

## **Collaboration as Resistance? Reconsidering the processes, products, and possibilities of feminist oral history and ethnography**

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**ABSTRACT** *As multiple norths emerge in the so-called souths (and vice versa) and non-government organizations (NGOs) become important partners in knowledge production, it becomes imperative for feminist actors to envision new collaborative methodologies that can simultaneously resist the ‘deradicalization of feminist politics’ in the increasingly corporatized academy as well as in the increasingly donor-driven, professionalized, and state-identified NGO sector. Based on an extensive reading of literature on oral history and critical ethnography, this viewpoint identifies four interrelated areas where reflexive interventions by feminist collaborators working across geographical, sociopolitical and institutional borders can advance such a project: rethinking the relationships between processes and products of collaboration; more conscious interweaving of the collaborative theories and methodologies; producing knowledges that can travel across the borders of academia/NGOs/people’s movements; and reimagining reciprocity in collaboration.*

### **Introduction**

The fancy word is empowerment, but the Elders tell us everyone has power, we just have to find it. (Words spoken by a woman in *Keepers of the Fire*, Christine Welsh’s 1994 documentary about Native Canadian ‘women warriors’ of Oka, Haida Gwaii, and an urban women’s shelter)

Much has been said and written about sexual discrimination and to [elaborate] the issue now would probably be somewhat boring; however, we have pretty much gone full circle. We have gone that circle but we have not managed to connect yet. (Mingwon Mingwon [Shirley Bear], 1990)

[T]he capital available to NGOs plays the same role in alternative politics as the speculative capital that flows in and out of the economies of poor countries. It begins to dictate the agenda. It turns confrontation into

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negotiation. It depoliticizes resistance. It interferes with local people's movements that have traditionally been self-reliant ... The NGO-ization of politics threatens to turn resistance into a well-mannered, reasonable, salaried, 9–5 job. With a few perks thrown in. (Arundhati Roy, speech given in San Francisco, 2004)

The above quotes may seem disjointed at first glance, but they eloquently articulate several premises that guide this viewpoint. They critique the gaps between theory and praxis by suggesting that the saying and writing of 'fancy words' such as empowerment does not necessarily lead people to 'find' empowerment. They also suggest that the factors that contribute to maintaining these gaps in academia might overlap with the same processes that place pressure on grassroots non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to depoliticize resistance. Finally, all three statements can be seen as parts of an increasingly prominent public debate on the manner in which the proliferation of NGOs in the post 1989 era has profoundly reshaped the realm of global feminist politics, and on the ways that gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment projects have come to redefine not only the terminologies and terrains of women's politics, but also the sites and meanings of knowledge production.

Increasing pressures from donors and alliances between donors and states have frequently led to a structural emphasis on professionalized but decentralized small-scale organizations and a turn from anti-hierarchical to more hierarchical structures. Consequently, traditionally complex and movement-driven agendas of emancipation and equality have been compartmentalized into specific single (and in the context of feminist politics, gynocentric) issues such as violence against women or women's reproductive health, and into strategies with a predominantly state-oriented focus (Lang, 2000; Kamat, 2002; Saunders, 2002). Feminist academics, bureaucrats, and activists have all been profoundly affected by and centrally involved in such transformations. Although it would be simplistic to paint all NGOs with the same brush, the critiques nevertheless have shown how NGOs seeking transformative changes in favor of the least privileged face immense barriers in maintaining their primary accountability towards the people rather than to their donors. Partnerships between academics and NGO actors can facilitate resistance to such pressures, even if such partnerships require endless scrutiny and self-critique (Armstrong, 2004; Singh & Nagar, 2006).

