Notes on a Dialogical Anthropology

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ABSTRACT: What could a dialogical anthropology look like? That is, an anthropology where production of knowledge is premised on a close collaboration with research subjects, which is acutely mindful of the power relations inherent in such relationships as well as of the possible multiple publics through which such products could circulate. This article provides an inquiry into the possibility of this form of dialogical engagement, debating the notion of the ‘public’ of anthropological products and the ‘uses’ of such products. It discusses the work of some authors who have also been engaged with these themes before going on to provide examples of texts that have attempted to put this approach into practice.

KEYWORDS: Brazil, collaborative ethnography, dialogical research, power, Public Anthropology, publics, representation

Publics in Anthropology

Since the birth of the discipline many anthropologists have been concerned with the potential practical uses of their knowledge. Indeed the term ‘applied anthropology’ has been attributed to the British anthropologist Pitt-Rivers who used it as far back as 1881 (Gardner and Lewis 1996). But right from the beginning the issue of who should benefit from such knowledge has been a controversial one. For some, like Boas and his students, the new discipline of anthropology was to provide a scientific basis to ward off evolutionist racist theories (see Eriksen 2006). At the same time, over the first half of the twentieth century, a number of anthropologists worked alongside colonial administrators and their knowledge was used, to varying degrees, to further colonial rule (Asad 1973). In the postcolonial period controversies surrounding anthropological knowledge in the U.S. have been associated with U.S. government counter-insurgency, the most notorious being Project Camelot (Wolf and Jorgensen 1970). Such controversial application of anthropological knowledge continues to this day around anthropologists working for the U.S. Department of Defense, and contributing to the U.S. military’s counter insurgency (Gonzalez 2007; Price 2007). A similar controversy has also taken place in the UK, with a research initiative entitled ‘Combating Terrorism by Countering Radicalisation’ launched jointly by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the Economic and Social Research Council and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (see Houtman 2006).

Such controversies point to the problematic nature of an ‘applied anthropology’. From involvement in development projects, the fields of health and education and long-standing contributions in the affairs of government and policy, to more recent placements in the private sector with consumer research, the diversity of activities encompassed in this category reveals the range of the key beneficiaries of such engagement. Put slightly differently, the question that engaged anthropologists need
to ask is who is the ‘public’ of a ‘public anthropology’? Or for whom is such knowledge useful? This article engages with these questions around the uses and publics of anthropological research. It does not address directly all the possible fields mentioned above, to which anthropology can be said to have made important contributions. Instead, it provides some reflections on how publics have been generally conceived in the discipline and how conventions of representation may limit not only the kinds of anthropological products made but may also constrain the possibilities of dialogue with those we research. The article goes on to discuss the work of authors who have also been engaged with these themes, before providing some examples of texts that have attempted to put a ‘dialogical’ approach into practice.

For Thomas Eriksen in Engaging Anthropology (2006), the public is understood to be the general reader of anthropological books or of newspapers and magazines to which anthropologists contribute. The public is here in a sense regarded as the general public sphere of intellectual discourse. The anthropologist would then have the responsibility, given her/his insights, nuanced explanations and textured material, of contributing to various debates. This position is perhaps closer to that of Boas, in the aspiration that anthropology could provide the contribution of a true science of humanity in which all peoples are considered of equal worth, and where anthropology has a key role in mediating understanding between diverse cultures. The central argument in Eriksen’s book is that anthropology is absent from the public sphere because it tends to dry out the riverbed of fieldwork experience and render its important insights unintelligible both to those we research and to the general public through use of an over-analytical language, distant from the narratives through which people make sense of their day-to-day lives. Eriksen points out that the significant public engagements of key figures in the discipline (he cites in particular Margaret Mead and Evans-Pritchard) occurred more than half a century ago and that whilst the discipline has grown significantly since this time, paradoxically its public profile has greatly diminished.

Another way to conceive of the ‘public’ of anthropology is through a consideration of for whom the anthropologist should be responsible. Following the controversies of U.S. anthropologists’ involvement in covert intelligence gathering in the late 1960s a number of anthropologists mobilized around the Ethics Committee of the American Anthropological Association in order to provide clear statements of principles concerning the ethical responsibilities of its practitioners.

