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Reflections on collaborative knowledge production in the context of forced migration.

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„I don't feel like a refugee, and I don't feel like a migrant either. I'm just a human being asking for a place to live", Buba Sesay[21] [22] stated during a video phone call in the summer of 2018, when we exchanged views on the terms 'refugee' and 'migrant' for the designation of the protagonists in our joint paper. I first met Buba during a research stay in Malta in July 2015, and from then on he supported me during my research project, introducing me to several discussion partners. Over the next couple of years a friendship was established between me and Buba and his family. Out of this friendship, and on the initiative of Buba's wife, we decided in the autumn 2017 to jointly

bring attention to the precarious living situation of people in Malta and Italy who cannot be deported by creating a collaborative writing project. In the course of our writing process we repeatedly negotiated which designatory terms we would use and how we would present and interpret certain situations. Joint writing represents one form of collaboration in engaged research in order to share the power of interpretation with all actors involved. Since the 1980s decolonial feminist researchers have appealed for a "decolonization on the level of the text" (Abu-Lughod 2008, 26), which is expressed in dialogic writing, polyvocal texts and "'indigenizing' anthropology" (ibid.). Similarly, in the mid-1990s, the Latin American research collective *Modernidad/Colonialidad*, initiated by Aníbal Quijano and other critical intellectuals, called for epistemic disobedience to contest Euro-American academic traditions (Escobar 2003). These approaches can be understood as a framework to how we can design participatory research in transnational and postcolonial contexts. However, since there is no predefined methodological set for collaborative research, the design and forms are always dependent on the particular collaborations. In my research project I have tried to actively involve especially refugee research partners through various collaborative forms in order not to limit my scientific work to a mere increase in knowledge, but to intervene in social processes and to influence the knowledge field of forced migration in a self-reflexive and power-critical manner. In the following I will present and discuss five forms of collaboration which have been used in my dissertation project, as well as their challenges. I will reflect on the structures and power relations under which the collaboration processes were constituted.

Collaborative data production and interpretation

During fieldwork I documented my observations in a research diary. Most of the time I openly made notes in my diary, which attracted the interest of my conversation partners.

On one afternoon in October 2015, I sat in the lounge of an Open Center in Malta, which temporarily offered accommodation for refugees. I sat at the table with my research diary waiting for conversation partners. Basra Warsame, who left Somalia for Europe in 2012, sat down on the chair next to me and we started a conversation. During the conversation I took notes, and these notes

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[21] All names of the research partners have been changed. This also applies to co-authorships with refugee research partners.

[22] I refer to people with whom I have done research and who were willing to interact with me in my research as research partners. In doing so,

I emphasize that knowledge production is a situational interaction process in which 'to be researched'-individuals are actively involved in knowledge production, albeit to a different extent than I am as a researcher.

then became the focus of further conversation: "You have to write *this* down", she said and dictated to me in slow words what I should write down. This process continued and every now and then she made sure that I had written everything down she had told me. Dereje Abebe, who came to Malta from Ethiopia in 2012 and whom I also met at the Open Center, was not satisfied with just asking if I wrote everything down. He looked several times at my writings and read exactly what I had noted down. He asked, "Can I restructure this a bit?" as he pointed to an actor diagram that I had drawn on a page. In oval circles I had depicted various actors, such as 'Open Center Management', 'residents', 'NGO 1', 'NGO 2' etc., and connected them with different arrows and lines in a network. I was apprehensive at first, but then I gave Dereje my pen. He inserted arrows and wrote down keywords next to the actors. His additions clarified the relationships between the individual actors from his perspective. With the inscription "no trust" on a double arrow, he assessed the relationship between the residents of the Open Center and the management as characterized by mutual distrust.

Encouraged by the encounters and initiatives of co-writing and commenting of Basra and Dereje, I decided during the research process to have interested discussion partners read and comment on my notes. Thus, my research diary not only contained my notes, but also comments and additions by discussion partners as well as drawings by the children with whose parents I had a conversation. I understand the joint writing of my research diary as a form of collaborative knowledge production, which also involves sharing the power of interpretation, that in conventional research is often reserved for researchers only. However, despite my efforts, the balance of power cannot be completely dissolved: The decision of which notes and comments of the research partners I will use for the analysis and how they are interpreted is only done by myself.

