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# Community-Centered Collaboration in Applied Linguistics

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## COMMUNITY-CENTERED COLLABORATION IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

‘Why do you do the research that you do?’

*It has important implications for major theoretical debates in the field and will help advance scholarly knowledge. . .*

‘Why do you do the research that you do?’

*I was trained by the world’s experts in these methodologies, which are the best suited for answering my research questions. . .*

‘No, why do you do the research that you do?’

*(I grew up in. . . My family. . . I have a friend who. . . I worked as. . . I never forgot that time. . .)*

‘But why do you do the research that you do?’

*(They didn’t teach me how to do anything else. . .)*

This deceptively simple question was posed by Jamaal Muwwakkil, a doctoral student in linguistics and—by my great good fortune—my advisee, in a graduate class on ethnographic methods that I was teaching in Winter 2017, just as Trump took office. Jamaal asked this question not of me directly, or of any particular student, but more broadly, to invite the entire class to interrogate the assumptions of our discipline and of the academy at a time of growing hate and injustice in the USA and around the world. His incisive intervention launched a rich and wide-ranging discussion: Why does each of us do the research that we do? Why us? And why research? Jamaal’s question was part of a sustained and much-needed effort by students of color in that class to critique academic business-as-usual. Even now, after the violence, cruelty, loss, and pain of the past several years and every indication of further suffering to come, the academy—including our own discipline—lacks a meaningful commitment to social justice.

How, then, are researchers to support the dignity and self-determination of oppressed and marginalized communities using the conventional tools of academia? The short, and troubling, answer is that we can’t, at least not entirely. The contributors to this special issue demonstrate that what we can do instead is to create alternative collective spaces where we can imagine and bring into

being different and more just, equitable, and humane kinds of research, the only academic research worth doing (Paris and Winn 2014). Moten and Harney (2013) theorize such spaces of stealthy subversion in the interstices of the academy as the ‘undercommons’ and the work that these spaces enable as ‘fugitive planning’. The papers in this issue illustrate some of the myriad forms that the research undercommons can take. What unifies this diverse set of projects is not only their focus on social justice as a research outcome, which has been a widespread if often implicit orientation of the field for many years. More importantly, these papers highlight how the research process itself can and must serve as a site for solidarity and social justice. In particular, these studies envision and enact a research model that is community-centered and collaborative at its core (Bax *et al.* 2019). Such research is not precisely—or not only—ethnographic, although it often involves a decolonial form of ethnography (e.g., Alonso Bejarano *et al.* 2019). In fact, community-centered collaboration is not always or even necessarily primarily research: Its results are shaped not by researchers’ professional goals, deadlines, and scholarly agendas but by community needs and priorities (Bucholtz *et al.* 2020; Lopez 2020), so that only a small fraction of the work that is done through collaboration ever ends up in the pages of academic volumes.

In what follows, I discuss how the papers in this special issue illustrate seven key principles of community-centered collaboration, which can be roughly grouped around issues of redistribution (of power, of other resources), positionality (contact across difference, subjectivity, emotion), and sociopolitical and scholarly transformation (theory, moral responsibility). As concrete examples of these principles in action, these papers thus provide powerful insights into not just why but more importantly *how* applied linguists should engage in collaborative research to work toward social justice.

### **Collaboration requires giving up power**

Community-centered collaboration typically involves people with relatively greater institutional and often structural power working in solidarity with people with relatively less institutional and often structural power. However, as seen in many of the papers in this issue, researchers may also be community members, thus complicating dichotomous understandings of power. All the contributions demonstrate that community-centered collaboration requires researchers to resist claiming the power and authority conferred by our degrees, our institutional affiliations, and often our structural advantages on the basis of class, race, and/or other axes of inequity, in order to make room for our community collaborators to guide the work to be done. In short, the researcher’s role is to serve as a resource for the community, not the other way around. In reality, of course, collaboration with the goal of social justice destabilizes but cannot entirely undo the unequal power dynamic of the traditional researcher–participant relationship. In prioritizing partnership and

accompaniment, this approach diverges sharply both from colonizing practices of data extraction and from well-intentioned but misguided top-down ‘empowerment’ interventions (Bucholtz *et al.* 2016).