For a number of anthropologists, these responsibilities to the people we study should go beyond that of ‘doing no harm’, stipulated in the AAA ‘Principles of Professional Responsibility’, and instead ought to entail actively trying to improve the lives of those we research and their communities. In the 1950s Sol Tax coined the term ‘action anthropology’ to refer to a kind of anthropology that was committed to engaging with the subjects being studied in such a way as to make anthropological knowledge practically useful to their actual situation. Tax defined this activity as one in which the anthropologist has two equally valued goals: to help a group of people to solve a problem and to learn something in the process. The key feature of this is that not only should anthropological ethics entail not doing any harm to the people studied but also that they should not be used as means for our own ends. ‘Community research is thus justifiable only to the degree that the results are imminently useful to the community and easily outweigh the disturbance to it’ (Tax 1975: 515).

Tax’s impetus for an action anthropology, as well as the drive of many other anthropologists for a more ethically committed discipline, largely stems from a reflection on the asymmetries of power between the anthropologists and those we study (see for instance Schepers-
Hughes 1995). The so-called crisis of representation debates in the 1980s and 1990s were also concerned with these themes, challenging the possibility of a ‘neutral’, ‘objectivist’ anthropology and pointing to the field of power within which anthropological research has been historically conducted (Clifford and Marcus 1986). These critiques challenged the possibility of ‘neutral’ representations of culture, and pointed to the necessarily constructed and partial nature of anthropological knowledge and to the various rhetorical devices by which ethnographic texts project their authority. In response to these critiques a number of experimental approaches to the writing of ethnography were produced which sought to give more space to the voices of those researched. As James Clifford noted, in some of these experiments, such as Kevin Dwyer’s (1977) dialogues, the confrontations between the anthropologist and his interlocutor come to make up a substantial part of the text. Speaking of Dwyer’s and others’ experiments, Clifford wrote:

These fictions of dialogue have the effect of transforming the ‘cultural’ text (a ritual, an institution, a life history, or any unit of typical behaviour to be described or interpreted) into a speaking subject, who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back. In this view of ethnography the proper referent of any account is not a represented ‘world’; now it is specific instances of discourse … It locates cultural interpretation in many sorts of reciprocal contexts, and it obliges writers to find diverse ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden, and incongruent. In this view, ‘culture’ is always relational, an inscription of communicative processes that exist, historically, between subjects in relations of power. (Clifford 1986: 15)

Despite the arguments and aspirations for a ‘multi-vocal’ ethnography which the debates from the 1980s and 1990s put forward, such calls have tended to be theoretical with few examples of successful attempts of ‘multi-vocality’ being produced. Agneta Johannsen (1992), in her discussion of this period of anthropological experimentation, briefly evaluates some attempts at ethnographic dialogues, such as Dwyer’s exchanges with a Moroccan Faqir (Dwyer 1977), concluding that these fail to develop a true dialogue with their interlocutors. The basis of such failures, Johannsen argues, is an asymmetry of interests and power. Johannsen also suggests that it may well be impossible to escape from the accusation that the anthropologist dominates the text. Perhaps, as she argues, the interpretive anthropologist disperses authority and lets the ‘native’s voice’ be heard only as a means to establish their ‘anti-hegemonial credentials’, which in itself provides a refashioning of authority. What is important here, for the purposes of the present paper, is how such experimentation still leaves unchallenged relations of power and the conventions of academic representation. In his reflection on his own dialogues with Faqir Mbarek, Dwyer made the important observation, somewhat relating to this, of the different life projects that such interactions bring into the encounter, and perhaps to their irreconcilability (Dwyer 1977).

Kirsten Hastrup also touched on this key topic when she wrote that however much we replace the monologue with dialogue, the discourse will always remain asymmetrical, for the purpose of ethnography ‘is to speak about something for somebody; it implies contextualisation and reframing’ (Hastrup 1992: 122). Whereas at the level of autobiography, the anthropologist and informant are equal, at the level of the anthropological discourse their relationship is hierarchical and the ultimate responsibility in the writing of ethnography should rest with the anthropologist. For Hastrup, anthropology, like any scientific discourse, involves a degree of violence as it makes claims to speak over and above the acts observed and heard (ibid.). In my view, Dwyer’s recognition of the different life projects that anthropologists and research subjects bring into the dialogue situation is important. Equally, Hastrup’s observations as to the nature of the anthropological project, in terms of its asymmetry and
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its symbolic violence, in relation to the project of the other, which becomes subsumed within the text, is also significant. However, I wonder if these concerns need always necessarily be evident in dialogic encounters.