Sharing and discussing (interim) results with research partners

During my collaborative research, I made a further attempt to share the power of interpretation by discussing the (interim) results with research partners. Throughout my research stays, I volunteered for an international aid organization in Malta, which offered support to refugees. This joint work and shared values and ideas enabled a collaborative research practice with the NGO staff. In summer 2016, I decided to discuss my interpretations with research partners before publication. Afterall, I believed it was important for me to involve the NGO before publishing my first interim results since the NGO had provided

me a great deal of support for my research. And so I sent my draft to the team leader with whom I had worked more intensively during my previous research stays.

After reading my article, the team leader sent me a message stating that he did not see a clear distinction between my role as a researcher and a volunteer. The NGO feared that it might look like they were abusing their position and access to refugees by allowing volunteers to follow an external research interest within the NGO as part of the volunteer role. One paragraph in my introduction in particular would need to be revised to avoid implicating the NGO in potentially ambiguous activity. I compared my paragraph with the wording proposed by the team leader and decided to substitute the revised paragraph, in order to avoid ambiguities related to word choice, so as not to jeopardize the relationship of trust between the NGO and the state institutions through my research or publication. At the same time, this event prompted me to reflect on whether I had articulated my position as a researcher properly and had behaved ethically in my roles as a researcher and volunteer. In the further course of my research, this self-reflection helped me to be aware of my various roles and also the hierarchical relationships in future collaborations in order to create a common capacity to act.

Collaborative authorship

A third form of collaboration is the co-authorship with research partners. I have written four collaborative texts with different research partners (see Bijl/Nimführ 2020; Nimführ/Otto/Samateh 2020; Nimführ/Sesay 2019; Nimführ/Otto/Samateh 2017). Depending on the possibilities of the authors, different challenges during the collaborative writing process arose, which I will illustrate in the following with two examples of collaborative co-authorships.

In an article, which I wrote for an anthology together with my colleague Laura Otto and research partner Gabriel Samateh (Nimführ/Otto/Samateh 2017), the technical equipment of the authors was largely responsible for the extent and nature of their respective involvement. Gabriel grew up in Gambia and has lived in Malta since 2014, where I met him in summer 2015. While Laura and I created the basic structure of the article with *Word*, Gabriel could not participate in the writing of the article in this way. He neither had his own computer nor any other access to edit a .doc- file generated by Word. We agreed on the procedure that Laura and I were largely responsible for the analysis and presentation of the content when writing the article, but consulted Gabriel on individual

points of argumentation via video phone calls and SMS. He independently produced his own text via SMS on the experience of his rescue, which we inserted as an intermedia in our article and to which we referred in the continuous text. Due to the missing possibility to meet (again) personally and the different technical equipment, we were unfortunately not able to allow all authors involved to participate equally in the analysis and writing process. The fact that we first had to negotiate our understanding of collaborative writing became particularly apparent when the article was edited in an adapted version in another volume (Nimführ/Otto/Samateh 2020). The proofreader 'smoothed' the language of Gabriel's text, as otherwise the writing style and grammar would not have been consistently correct. The first reaction Laura and I had was to leave Gabriel's text in the original version for the sake of authenticity. While we did not want to correct Gabriel in order not to undermine his authority as an author, the proofreader argued that the editing should be made available to all parts of the text and all authors on an equal footing, thus counteracting a power gap. In the end, we accepted that the preservation of Gabriel's original texts as authentically and literally as possible, without smoothing out language and punctuation—though being quite common practice in ethnographic texts—, would indeed reproduce a hierarchy of authorship that only became conscious to us through the intervention of the proofreader. Thereafter, in consultation with Gabriel, linguistic and grammatical changes were made to the sentence structure in some parts of the intermedia. However, where Gabriel insisted on his choice of words for certain rewordings, we respected his choice, despite the proofreader's suggestions.