The work of collaboration begins by listening with humility and without an agenda. In their groundbreaking paper on collaborating with racialized Catalan students to address racism in Catalonia, Khan and Gallego Balsà note that the practice of listening is a political act of solidarity that is foundational to social justice. Both authors have commonalities with their student collaborators, but they hold more power due to their status as academics. In recognition of this power asymmetry, Khan and Gallego Balsà invited students into a space where they could talk in an open-ended way about their lives and experiences and then set their own agenda for anti-racist action in response to those experiences. As the authors show, when we set aside our expertise and enter into collaboration from a stance of humility, we become more able to hear and see what our community partners are generous enough to teach us, and we begin to learn how to do the work that needs to be done.

### **Collaboration is a redistribution of resources**

By recognizing and supporting community members’ self-determination, community-centered collaborative research enables the redistribution of material and symbolic resources from the academy to the community (e.g., funding, equipment, training, knowledge, institutional and disciplinary prestige/authority). One key way that community-centered collaborative research can lead to redistribution of resources is through the use of the institutional authority and material resources of the university to amplify collaborators’ voices to a larger audience—to ‘make others listen’, as Khan and Gallego Balsà aptly put it. Such research can function as a form of reparations when coupled with more systemic decolonizing and anti-racist efforts.

Williams’s paper addresses the principle of resource redistribution through his collaborative work with Hip Hop language activists/technicians in Cape Town. The centerpiece of this collaboration was a public dialog between Williams and Hip Hop language technicians about the raciolinguistically complex variety Afrikaaps as a resource for community well-being. As seen in this case, the redistribution of resources crucially entails enlarging traditional scholarly notions of ‘the public’ to include multiple publics and especially counterpublics (Warner 2002) with whom academics collaborate in a model of egalitarianism rather than structural hierarchy. Moreover, in these alliances, researchers can use our institutional power to reallocate resources that typically exclude counterpublics, including physical space and media attention. Williams’s proposal to create ‘truth-to-power think tanks’ is an especially innovative and exciting example of the potential of community-centered collaboration to enable the undercommons to reimagine the commons.

## Collaboration is a contact zone

In community-centered collaboration, ‘the community’ can be anywhere, and anyone can be a collaborator. In these papers, the community spaces in which collaborative work is done include university and public-school classrooms, health and social service centers, and the transnational virtual spaces of social media, and collaborators range from university faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates to public school students, patients and their families, Hip Hop artist-activists, and political protesters. Community-centered collaboration is therefore what Pratt (1991) calls a contact zone, a concept that Martínez and his coauthors put to fruitful use in their contribution. While they use this term to characterize the experience of US Latinxs navigating the US health care system (as I discuss further below), it also applies to the process of collaboration itself. Pratt theorizes contact zones as sites of encounter across difference and thus as spaces of asymmetrical power struggle as well as the creation of new knowledges and understandings. In fact, one of her examples of a contact zone is a university classroom in which students from diverse backgrounds grapple with coloniality and its continuing legacy. Contact zones are not ‘the field’—a colonizing term that treats someone’s home as a space of otherness (Charity Hudley, personal communication)—but rather should be understood as translingual and culturally complex borderlands where all who enter are simultaneously insider and outsider (Anzaldúa 1987). As the papers show, contact zones may be sites of contestation, oppression, and resistance (Anya; Martínez et al.), spaces of solidarity and relative safety (de los Ríos, Seltzer, and Molina; Ortega), or both (Hamm-Rodríguez and Medina; Khan and Gallego Balsà; López-Gopar *et al.*; Williams).