These processes and insights have thus far remained under-theorized in discussions on feminist research in general, and feminist methodologies in particular. The role of the academic researcher, the dilemmas of representation, and the sharing of power, privilege and authority as ways to step out of those dilemmas have been creatively addressed by a whole spectrum of oral historians and feminist ethnographers. These conversations, however, must be extended to systematically explore the possibilities, strategies and challenges for feminist scholars to create new kinds of collaborative agendas and partnerships with organizational actors who work most closely with people at the 'grassroots', and in whose names projects of empowerment are envisioned and implemented. As multiple norths continue to emerge in the souths (and vice versa) and as NGO actors become important partners in knowledge production, it becomes imperative for feminist thinkers and activists to envision radical transnational methodologies that can simultaneously resist deradicalization of feminist politics in the corporate academy and in the donor-driven visions of women's

empowerment (Pratt, 2000; Mohanty, 2003; Armstrong, 2004). Collaboration is a complex and powerful tool that can be developed—through constant and multiple self-critiques by intellectuals and activists in and beyond academia and NGOs—to forge alliances and re(de)fine methodologies that seek to reconstitute the norms, structures and content of feminist knowledges and political agendas in anti-hierarchical ways.

In the following analysis, we first present a transdisciplinary overview of the manner in which themes of voice, memory and authority have been addressed by oral/life historians and feminist ethnographers, and our ‘take’ on how and why these conversations are useful for identifying the possibilities and challenges of collaborative praxis. Subsequently, we identify four interrelated themes where reflexive engagement by feminist collaborators across geographical, sociopolitical and institutional borders can create new spaces for transformative intellectual and political interventions.

### **Voice, Memory, Authority and Collaboration in Oral Historical and Ethnographic Research**

#### *Recasting the Politics of Voice and Memory*

If the ultimate mark of power is its invisibility, then the ultimate challenge of scholarship is to uncover the roots of power (Trouillot, 1995). As the politics of voice/lessness gained prominence in the social sciences and humanities during the last two decades, social historians and geographers became concerned with understanding the erstwhile ‘invisible’ pasts and everyday places, questioning the role of memory and the present context in recounting the past, and revamping older categories of analysis that were deemed relevant to the subjects of history and geography. At the same time, the challenges of feminist and postcolonial theories made researchers extremely cautious about oral/life history and ethnography as both representation and as data, about shifting matrices of power relations in/outside the ‘field’, and about not imposing their own meanings and organizations onto ‘other’ people or places, or events of the past (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Barnes, 1999; Peake & Trotz, 1999). These trends gave birth to exciting new methods that strive to hear silences, to read against the grain, and to ask open-ended questions (Silman, 1987; Bozzoli & Nkotsoe, 1991; Borland, 1998; Ouellette, 2002). Here, we explore the analytical utility of these conversations in revisiting the idea of collaboration: how, if at all, have the above interventions created new spaces for us to collaborate, co-imagine, and co-author new forms of academic products with those non-academic actors whom academics frequently ‘choose’ as their subjects or narrators?

In feminist research, positionality has become a critical concept and practice to address questions of voice and authority. The intensification of debates over sisterhood across geographic, sociopolitical, and racial borders pushed feminist academics not only to interrogate the power dynamics between the interviewer/interpreter and the interviewee/narrator, but also to pose difficult questions ranging from ‘who can/should write whose history?’ to ‘what kinds of struggles should research/theory enable?’ (Larner, 1995). These critiques successfully destabilized the search for some form of definitive, universal Truth of past or present lives, and underscored the importance of circulating multiple truths that are meaningful to the communities being studied.

Accountability emerged as a prominent theme as feminist scholars variously grappled with the dilemmas of epistemology, power and privilege while still trying to gain wider public audience for marginalized women's interpretive voices and constructions of the past and present (Gengenbach, 1994; Pratt, 2000). They often negotiated these spaces through intense reflection and self-critique, by asking open-ended interview questions, and by making the process of research visible (e.g. by 'marking' and specifying analysis and editorial voice in the production of life/oral history texts). The concern with accountability, furthermore, resulted in serious discussions of the politics of memory and place, underscoring the ways in which personal narratives are influenced by the sociopolitical and spatial contexts in which they are re/collected as well as by the un/equal relationships between the narrators and interpreters. Far from assuming a shared agenda between the researcher and the researched, this scholarship asked critical questions about the roles, motives, world views, social structures, shifting meanings of time and space, and the incommensurabilities and silences that remained on both sides (Frisch, 1990; Pratt, 2004).