In contrast to the article mentioned above, the entire creation of a journal article (Nimführ/Sesay 2019) was written together with Buba. Over numerous video phone calls and the mutual editing of the document, a common text was gradually formed. Nevertheless, the writing process was faced with challenges. First, my academic and Buba's non-academic background clashed, which sometimes led to a lack of understanding on the part of Buba regarding the structure of the paper and also the numerous revision phases required for the publication process.[23] Second, Buba had never attended school and had taught himself to read and write, and therefore the preparation of his

text passages took more time. Buba had a wonderful way of telling his experiences and thoughts, however, when it came to putting these richly illustrated stories on paper he was challenged. Therefore, at Buba's request, we developed a collaborative system in which he told me conceptually what he would like to have written which I then converted into sensible academic text. Next, after drafting an initial textual framework, Buba would independently make small changes and add new text. As a final step, we went through all the paragraphs again together and Buba intervened if I had not put his thoughts down on paper as he had imagined. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, we often had long discussions about terminology regarding the designation of various protagonists, but also about representing the mode of departure from Malta.

The public presentation of collaborative projects

As a fourth form of collaboration, I will discuss the public presentation of collaborative projects. Lectures or book presentations are an often used medium for the dissemination of scientific results, and were the two forms I attempted to use to present our projects. In both cases, however, these could not be realized – due to different existential and political circumstances of collaborative partners. Nevertheless, I would like to mention them here to show the challenges of collaborative knowledge production.

A chapter written jointly with Laura and Gabriel (Nimführ/Otto/Samateh 2020) was to be presented at a book launch. However, co-author Gabriel decided against a public appearance. Gabriel feared that the Maltese Asylum Department would discover his participation and his critical attitude towards Maltese integration policy would have consequences for his pending family proceedings.[24] This fear was not unfounded, as became apparent just two weeks after the publication of our chapter when I received an e-mail from the Maltese Minister for Integration who became aware of our critical contribution to (dis)integration policy via the Maltese media. The fact that one does not have the free choice to appear in public without fear of reprisals is also shown by the unequal balance of power among the actors in the border regime.

Different challenges occurred in the collaboration with Buba. In spring 2018, Buba and I prepared the trip to the

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[23] The sharing of the power of interpretation and representation with research partners was not only met with approval: The reviewers questioned the benefits for sciences of this collaborative approach and pointed out the pitfalls. This shows that academia and peer-review processes often rigidly function according to very specific logics and ideas about knowledge orders and forms of representation.

[24] Gabriel was granted recognized refugee status under the Geneva Conventions in spring 2016. After being granted this status, he immediately submitted an application for family reunification to enable his wife and child to enter Malta. This application is still being processed.

conference venue. For Buba, the conference participation fee of €250.00 was already prohibitive, aside from the expected travel and accommodation costs to and at the venue. I had already been in contact with the conference organization team for several weeks to obtain a fee waiver for Buba and to apply for a travel allowance. Despite several requests, the organizers and network management rejected the waiver and even a reduced conference fee as well as the requested travel subsidy for Buba. I was informed, however, that there was the possibility of submitting a cost grant through the *Solidarity Fund* of the network, through which "scholars at risk" could apply for a grant. However, since Buba had no university or other affiliation to a research institution, a reimbursement of costs via this fund was not possible. My doctoral supervisor offered to pay the travel expenses for Buba. However, this still would not cover the necessary expenses so I again contacted the organizers with the request to grant Buba cost-free access to the conference only for our 20-minute presentation so that we could present the results of our contribution together. Unfortunately, my e-mail remained unanswered. In the end, the cost of the conference was unaffordable for Buba and so I travelled alone to the conference with the intention of addressing these exclusion practices in the context of the lecture. I started our presentation with the slide "WHERE IS BUBA?" explaining the circumstances that led to the fact that I now had to present our collaborative paper alone and pointed out the importance of acknowledging different forms of knowledge and knowledge production.