Another way of approaching these challenges relates to the writing culture debate’s neglect of reading texts, which involves questions of audience or publics. This theme was tackled by Talal Asad, who spoke of the notion of ‘cultural translation’ (Asad 1986). Anthropologists, Asad said, must ‘write their people up’ in the conventions of representation dictated by their discipline, by institutional life and by wider society. Cultural translation, Asad argued, needs to accommodate itself not only to a different language – English as opposed to Kabbashi Arabic for instance – but also to the British or North-American middle-class ‘academic game’, as opposed to the ‘modes of life’ of the ‘tribal Sudan’ (Asad 1986: 159). Asad contended that, given this, translating an alien form of life may not necessarily best be done through the representational discourse of ethnography, but rather in some cases a dramatic performance, a dance or a piece of music may be more appropriate. Such endeavour, Asad wrote, brings into light the wider issue of the relationship between the anthropological work and its audience, questions of the ‘uses’ as opposed to the ‘writings and readings’ of that work. Asad asserted that as anthropologists we are trained to translate other cultural languages as texts, translation being essentially a matter of verbal representation (Asad 1986). Asad here pointed to a crucial element that is often left out of debates around the ‘politics of representation’, mainly what he terms the ‘conventions of representation’ governed by academic life and the uses to which such products are put. It might be a fruitful enquiry to probe how much of the concerns raised by Johannsen, Hastrup and Dwyer above stem from such conventions. Nevertheless, such discussions only occur at the fringes of the discipline, where the challenges to the ‘rules of the game’ are not so strongly felt. At the same time, to engage directly with such conventions requires forms of creative experimentation and praxis, which perhaps by definition can only occur in the space of the margins.

An author who has addressed how a dialogical approach might unfold through text is Agneta Johannsen. Combining the contributions of applied anthropology with what she identifies as the insights of a postmodern, interpretative ethnography, Johannsen suggested what she calls a postmodern applied anthropology. Johannsen’s project entails neither seeking to solve problems, as Tax’s action anthropology proposed, nor representing a ‘target’ culture as interpretive anthropologists attempt to do. Rather: ‘The post-modernist applied anthropologist can provide a mechanism by which the target community represents itself and determines the nature and solution of its problem’ (Johannsen 1992: 72).

Johannsen took interpretative anthropology’s self-critical concern with ethical responsibilities in the representation of a culture and combined these with applied anthropology’s motivation to work with particular communities. Interpretative ethnographies though, are also concerned with the epistemological difficulties in the representation of ethnographic data. A further motivation of such an applied postmodern ethnography for Johannsen is that these difficulties of representation are faced through establishing a dialogue in which the anthropologist ‘seeks to present objectively and fruitfully a number of different ‘voices’, each of which has the authority to contribute a thorough portrayal of the target culture meaningful to a variety of readerships’ (Johannsen 1992: 74). For Johannsen such an ethnography based on dialogue becomes a source for both scholars and ‘natives’, as well as potentially a broader public, challenging a convention in anthropology of writing principally for academics.

Such a proposal raises a number of questions and challenges to traditional ways of conduct-
ing fieldwork and of producing ethnographies. Johannsen proposed some interesting points of convergence of an applied anthropology that is primarily responsible to the people it studies with the concerns of interpretive anthropology and its critique of scholarly and scientific authority and of the difficulties surrounding cultural representation. Unfortunately, Johannsen’s paper did not provide examples of what such a proposal would look like in practice. In the next section I will provide a brief exposition of some endeavours that may be classified as dialogical in their approach.

