its efforts have failed to the extent that they have “always already” been premised on the absence of the “Other” (Michaelsen 2008: 26). Put differently, the very idea of the Other presupposes absence. The Other—the anthropological Other—is the designation of a boundary and border, redrawn each and every time within the work of anthropology, providing the determination and assignment of spaces and places for those with whom anthropology works.¹⁶ The politics of collaboration, as I have suggested, aims to undo this border, not by granting the Other a voice but rather in listening to the verification and practice of equality with those with whom anthropology works. Thus the practice of collaboration is not political because it is replete with power relations, because power is everywhere and must therefore somehow be navigated, its excesses contained: power relations are not politics. If power is everywhere, as Foucault suggests, it does not mean politics is everywhere (see Nancy 2000). As Rancière notes, “Politics is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds (1999: 42). These “worlds” for Rancière are the two logics, the logic of equality and the logic of police. As I have argued, the collaborative encounter is conceived as a polemical space wherein the egalitarian logic of those with whom anthropology works confronts the anthropological episteme. The “politics” at work in the presumption of equality, therefore, is first and foremost an anarchic disruption of the anthropological, its suspension and interruption and reconfiguration.

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KIVEN STROHM is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology, Université de Montréal. His interests include the history of anthropology, aesthetics and politics, and contemporary art and popular culture in the Arab world. He received an MA in Philosophy and Cultural Analysis from the Universiteit van Amsterdam and has been a visiting researcher in the Department Sociology and Anthropology at Birzeit University (Palestine, 2011) and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Central European University (Hungary, 2012). His postdoctoral research is focused on the transformations of place within contemporary Palestinian art.

Notes

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1. Holmes and Marcus understand refunctioning as “drawing on the analytical acumen and existential insights of our subjects to recast the intellectual imperatives of our own methodological practices, in short, the para-ethnographic practices of our subjects” (2008: 82).

2. Of particular relevance is section A: “Responsibility to people and animals with whom anthropological researchers work and whose lives and cultures they study.”

3. I place the recent “collaborative turn” within the context of the debates surrounding the politics of representation that gained traction in the 1980s (see Clifford and Marcus 1986). For a discussion of this historical relationship see Lassiter and Campbell (2010).

4. The full statement by Kotay reads: “I’m always willing to give out information like this. But . . . I don’t want anything else said above this. Some people who write books, I’ve read their stories where they build things up that’s not there. When people don’t know [any better], anytime they hear these things, they believe what you say or write” (Lassiter 2005:4).

5. It is important to note that one of Rancière’s key protagonists in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is Pierre Bourdieu. As Kristin Ross explains in her seminal introduction to this book, Rancière is contesting a sociological discourse, of which Bourdieu is a key figure, and which “[derives] its authority from the presumed naïveté or ignorance of its objects of study” (Ross 1991: xi).

6. It would be prudent here to distinguish Rancière’s conceptualization of equality from Jürgen Habermas’s “ideal speech situation,” which is more akin to Rawls’s “veil of ignorance” versus equality per se. For Rancière equality is not ontological in the sense that it is not inscribed in human nature or something that exists in reality.

7. A “wrong” is the translation of “le tort.” Rancière plays on the meaning of this word in French, *tordre*, as a torsion or twisting of equality in human relations. In this sense inequality is a “wronging or wringing” of the more primordial equality on which inequality rests. See Deranty (2003).

8. It is important to keep in mind the double sense of *partage* as exclusion/separation as well as that which allows participation.

9. I use *episteme* in the sense implied by Michel Foucault to designate what is visible, sayable, thinkable, and doable in a particular era.

10. While I do not have the space here to do so, there is a potentially provocative comparative analysis to be made between many of the ideas argued for by Luis Guill-

mo Vasco Uribe and Johannes Fabian, certainly the dialectical production of knowledge and dialogue as confrontation. See Fabian (1991).

11. This is not to say that artists get a free pass in either of these books. As Schneider quite forcefully warns in his chapter “Appropriations,” which is more or less an extension of the introduction to *Contemporary Art and Anthropology*: “Admittedly, there might be those artists for whom understanding the other is not an issue at all, and who just deliberately play with form, devoid of ethnographically specific meaning. Criticisms of superficiality and aestheticism have been rightly leveled against such approaches. This book is an invitation for artists to engage more profoundly with other cultures though they might not apply the same criteria to ethnography as anthropologists do” (Schneider 2006: 40).

12. By contextualization Wright is referring to the social and historical background considered necessary for understanding a culture, an idea that is premised on the principle of the holism of culture and the interrelatedness of its parts. See Fabian (1995) for a critical view of how context is invoked as a “corrective” in cases of misunderstanding.

13. See Kanaaneh (2009) for a vivid discussion of the strategies of identity among Palestinians in Israel.

14. It is important to point out that when Rancière talks about the politics of aesthetics he is distinguishing himself from Benjamin’s “aestheticization of politics” (1968: 242). As Rancière notes, “There is thus an aesthetics at the core of politics that has nothing to do with Benjamin’s discussion of the ‘aestheticization of politics’ specific to the ‘age of the masses.’ This aesthetics should not be understood as the perverse commandeering of politics by a will to art, by a consideration of the people qua work of art. If the reader is fond of analogy, aesthetics can be understood in a Kantian sense—re-examined perhaps by Foucault—as the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience” (Rancière 2004: 13).

15. Lest I be taken to be putting art on a pedestal, the “effectiveness” of art to which I am appealing is not intrinsic to art per se, its natural disposition. On the contrary, much of what passes itself off as “political art” is questionable in its capacity to contribute to new ways of seeing, talking, and doing. As Rancière clarifies: “Today, indeed, much art continues to assert not only its will, but also its ability to denounce the reign of the commodity, its iconic ideals and putrid excrement. Calls for the need to struggle against the society of the spectacle, to develop practices of *détournement*, continue to come from all quarters. And they do so by invoking the standard repertoire of denunciatory techniques: parodies of promotional films; re-processed disco sounds; advertising icons or media stars modelled in wax figures; Disney animals turned into polymorphous perverts; montages of ‘vernacular’ photographs depicting standardized petty-bourgeois living-rooms, overloaded supermarket trolleys, standardized entertainment and the excrement of civilization; huge installations of pipes and machines that depict the bowels of the social machine as it swallows everything and turns it into shit. These sorts of rhetorical dispositif still prevail in a good many galleries and museums professing to be revealing the power of the commodity, the reign of the spectacle, or the pornography of power. But since it is actually difficult to find anybody who is actually ignorant of such things, the mechanism ends up spinning around itself and playing on the very undecidability of its effects” (Rancière 2010: 144).

16. Matti Bunzl (2004) makes a similar argument about the implicit hierarchies of Self/Other in recent critiques of anthropology. In his discussion of Gupta and Ferguson (1997) and Clifford (1997) he argues that although an effort is made to challenge the

foundational role assigned to alterity in fieldwork, these authors are nonetheless “reaffirming the paradigm they deplore” by maintaining the assumption of cultural differences or alterity between the ethnographer and the people involved. Bunzl argues that such differences cannot be assumed but instead must be examined genealogically in what he refers to as a “history of the present.”

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