Support of projects of the research partners

Another possibility for me to work collaboratively and above all to stimulate change is to support the projects of my research partners. After years of struggle, Buba managed to regularize his legal status and to live with his family in the Netherlands. Together with his wife he established a foundation in 2019. Their foundation, called *Education Gives Hope Foundation*, aims to improve the living standards of children and young people in Sierra Leone (Buba's country of origin) through educational opportunities. It is an honor for me that they asked me to participate in this project, in which I am involved in fundraising and public relations. With the support of volunteer work and donations, a school building has already been constructed in which currently about 50 students are taught by volunteer teachers. In the first year access to running water, electricity and sanitary facilities for the school were realized. In order to provide the students of the educational project with the necessary school materials, I in-

itiated a collection campaign in Austria, in which backpacks filled with school supplies were donated. Some committed employees of the Department of European Ethnology of the University of Vienna also took part in the campaign, so that the boundaries between science and commitment became permeable.

The need of collaborative, engaged knowledge production

As I have shown in the previous sections, the collaborations depicted are characterized by constant negotiation between different actors. On the one hand, the negotiations are defined by interactions and processes of understanding between myself, as a researcher, and the research partners. On the other hand, negotiations also take place within the scientific field. Collaborative knowledge production results in a changing and dissolving demarcation between science and society. These processes can be described as "border work" (von Unger 2014, 9f.), which is not only confronted with methodological challenges, but also with questions of legitimacy from positions of hegemonic academic knowledge production.

With my contribution, I would like to encourage the sharing of the (scientific) privilege of interpretation and representation with research partners, even if full equality may not be achieved. By enabling spaces of knowledge-production in which all the actors involved participate, "[r]esearch through imperial eyes" (Smith 2012, 44) can be deconstructed. Said actors' participation counteracts the danger of *white* Eurocentric knowledge production and fosters decolonial thinking. Collaborative research can offer research partners the perspective of working with a critical public, especially in fields of knowledge that are characterized by the production of unequal spaces. In this collaboration, the equality of various forms of knowledge and ways of knowing can be recognized (Aluli Meyer 2003) and a thematization and a reflexive approach to historically grown unequal structural power relations between participating actors can be promoted (Smith 2012, 58). Particularly in the context of forced migration, collaboration enables both an understanding and an intervention in migration realities. Instead of merely evoking an increase in knowledge about forced migration, collaborative knowledge production can promote (field) research that supports a "liberation of knowledge" (Mignolo & Walsh 2018, 146) and advances a "feeding of knowledge into social struggles" (Binder/Hess 2013, 35; own translation).

Figure 1: Distribution of donated school supplies from the collection campaign in October 2019 © Education Gives Hope Foundation

Figure 2: John Ceesay with some children in the classroom, © Education Gives Hope Foundation

At the same time, by opposing a reflexive perspective, current policies can be deconstructed and thus the conditions of the realities of forced migration can be contested. However, even if collaborative research is explicitly aimed at reducing power differentials and "letting the other speak" (Abu-Lughod 2008, 26), challenges still remain, as this article has shown. There is still a long way to go to achieve a decolonializing of research perspectives, since this transformation always implies a denaturalizing of global orders and power relations, which can only be achieved by "letting something go, namely the flows of energy that keep you attached to the colonial matrix of power, whether you are in the camp of those who sanction or the camp of those sanctioned" (Mignolo & Walsh 2018, 148).

The *Education Gives Hope Foundation* was founded in 2019 by John Ceesay and Jorinde Bijl to improve the standard of living of children and young people in Sierra Leone. Education does not have to remain an unattainable right. Your support of the foundation is an important step to give disadvantaged children a chance to learn. The goal for 2020 is to equip the school with chairs and tables. The foundation has already received a generous donation from a school in Holland and now needs 1,800€ for shipping to Sierra Leone. Help to reach this goal by donating to the *Education Gives Hope Foundation*: Children Better Life, NL39INGB0007298083. For more information: https://www.facebook.com/EducationgivesHope/

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