Cabeça de Porco

An example of what such a dialogic anthropology could look like in text is the best-selling Brazilian book Cabeça de Porco [Pig’s Head] (2005), written collaboratively by the anthropologist Luiz Eduardo Soares, the rapper MV Bill and his Hip Hop producer Celso Athayde. The book addresses the issue of the growth of drug trafficking gangs across Brazil and their increasing power in urban shanty-towns [favelas] where they have, over the last twenty years, come to be part of the day-to-day lives of many of these communities. More specifically the book addresses the increasing numbers of young recruits joining these gangs, outlining how working in the gang has become for many an attractive option in an environment of increasing inequality, unemployment and in a consumerist society whose desirable products are out of reach for many. Further, the book tackles the repressive and violent responses of the state to these gangs, whose actions within the favelas has often served to antagonise residents and further encourage young people to join the gangs as a way of seeking protection and retaliation. The book explores these issues, as well as the broader social context in which favela residents, especially its black youth, are discriminated against and denied opportunities for social mobility.

Though such issues have been tackled by anthropologists before (see Zaluar 1994; Vinanna 1997; De Assis 1999; Dowdney 2002) the novelty of the book and what makes it dialogical lies in how it was produced and received. The book merged the ethnographic work and personal experiences of Soares with research carried out by Bill and Athayde. The latter two, residents of one of Rio’s largest favelas, Cidade de Deus [City of God], carried out research, with no formal training, over a number of years all over Brazil with young people involved in drug trafficking gangs. The important thing here is that, through this research, MV Bill and Celso Athayde were reflecting upon experiences that were part of their day-to-day lives in Cidade de Deus and other favelas. The critical culture in which both are involved is not that of academia but of Hip Hop. The manifestation of this culture in Brazil, though diverse, tends to be more akin to the early politicized Hip Hop from New York, with messages about black empowerment and the need to be aware of one’s history and to ‘fight the power’, than to the Hip Hop that glamourizes consumerism, which is more commonly found through the mass-media across the globe.

Cabeça de Porco alternates in its narrative between texts written separately by the three writers. Bill and Athayde provided more personal accounts of their encounters with young people across a number of favelas throughout the country alongside their personal experiences of growing up and living in these communities. Soares, though also using an engaging and accessible language, provided a more theoretical analysis of the causes of urban crime, of the expansion of the drug trade, of the responses of the state, and of the origins and perpetuation of social stigma towards young, black, favela residents. The balance between interesting and captivating stories written in a clear and easily understood language, combined with nuanced, theoretically rich, but jargon-free analysis of these themes accounts for the success of the book. The book addressed
important questions for many urban dwellers in Brazil, the issue of security, drug gangs, violence, youth, poverty and discrimination. Sales of the book and reviews show how well it was received, even though its key messages were not uncontroversial: of the need for a systemic and humanizing understanding of why young people join the drug gangs; of the police’s collusion in the drug trade and the violence it perpetuates against these communities, as well the failure of the government and society more generally to tackle the problem adequately. The book topped the best-seller’s list in Brazil for many weeks and, perhaps more interestingly, served to catalyse a number of reading groups of young people in a number of favelas throughout Brazil. The book has since been read right across Brazilian society.

The dialogical element of this project is clear. This is most succinctly described by Fernanda Abreu, a Brazilian musician, who wrote a review for the cover of the book, referring to the partnership between the favela and the asphalt (the region where middle-class non-favela residents live):

A connection white middle-class asphalt + black poor peripheric. Two worlds that do not communicate. But here, despite the distance that separates them, what surprises are the similarities and not the differences. A possible partnership? Two worlds. One legitimating the other. (Fernanda Abreu in Soares, Bill and Athayde 2005, my translation)

The success of the project lies in its complementarity. Two perspectives are given, one more experience-near but no less analytical, the other able to link across diverse areas and theories of social analysis and meaningfully integrate these experiences, as well those of Soares himself, into a satisfying whole. At the same time the ‘authority’ of the text is derived, as Abreu states above, from a mutual acknowledgement of the value of each other’s perspective around the phenomena of young people who are part of drug-trafficking gangs. This is slightly different from what Johannsen proposed, in an applied postmodern anthropology. For here it is not about giving the people studied the means of representation and letting them get on with it. Rather, it is about a dialogue, in this case through the text, of complementary perspectives.