At their best, contact zones are ‘third spaces’ in which collaboration and multidirectional learning flourish (Gutiérrez *et al.* 1999). This situation is documented by de los Ríos, Seltzer, and Molina in their deeply moving discussion of how Black and Latinx students in California built solidarity and community across racial lines by jointly writing corridos in their ethnic studies class. This class, itself a collaboration between two of the authors, introduced the field of ethnic studies to high school students of color, who urgently need this knowledge but have often been systemically blocked from gaining access to it. Given the changing demographics of the state and the nation, the class represented a transformative third space in which young people of color could challenge racial divisions. The political possibilities enabled by collaboration in such spaces are captured in the eloquently translingual turn of phrase of one of the students (‘Borderlands son fronteras that ain’t real’) as well as the title of the corrido and of the paper itself: ‘Juntos Somos Fuertes’.

By their nature, then, contact zones unsettle notions of fixed borders. As Hamm-Rodríguez and Medina’s paper illustrates, the contact zones of social protest may even be geographically dispersed yet remain intimately linked via diasporic connection and mediatized political and scholarly engagement. In their richly nuanced exploration of discursively linked protest movements in

both Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, the authors thoroughly inhabit the contact zone in a variety of times and spaces: They were involved in these events as researchers, as protesters, as engaged viewers, and as members of kinship and friendship networks. Their work reveals how during these protests digital spaces operated as undercommons and counterpublics, transcending geopolitical boundaries to create an intra-Caribbean contact zone of resistance and solidarity.

### **Collaboration involves the whole self**

If researchers and community members are to work collectively while avoiding the traditional colonizing research relationship, then we must acknowledge our positionality and how it shapes our collaboration. This acknowledgment must be made explicit from the beginning of the collaborative relationship and then continue throughout the research process and beyond. The question *Why do you do the research that you do?* can only be fully answered from the standpoint of the whole self, and not from the limited view of a supposedly objective and neutral researcher. To answer this question requires researchers to engage in critical reflexivity: How does our subject position facilitate and limit our actions and understandings within the collaborative research relationship? How can our positionality benefit our partners, and how might it harm them, especially in ways we aren't aware of?

The critical role of positionality in collaboration is powerfully highlighted in Anya's paper on white supremacy and anti-Blackness in US world language education. Rooting her discussion in collaborative research with instructors and students at three different institutions, two of them minority-serving and the other predominantly white, Anya grounds her analysis in her own solo-status experiences as a Black American woman who was first a student, then an instructor, and now a researcher and teacher educator in world language education. This positionality and lived experience informed all aspects of her collaborations, from inspiring her to engage with Critical Race Theory and Critical Race Pedagogy, which are underutilized in applied linguistics research, to enabling her to make room for, listen to, and make sense of Black students' discussions of their negative experiences in anti-Black classrooms, to her ability to guide mostly white Spanish language instructors to reflect critically on their own racial positionalities and then to recognize and eliminate white-supremacist discourses and actions in their curricular materials. In other words, researchers and collaborators alike must bring our whole beings to our work if it is to be transformative.

### **Collaboration is emotional**

Because community-centered collaboration prioritizes equity, relationality, and positionality, it requires a shift in focus from outcomes to processes and from findings to experiences (see also [Avineri et al. 2021](#)). Consequently, such

work is deeply affective, attuning us to our own and our collaborators' emotions. The authors identify a range of affective experiences in and around the research process, many of them painful and even traumatic, yet they do so in ways that do not exploit or sensationalize their own or their partners' vulnerability but rather honor their humanity.

Ortega's piece compellingly illustrates the significance, complexity, and situatedness of emotion in collaborative research. He poignantly describes how students and their teachers in Bogotá confronted trauma and loss resulting from normalized violence, and he goes on to recount that during the research he re-experienced his own trauma of growing up under conditions of poverty and violence in the city. Given this somber context, it may come as a surprise to readers in the Global North to learn that the teachers encouraged students to write 'gratitude notes' for themselves and positive affirmations for their peers. In the USA and elsewhere, gratitude has been cynically commodified by a 'wellness' industry seeking to sell neoliberal self-actualization to affluent professionals. By contrast, in the classrooms where Ortega collaborated with—and grieved with—teachers and students, gratitude becomes an act of affective and political agency, resistance, and resilience (Ferrada *et al.* 2020). A shared acknowledgment of emotion and its meaning is thus a fundamental responsibility of collaborative work.