Most broadly defined as the combined insights of different persons, places and research contexts, collaboration has been recognized for its ability to play a critical role in generating new dialogues and knowledges across socioeconomic, geographical and institutional borders. Collaborative research is based on the premises that (a) authority does not remain exclusively in the hands of the researcher; (b) neither the interpreter's nor the narrator's perspective is necessarily privileged; and (c) the meaning forged through dialogue is not necessarily arrived at through agreement and shared perspective but can evolve from constructive disagreements (Rouverol, 2003; Pratt, 2004; Sangtin Writers [& Nagar], 2006). The process of co-determining the various dimensions of research, action, writing/performance, reception and follow-up imparts new and sometimes unforeseen meanings to the collaborative project. Such a project, furthermore, takes on radically different forms of responsibility for assessment and analysis because it is simultaneously accountable to the people with/for whom it is imagined and undertaken, as well as to multiple academic/institutional audiences who have supported or are invested in the project (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Shopes, 1984, 1986; Kruzynski, 2003).

### *The Challenges of/to Collaboration*

Embracing multiple levels of accountability does not automatically translate into institutional acceptance of collaborative knowledges, however. For instance, Kerr (2003) after having worked on the Cleveland Homeless Oral History Project for his dissertation research, notes the obstacles faced by academic researchers who embrace activist aspirations, as well as the need to continue the struggle(s) over redefinition of authority, expertise and the spheres of formal knowledge production:

As I research and write my dissertation, knowing my committee will not accept a collaborative product ... the most important product for my collaborators is not my thesis, but the movement for social change that we have all been a part of ... while I will write about this process at some length in the future, I have committed myself to use my skills as

a traditional research historian to explore the longer-term historical development of the six themes identified in the workshops.

This recognition that critical scholarship must communicate with more than one audience emerges from the conviction that there are many levels on which intellectual and political intervention is necessary to effect social change (Houston & Pulido, 2002). Acting upon this conviction implies embracing the challenges of finding acceptable research methods for chosen audiences, a clear conceptualization of accountability, and a conscious destabilizing of dominant assumptions about who can produce knowledge. Such challenges, moreover, frequently must be faced in the absence of professional openness to the processes and/or principles by which collaborative practices are imagined and enacted across the borders of academia, NGOs, donor agencies and transnational solidarity networks.

Ideas about power and accountability in developing collaborative partnerships are also put to the test when seeking and allocating funding for projects. There are few resources for academics to work collectively with those they 'research'. In fact, stipulations built into academic grants severely limit collaborative possibilities. The very ideas about what counts as fieldwork or about the resources it requires often assume solitary 'experts' producing 'original' knowledges on the lives and problems of the marginalized. While input and insights from 'below' are applauded by funders of academic work and the term collaboration is often used to authenticate projects, little incentive or support exists for students to build intellectual partnerships with non-academic people in the global south. As a result, applicants interested in collaboration are often forced to turn to international donors concerned with 'poverty alleviation' and 'international development'. From an academic perspective, this sidelines the activist parts of the project to 'informing scholarly research', and from the perspective of collaboration, it creates a tension between satisfying two different kinds of expectations from funders in terms of project goals, methods, budgets and so on. Such roadblocks keep academic and activist aspirations of inverting power dynamics separate, and impoverish our abilities to enrich the theories and praxis of collaboration.

Likewise, from the perspective of many southern NGOs and people's movements, the people-driven grassroots politics at the local level has been overshadowed by the norms and requirements of donor agencies and mediations by the state. In this scenario, it becomes critical to systematically distinguish between the political agendas of various groups working in the voluntary sector, and to forge links with those NGOs that are trying to retain independence in the midst of the pressures created by a globalized 'women's empowerment' industry.

In order for collaboration to become a rigorous praxis, the deployments of collaboration warrant a close and critical assessment in the same ways as the meanings and practices associated with 'gender-training', 'empowerment', and 'community development' in the NGO sector necessitate a close and context-specific scrutiny at all times (see Pratt, 2004; Singh & Nagar, 2006). It is only through such critical interrogation that we can develop new theoretical and methodological languages and spaces for reconceptualizing collaboration. As part of this larger project, we identify and outline four points that need careful consideration by critical academics. The first two highlight a need for greater attentiveness to the relationships between processes and products of collaboration

on the one hand and between the theories and methodologies of collaboration on the other. The third and fourth points demand a closer consideration of how forms and trajectories of knowledge production/dissemination can be challenged and reconstituted across the borders of academia/NGOs/people's movements, and how such an agenda can be sustained by constantly negotiating and reimagining the meanings, forms and functions of reciprocity among variously situated collaborators.