Nós: The Revolution of the Day to Day

A second, more humble example is from recent work in which I was involved in Rio de Janeiro with young people who participate in a variety of social movements, community development and non-governmental organizations in the city (Butler and Princeswal 2008). The project Cultures of Participation began in May 2005, with the objective of understanding how young people perceive and practice citizenship in the public sphere in the city of Rio de Janeiro and what concepts such as ‘citizenship’ and ‘participation’ mean to them. Initially we identified 20 different initiatives working with this sector of the population, and focusing on social justice, community development, citizenship and access to cultural opportunities. These initiatives included community organizations, NGOs, a union, the landless movement as well as more informal groups such as Hip Hop activists. Following visits and interviews with coordinators and young people participating in these organizations, we began a second stage where we sought to deepen the stories of engagement and participation of a diverse group of youths. The idea was to go beyond the interviews with young people and initiate a collective process of narration and debate about their experiences. As the participants in this phase themselves described, it was a process of reflection about ‘their lives inside activism and activism inside their lives’, and the challenges, difficulties and pleasures of their chosen paths.

Over a period of nine months a group of seven young people between the ages of 15 and 27, active in diverse groups in the city’s
public sphere, met with members of the research team to develop narratives about their experiences of participation and what this has meant for them. The result of this process of individual and collective creation is a publication designed by the group containing the narratives they themselves wrote. The book Nós: A Revolução de Cada Dia [Nós: The Revolution of the Day to Day] (2007) presents the trajectories of these young people, focusing on their participation in different groups, movements and projects engaged in a struggle for citizenship and social justice.4

For example, Quênia, a 23-year old woman, has been involved in a number of community arts projects and a rap group and has been engaged in questions around black women’s self-esteem. In her chapter, as in those of the other young people, she narrated the intricate connections between the personal and the political, reflecting on everyday experiences of discrimination as well as on the processes through which she became engaged in movements trying to combat the many forms this takes:

During pre-school days, if I remember rightly, we were only two black girls in the classroom – something that has not changed much [in the south of Brazil]. All the teachers were white. On TV all the presenters were white. So what would my reference of beauty be??? It is complicated only having one reference of the beautiful in a stage where you are creating your identity. You are making friends, making up your group in which ‘we are all equal’, we have ‘the same toys’, the same white dolls. Yes, but the same as my white friends. And this difference I only noticed when my mum arrived with a black doll. You can say that at that moment I was very shocked: ‘What do you mean??? ’Who told her that I wanted to be different?’ ‘And who told her that I wanted a BLACK doll??’ Not to say, curly hair. That doll called Luana was for me the last straw. How different would I be from my friends who had Xuxa?5 No one knew who Luana was! I didn’t know and didn’t care. This understanding of what it is to be the same and what it is to be different I only came to acquire over the years. (Quênia Lopes in Nós 2007: 35)

These themes of being the same yet different, of the multiplicity of sites of the ‘political’ and how young people come to be gradually aware of such issues and engage in action towards social change through a number of different forms and spaces, runs through all of the texts in the book. At the same time these points resonate with the themes that the research project as a whole was trying to explore. In Quênia’s case, her process of political awakening came through her encounter with Hip Hop culture:

When I started going to break-dance circles, I saw happy black people, saw aware black people. It was a movement of self-affirmation, and I was very happy to be part of this movement of liberation that was, mainly, freeing my mind. This shock of awareness changed my life. In less than four months me and my friends already had a rap group made up only of black women, with the name of Anastácias because it identified us with the life-story of this warrior woman. With this group we won national prizes in music, with our work being recognised in the media throughout the country. (Nós 2007: 36)

In the research team we wanted to go beyond our analysis of these themes and have young people’s own reflections on the matter, not just through interviews or debates but through a collectively constructed research product that could speak to not only other researchers but also to other young people. Centred on the theme of ‘participation’, we wanted to try to practice what we were investigating, incorporating at least one element of the research as a participative experiment. Though we were the catalysts for the process and provided its resources, we were at least willing to explore in practice those ‘conventions of representation’ through a joint product, whose basis was their own texts. This has subsequently been used and disseminated by its authors as they see fit. At the same time, the research team was acutely mindful of the relations of power inherent in such an endeavour and tried to be as transparent about these as possible whenever they came to light.
Both the research team and the research participants believe that the experiment was on the whole successful. The authors each wrote a short text at the end of the book outlining their reflections on the process of making the publication. Here is what Manuelle Rosa, who is in her early twenties and active in community journalism, wrote about her experience:

Before being invited to participate in this project, I had never had time to think about this thing called Participation. Deep down I knew that my work brought something good for me and for others, but I had not perceived its real function. It was through the conversations with other participants and the writing of my own trajectory that I could reflect about what I do, of the importance that this has for me, and the repercussions of this in the place where I live.