### **Collaboration is social change**

In prioritizing our shared humanity, community-centered collaboration recenters the primary goal of research from 'knowledge for its own sake' to usable knowledge that advances structural social change. The authors provide an abundance of ideas for and examples of social justice praxis through community-centered collaboration, including strategies for the Black-centered teaching of world languages (Anyà), decolonized English teaching (López-Gopar *et al.*), knowledge brokering between health-care providers and Spanish-speaking patients (Martínez *et al.*), the engagement of wider publics via debates and discussions (Williams), the facilitation of critical public platforms and contexts for our collaborators (de los Ríos *et al.*; Khan and Gallego Balsà; Ortega), and transnational coalition building through social media (Hamm-Rodríguez and Medina).

As López-Gopar and his coauthors state in their contribution, 'social justice is not a broad, exo-normative goal; it is grounded in day-to-day research practices'. They convincingly and comprehensively support this statement in their paper, which brings together the perspectives of university researchers from the Global North, a local English teacher and teacher educator, and Indigenous students in a teaching preparation program in Mexico, thus blurring the lines between 'researcher' and 'participant'. In this space—a kind of undercommons within the larger colonial context of Mexican higher education—collaborators' contributions jointly enable new, decolonial pedagogical possibilities: new ways of conceptualizing students; new ways of teaching

English that valorize multilingualism and translanguaging; and new, locally situated and socially meaningful forms of assessment. Such concrete acts of change are fundamental to social justice research.

### **Collaboration is theory**

Collaboration is widely considered a methodology, but in research that centers social justice, it is also an epistemology. Social justice-oriented collaboration prioritizes community members' expertise and understandings because this knowledge is central to building theories that are inclusive, accurate, and foundational to social change. Anya uses the indispensable concept of counternarratives from Critical Race Theory to characterize the crucial knowledge that emerges when the lived experiences of people who are sociopolitically subordinated are centered as authoritative evidence (and her own article is a powerful example of a counternarrative in its own right). The papers in this issue document a wide range of counternarrative genres—from corridos to testimonios, from life stories to public debates, from research interviews to intercultural dialogues, from community action projects to social media posts—all of which enact communicative resistance by claiming discursive space to critique hegemonic structures and ideologies and to create more just and equitable futures.

The articles invoke multiple facets of social justice, including racial justice, economic justice, linguistic justice, testimonial justice, and epistemic justice. The latter two concepts, as the paper by Martínez and his coauthors demonstrates, emphasize the close relationship between social justice and the recognition and validation of subjugated knowledges. The authors identify a situation of profound testimonial and epistemic injustice in the experiences of Spanish-speaking patients and family members—especially women—seeking health care in the USA, whose insights and concerns were silenced, ignored, and dismissed by health care providers. The researchers' community-centered collaborative approach offers an invaluable form of redress by creating spaces for these women to tell their stories, or *testimonios*, and validating their knowledge. The authors' call for health care providers to learn from this knowledge challenges dominant epistemologies of health literacy as the transfer of expert medical information to uninformed patients and families. As such work shows, social justice requires us not only to act differently, but to think and theorize differently as well.

### **Conclusion: Collaboration is not optional**

A fundamental principle that guides each of these papers is that community collaboration is not optional but obligatory for researchers committed to social justice. Such an approach demands a reimagining of what research means and what it can and should do. The work to advance social justice through research and other means is an ongoing process that requires continual



attention and effort, as those who benefit from injustice and inequity—both within the academy and in society more generally—constantly devise new strategies to maintain systems of oppression in order to preserve their power. Community-centered collaboration constitutes a rejection of academic business-as-usual. From this perspective, it can be useful to understand these papers, and the special issue as a whole, as an act of protest analogous to that of the Dominican and Puerto Rican social media users discussed by Hamm-Rodríguez and Medina. Like the collective action of *el pueblo*, these authors are ‘mobiliz[ing] to demand alternative futures while showing they are fed up with the status quo’.

Why do you do the research that you do?

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