### **Rethinking Collaboration: Processes, products and possibilities**

#### *Processes and Products of Collaboration*

There are authors who talk about the process of collaboration (e.g. Edmonson, 1993; Kerr, 2003; Rouverol, 2003); those who focus on the products of collaboration (Houston & Pulido, 2002); and some who attempt to discuss both aspects in the same projects (Frisch, 1990). There is serious and promising work to be done to bridge the divide between processes and products. It is crucial that we consider how the process unfolds—what is said/written, individually and dialogically—and how a consideration of the mutually constitutive relationship between processes and products of collaboration can open up new spaces for intellectual and political interventions.

Part of this challenge comes from the ways that accountability is conceptualized and multiple products of research are envisioned and supported. This is true for both academic and grassroots/community-based projects. For example, Rouverol (2003) collaborated with men in a prison to create theater based on their oral histories which they decided should be especially crafted for an at-risk youth audience. Sharing authority, she argues, also means sharing control of the outcomes. Multiple products of her research came out of the conviction that multiple truths and more nuanced understandings of historical events by a range of audiences are important for challenging public policy on the prison industrial complex.

Re-aligning accountability in research relationships is at the heart of bridging the divide between processes and products of collaborative methodologies and well as in resisting the mechanisms by which empowerment of the marginalized communities becomes a donor-driven enterprise. For example, Kerr (2003, p. 30) argues that his apparently progressive move to define the homeless as his primary audience was still limited. Rather, it was necessary to work with them as active participants in the formation of analysis. Sadly, accountability is absent in not only the relationship between the state and the homeless subject, but also in the relationship between the academic institutions and the subjects of academic research. Kerr discusses how peer review is regarded in higher esteem than the feedback given by homeless people to policy makers, and how academic roadblocks led him to eliminate a discussion of collaboration from his final dissertation, settling instead for an academic analysis of information yielded by the collaborative project (Kerr, 2003, p. 30).

#### *Theories and Methodologies of Collaboration*

There is a small but growing literature that details the collaborative process, but even here researchers rarely talk about creating methodologies or theories of

collaboration. As beliefs that guide behavior, theories can actively create and advance participatory methodologies while resisting sweeping deployments of the term collaboration, and creating more space for the hitherto under legitimized, under funded, and under analyzed collaborative practices. Kruzynski (2003), for example, draws on a wide range of feminist writing on collaboration to argue for the adoption of community organizing methods in a collaborative oral history project. Similarly, Rouverol's discussion of research with insider–outsider teams moves conversations about uneven power dynamics between the social/global position of the 'researcher' and the 'researched' beyond discussions of who can study and write what, to how studying and writing can advance social struggles on the ground.

Theorizing methodology in this manner uncovers underlying assumptions of how to do research; it offers general principles, frameworks, propositions, and guidance; and it creates techniques that might allow us to shift the angles of our research findings. Sustained and in-depth conversations about the aims and principles of participatory methods can help to formulate new epistemological insights and concrete how-tos. They can also demonstrate why collaboration is not merely a tool to generate new descriptions or anecdotes pertaining to isolated projects; in fact, it can serve as a conceptualization of social justice that is committed to reshaping the agendas, products, and possibilities embedded in academic research. Although some researchers believe in keeping activism separate from academic endeavors (Edmonson, 1993), we posit that our ability to advance struggles for social justice is more likely to be compromised if we fail to elaborate on the responsibilities, goals and strategies associated with research collaborations in our theories and methodologies.