After a long period without having a clue what to write, and after many rough drafts thrown in the bin, I got to the final text with some questions and answers that had never occurred to me before. In truth, this text is not finished, and I don’t even know if it will be one day, because many of the questions that emerged during this process still have no answer. But I arrive here with the certainty that the experience I had was worth it. It was really good to stop for a moment from the rush of daily work and look at what I have been doing. And I liked what I saw. As for the answers, I am still looking for them. (Nós 2007: 65)

Though challenging and very different from the solitary analysis that most anthropologists engage in post-fieldwork, working in collaboration allowed for not only the creation of a group of rich, experience-near yet reflexive personal accounts of young people’s engagement in public action initiatives, but also encouraged a learning process by all involved, as Manuelle articulates above. For the young people, the context of this collaborative work offered the opportunity to debate and exchange with others from different groups and areas of public action. This exchange allowed for mutual reflection upon common themes and challenges. The writing process, though not easy for everyone, also provoked reflection on key concepts, such as that of ‘participation’ that had not been fully considered before.6

For us in the research team the experience was also unsettling, for through this encounter we came to reflect upon our own practices as researchers and our commitment (or lack thereof) to processes of social transformation. Working with groups of young people who were clearly committed to different forms of combating injustice on various fronts provoked us to question our own activities, our own participation as well as the limitations of our role as ‘researcher’.

Discussion

This example from our research and that found in the book Cabeça de Porco offer some illustrations of attempts at a text-based dialogic anthropology. Clearly, initiatives such as these also have a number of shortcomings. One challenge such an approach faces is that if collaborations are to be based through the medium of the written word, research participants may not be equipped with the levels of literacy required to represent their own experiences and reflections faithfully through text. One challenge we faced in our project was the fine line between acting as editors, making sure the narratives of the young people were clearly understood and reflected what they really wanted to say, and not wishing to impose our own writing styles and conventions on their mode of expression. A way to overcome these challenges may well be to opt for other forms of collaboration that are not text-based.

There are of course a number of other more serious difficulties with such an approach. As with the difficulties in anthropological research more generally, with the goal of seeking to represent ‘culture’, how representative any accounts of a particular community or groups of people are will always be open to question. Such a dialogical approach may only be practi-
cal with a relatively small number of people. In the examples mentioned here, there were frequently only a handful of research participants involved. The difficulty is then how to select such participants. In the case of our work in Rio de Janeiro, such selection emerged only after a period of fieldwork through which we identified a range of initiatives and organizations in which young people took part. After identifying young people who appeared to be more engaged in these organizations, we sought a diversity of areas of activity.

The second challenge in such an approach is the actual dialogical process itself. In the case of our work, this entailed nine months of periodical meetings with debates, and a number of drafts of the texts, which the group circulated to the research team and amongst themselves. Catalysing such a process may not be appealing to many researchers, requiring different sets of skills and different time-scales. Here, again, we have much to learn from Freirean pedagogical approaches as well as other participatory research practices (Freire 1976, [1970] 1993).

A third challenge concerns its appropriateness. As mentioned, working in this way is not necessarily suitable or desirable in all cases. The examples given here involved people with an aspiration to working together on a joint product. Though clearly researchers and those involved in these projects may well have, as Dwyer reflected, different life projects, motivations, worldviews and so forth, these products or encounters show that there is also room for at least a partial overlap or a willingness to work together. Were such willingness not to be found, it would not be possible or desirable to pursue such an endeavour. What is important from these dialogues is the sense of mutual learning and respect, and how through embodying different ‘projects’ (of worldview, ethics, epistemology, ontology) the participants in many ways learn about how much they share in common.