#### *Collaboration as a Tool for Reconstituting Knowledges across Academic/NGO Borders*

The quotes at the outset of this paper remind us of the gulfs that continue to separate those who coin the terms from those 'upon' whom terms and concepts are applied by the 'experts'—whether those experts happen to be located in the academy, or in the voluntary sector. Arguably, the professionalization of research methods such as oral history and open-ended interviews have frequently distanced ordinary people from their own stories. It is not uncommon for the production and analysis of oral histories to be viewed as redundant or inaccessible by the narrators, if they remain only narrators. Furthermore, when the collaborative component of a project does not go beyond recording an oral history, that act becomes an end in itself rather than a means to challenge hegemonic knowledges. Similarly, the privileging of a reflexivity that emphasizes the researcher's identity has overshadowed a more explicit discussion of the economic, political and institutional processes and structures that provide the context for the fieldwork encounter and shape its effects (Nagar & Geiger, 2006). As a result, the goal of finding power or voice (Welsh, 1994) with the people has been eclipsed; writing history or geography *for* someone is a far cry from working *with* individuals or collectives so that they can write, disseminate and participate in contestations over their own histories and geographies.

These problems are rooted in structural processes that have increasingly deradicalized feminist politics in both academia and in the voluntary agencies through professionalization and bureaucratization (Lang, 2000; Mohanty, 2003). In addition—or perhaps, relatedly—methodological and theoretical innovations

of oral historians have been stunted in the academy by having to focus on primarily northern academic audiences. When funding is provided to produce new knowledges, the expectation is that such knowledge would be 'original' in the eyes of the academics located in the global north. The goal of co/producing analyses that are relevant to non-academic collectivities (such as, rural or township women) in the global south is often regarded as a secondary added bonus to filling in gaps in the academic record. Not surprisingly, then, the findings that are seen as epistemological breakthroughs in academia often generate little excitement or news for the people being studied (Dreze, 2002). Such a failure on the part of the researcher to speak to the agendas and priorities of her 'third world subjects' becomes more pronounced in the absence of direct institutional support where securing time, resources or intellectual credit for co/producing products that do not qualify as regular academic publications becomes a daunting—if not impossible—task for many students and faculty.

In a strikingly parallel development, the agendas of many women's NGOs in the south have come to be dominated by northern donors (Nnaemeka, 2004). The targeting of women by development policies and programs, and the agency exercised by the implementers of these programs have intersected in complex ways to create a situation where participatory research has frequently become a domain reserved for NGOs, practitioners and sociologists or academics engaging in 'development' studies. Knowledge/research produced in such NGOs is often constrained by what donors such as World Bank, Ford Foundation or UNICEF wish to see based on their assumptions about the 'basic needs' and priorities of poor women. Thus, there is often funding for addressing certain forms of violence (e.g. wife battery) through theater or grassroots mobilization. But there is little funding for creative projects that seek to challenge the notion that domestic violence does not exist in isolation from other forms of violence and to explore the connections among bodily violence on the one hand, and processes that result in landlessness, privatization of water, elimination of subsidized education and health care, or increased incarceration of the poor, on the other. This kind of analysis is exactly where the involvement of academic actors in grassroots initiatives can advance the collective understandings as well as the intellectual and political agendas of their community-based feminist collaborators. In addition, the adoption and subsequent standardization of street theater, oral history, and community newspapers as pet NGO projects has often had the effect of compromising radical political content and contextual specificity of struggle in these forms of cultural protest (Kerr, 1991; Chifuniyise, 2001; Kerr, 2003). Alliances between feminists in the academy and in the NGO fields can play a critical role in uncovering and critiquing such homogenizing processes and in imagining new strategies that identify and resist deradicalization of politics in this manner.

#### *Reimagining Reciprocity in/through Collaboration*

Finally, discussions of reciprocity are often limited to suggestions of stated positionality and potential co-authorship. However, co-authoring is a limited way of conceptualizing shared authority, especially when it does not translate into challenging dominant intellectual practices where there is often little co-imagination in the framing of the project, and where the academic gains more from the authorship than do her/his interviewees (Mohanty, 2003). Just as ethics are not confined to giving people credit in our academic products, so also,

co-authoring is not the only way to recognize or represent collaborative partnerships (Nagar in collaboration with Ali & Sangatin, 2003). The notion that the only meaningful way to author something is to be the person(s) writing and publishing a project not only betrays a deep prejudice against formally non-/less literate people and practices, it seriously undermines the critical role that collective intellectual and political journeys play in the making of analysis and authorship. We must resist an institutionalization of reciprocity that turns authorship into the be all and end all of sharing authority, and recognize that multiple aspects of reciprocity and accountability can be actively built into one project.