Concluding Remarks

Before concluding that the most important reason why anthropology does not occupy its rightful role in the public sphere is due to its impenetrable language, Eriksen considers what he calls the many ‘scapegoats’ for anthropologists’ reluctance to engage with the public. These include the bureaucratization of academic life leading to less time to engage with society more broadly; the increasing specialization of academics to the point of fragmentation; the diminishing of their societal authority. Though I do not disagree that the issue of language and of offering more engaging narratives is an important one for anthropologists to have a greater public presence, I also believe that these so-called ‘scapegoats’ may well be the most important reasons for anthropologists’ reluctance to engage in dialogue. The dialogic products I have been referring to here have in some way challenged the conventions of representations. However, I am not arguing that such experiments should replace ethnographic writing which, as Hastrup convincingly argued, is primarily speaking about something for somebody and implies contextualisation and reframing. Neither, clearly, is this paper arguing that we cease considering our colleagues as the main public for our writing. Instead this article has shown how, on top of these activities, much is to be gained from speaking with and alongside those with whom we work. Moreover, this speaking with requires us to enquire deeply into what have been referred to here as the conventions of representation and how these are maintained by particular academic cultures and logic. A dialogical anthropology should not shy away from self-reflection and an examination of the conditions of the production of knowledge, nor should it lead to paralysis of doing research. Instead it could lead to creative ways of interacting with those we work with as we jointly engage with the important questions of our times.
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Notes

1. This point has also been briefly tackled by George Marcus who speaks of how such conventions of representation seem to be learned and shaped by the requirements of the monograph writing for a PhD, which provides a model and which, many would argue, provides an antiquated standard and practice for research and writing (Marcus 1986: 263).

2. Though falling outside the core theme of this paper, it is important to mention that such debates appear to have a more central place in the subfields of visual anthropology and museum ethnography. Here as early as the 1960s and 1970s ethnographic filmmakers like Jean Rouch and David and Judith MacDougall faced similar problems of how to create filmic texts which were more dialogical and true to the process that went into their making. Initially opting for an approach that portrayed in their films the process of its construction, such as Rouch’s Chronique d’un été (1961) and the MacDougalls’ The Wedding Camels (1977), these ethnographic filmmakers went on to collaborate more directly with those depicted. In a so-called ‘participatory cinema’ such as Rouch’s Jaguar (1967) or MacDougall’s Goodbye Old Man (1977) the collaboration between filmmakers and the film subjects (West Africans in the case of the former and Australian Aboriginals in the later) becomes a guiding principle of the film (see for instance MacDougall 1998). Added to such developments in visual anthropology, in the 1980s and 1990s we also see the emergence of what Faye Ginsburg has termed ‘indigenous media’. Here, at times emerging out of collaborations with anthropologists, this phenomenon has entailed the use of new communication media by indigenous communities themselves. The most famous early examples of this include the use of video by the Kayapo (Turner 1992), Australian Aboriginals (Ginsburg 1991), as well as by Inuit communities. I have only briefly mentioned these collaborative or even dialogical experiments through audio-visual media here to point out that such concerns have been occurring in sub-fields of the discipline and that these examples and the reflections they have generated could similarly contribute to dialogic approaches through the text.

3. The project was carried out with the Brazilian action-research NGO CIESPI (the International Center for Research and Policy on Childhood); other members of the team included Marcelo Princeswal and Roberta Abreu. This research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council’s Non-Governmental and Public Action Programme, which is a multi-disciplinary international research programme designed to investigate the variety of ways through which people in different countries organize together to bring about social change (see www.lse.ac.uk/collections/NGPA/).


5. Xuxa, a very famous Brazilian children’s TV presenter with a range of products for children, is white, with blue eyes and blonde hair.

6. It must be admitted that the term ‘participation’ is itself problematic (see for instance Rahnema 1992; Cooke and Kothari 2004). Significantly, local terms such as ‘solidarity’ were more important in the conversations with young people to represent values and the justification for forms of engagement in public action they felt to be meaningful. Though key terms are important, more significant are the set of practices, meanings, feelings, identities and relationships that are reflected upon and for which key terms only provide an initial framing.
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