Relatedly, there have been numerous critiques of who-gets-what out of life history projects, and individual researchers often write about attempting to 'give back' to those whose life histories they 'work on', while acknowledging the pitfalls in the problematic assumption that researchers always have power to change the lives and worlds of those they study (Geiger, 1990). It is now necessary to extend and enrich these discussions of reciprocity by simultaneously linking them to critiques of institutional norms and cultures that reproduce narrow and hierarchical notions of who counts as an expert producer of knowledge. At the same time, we deliberately need to give more formal recognition to non-academic products (e.g. pamphlets, primers, performances) as works that enable and enhance the quality of academic knowledge, rather than as peripheral byproducts of academic research. In addition, we need to create legitimacy for new forms of authorship by interrogating, reevaluating and redistributing authority at each stage of the project (Edmonson, 1993; Scott, 1999; Singh & Nagar, 2006). These stages include not only the activities that translate into concrete products of collaboration—for example, diary writing, interviews, transcription, analysis, scriptwriting, rehearsals, and writing of final texts—but also, the labor of sustaining long-term, on the ground struggles against multiple forms of structural violence and injustices.

A reflexive and systematic consideration of the above elements can allow feminist actors to undertake careful conceptualizations of collaborative methodologies, without undermining the historical, geographical and political specificity of any given collaboration, or its ability to articulate and (re)define itself as it unfolds. Such a reconsideration can also spark fresh discussions on how alternatives to traditional forms of co-authorship can be enacted, and the manner in which the terms of narration, translation and reception can be negotiated and recast across social and institutional locations. For the academic researcher, such collaborative possibilities can create concrete spaces to productively engage with politics on the ground by becoming a learner and a teacher with the grassroots workers at all stages—from agenda formation and analysis to building a campaign on the basis of critique. At the same time, the process and products allow all collaborators to advance their political work as a collective and can place issues such as 'politics of knowledge production' at the core of their intellectual agendas and frameworks. The collectively owned and contextually embedded analyses and critiques are better equipped to resist the donor-driven pressures on grassroots politics by carving out new and hitherto unforeseen intellectual and political territories that neither academics nor NGO actors can get institutional or political support to carry out as isolated entities (Sangtin Writers [& Nagar], 2006). In this way, academics and actors in NGOs and movements can together blur the divides between academia and activism, and facilitate the creation of new spaces, knowledges, and frameworks for public debate.

The territory of (re)imagining collaboration is infinitely vast and full of creative possibilities, and cannot be contained within sub-headings. Far from being fixed conclusions or recommended models, our propositions here are meant to serve as possible points of conversation for feminist scholars who are invested in advancing conceptualizations of collaborative theories and methodologies, and in creating new spaces where academics and grassroots actors can collectively push the boundaries of their own institutions to generate knowledges that can inspire new forms of creative struggle in and outside the academy.

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## ABSTRACT TRANSLATION

### ¿Colaboración como resistencia? Reconsiderando los procesos, productos, y Posibilidades de una etnografía y Historia oral feminista

RESUMEN Mientras que emergen 'nortes' múltiples en los así llamados 'sures' (y viceversa) y que los organismos no gubernamentales (ONG) se hacen parejas importantes en la producción de conocimiento, resulta imperativa para que los/as

actores/as feministas prevean nuevas metodologías colaborativas que puedan resistir simultaneo la 'de-radicalización de las políticas feministas' en la cada vez más corporatizada academia así como en los ONGs que son cada vez más profesionalizados y influido por el estado y donantes internacionales. Basado en una lectura extensiva de historias orales y etnografías críticas, ésta punta de vista identifica cuatro áreas entrelazados donde intervenciones reflexivas por colaboradoras feministas a través de fronteras geográficas, institucionales, y sociopolíticas puedan adelantar tal proyecto: repensando las relaciones entre los procesos y los productos de colaboración; más entretejiendo consciente de las teorías y metodologías colaborativas; la producción de conocimientos que puedan viajar a través de las fronteras de academia/ONG/movimientos sociales; y una reimaginación de reciprocidad en colaboraciones.