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Writing (Un)comfortably

Collaborating and Co-Producing Knowledge in Times of Crisis and Distance

(15 June 2025)

As I am writing this blog post, I face a deep discomfort. Drones and missiles are flying between Israel and Iran, and news updates are coming in thick and fast as the situation in the Middle East continues to escalate.[1] I anxiously watch for updates from family, friends, and colleagues. My thoughts are also with you as I search for the right words to describe our collaboration over the last few years. As an artist and activist born in Iran and living and working in Germany as an exile, you have a very strong connection and commitment to freedom and liberty for the people of Iran. The current situation must be terrible and traumatic for you, as it is for anyone who cannot be with their loved ones and does not know how they are doing or whether they have had to flee in these times of war.

Just a couple of days ago, we were messaging each other on WhatsApp. It was one of our regular, short "Hey, how are you? Just checking if you heard about [X] – I'm planning to [Y] – Curious what you think about…!" conversations. You mentioned your plans to travel to Iran to take care of your parents' house, something you later posted on your Facebook timeline too. Then, two days later, on Friday, June 13th, our communication shifted, circling around the attacks and the terrifying situation for Iranian civil society. We exchanged news about whether friends or relatives in Iran were safe. Today, on Sunday, the 15th of June 2025, I check Facebook and Instagram to see if you or other members of the Iranian community have posted anything about the recent escalation. I scroll through online news and headlines such as "Tehran is burning" in the German weekly news magazine *Die Zeit*.[2] I check posts by public

figures in German-Iranian communities, such as Daniela Sepehri on Instagram, commenting on the conflict and calling for peace, solidarity, and political action in support of civil society in Iran.

It is in this moment of crisis that I painfully feel a deep sense of resignation, distance, and detachment that could not be bigger—a detachment from you, from our collaborative project, and from engaging with and writing about topics of repression and human rights violations in Iran from afar. **I am painfully reminded of my privileged position: one of no risk, no censorship, and no state-driven persecution that might otherwise have prevented any form of collaboration and freedom of expression.** Moreover, I now believe it is white supremacy (Daswani 2019) that enables me to engage with issues such as co-production and collaboration—topics that should not be equated with solidarity, empathy, or commitment. When project partners come from completely different and unequal positions and don't share crisis and vulnerability in the same way, as was the case when our joint venture began during the COVID-19 pandemic, what, then, can the idea of co-producing knowledge mean beyond reflecting on situated knowledges (Haraway 1988)?

It was during the first lockdown in Germany in 2020, when meeting in person or conducting fieldwork became impossible, that you, the artist, and I, the anthropologist, began to intensify our exchange. In the spirit of solidarity and shared crisis, we both experienced similar anxieties, forced immobilities, diseases, and losses in our roles as family members, friends, professionals, and teachers. I believe this brought us closer together and strengthened our relationship of trust and solidarity. Through regular Zoom meetings and telephone calls, we began a conversation about photography, archives, and exile, which eventually became the foundation for our collaboration. What has stayed with me most is my own emotional reaction: a mixture of excitement and humbleness—as if a new, more intimate chapter had opened in my work as an anthropologist.

We first met online via email, phone, and Skype in 2016 and 2017 during my initial

postdoctoral research on photographers (and other related practitioners) from Iran living and working in the diaspora in Europe. At that time, my primary interest was photography as an alternative cultural practice that challenge stereotypical media representations of Iran and its people, raising awareness about the experiences of diaspora members and exiles. Since then, both my research questions and themes have changed in many ways, as has our collaboration. We have established different ways of working with your photo archive that go beyond photo-elicitation. We have given public talks about your art and political activism, published articles together, and I was present when you prepared and opened exhibitions. Likewise, you participated in exhibitions and events I organized. We have spent long hours thinking, talking, and walking, sharing insights into our personal lives but also socio-political concerns extending beyond Iran and its history to broader themes of forced displacement and political repression. Through our collaboration, we have continually transformed and reshaped the social field of research according to our shared ideas and the upcoming needs of our projects. Here lies, I believe, the special experimental dimension of ethnographic practice (Marcus 2013).

While staying in conversation and contact, and as each of us followed our respective professional work, we formed a dynamic and shared social field: a network of encounters, distances, conversations, and active collaborations unfolding at different times and places across multiple personal and professional contexts.

Today, I am thinking about how it was just a few months ago—sometime in April 2025—that we spoke on Zoom to finalize a text about our project. The text that we discussed was one of your ideas. You had suggested including it in a magazine-style booklet which you plan to publish as an outcome of your work from the last few years. You thought that this contribution could mark a great result of our joint efforts. I remember feeling excited by your suggestion. Even though I didn't express it at the time, I ultimately got the impression that this text could take our collaboration to another level, offering a more experimental, non-text and creative

design-based approach. This would involve us deciding together not only on central thematic and methodological issues but also aesthetic aspects. In other words, we could co-produce knowledge by collaborating on the question of what working in a photographic archive would mean from our respective perspectives as an anthropologist and an artist-activist, and how do we want to represent it. Achieving this through joint reflection could become a methodological approach to what we have often tried to do without finding a good approach so far.

A few weeks later, when we talked about the text again, I raised the possibility of writing this blog post on anthropological research methods and concerns regarding the concepts of collaboration and co-producing knowledge. I explained why these issues are particularly relevant in my work as an anthropologist, especially in light of recent debates on decolonizing methods, addressing power dynamics, and the dominance of white supremacy in ethnography. At that time, I was also teaching a seminar about these topics at university, an experience which was highly inspiring. I was well aware that this was more of an interest to me than to you. But since there was usually space for new thoughts and concerns in our conversations, I suggested we could also write this blog post together as we had done it before. However, bearing in mind our schedules and how long the process of co-writing might take, I quickly added that I understood if it was too much to ask at that moment. But you replied "Yes, but you can also send me the text, and I'll see if I can contribute to it."[3] You also spontaneously added that, for you, the collaborative aspect is more a dialogue and about including other perspectives that you might not have yourself, allowing the other person to open up new ways of seeing and contributing to your own.

At that point, we did not continue the discussion. However, even though you had expressed somewhat different ideas about "collaboration" and "joint knowledge production," describing it rather as an exchange of different perspectives in dialogue and a mutual complementarity on equal footing, I do not see any major discrepancies

here, only different priorities. While you focused more on practice, I am also interested in the results. While you once stated that you are interested in "learning from my approaches to photography as an Anthropologist," I am more concerned with representing those approaches and learning from you as an artist. This all seems to be fair enough to me. After all, we come from different disciplines with different areas of interest and expertise. And even if we use different languages to describe it, you clearly speak about what to me also implies *co-laborare*—the Latin term for "working together." I am relatively certain that with more time, we will have some more productive discussion, most likely reaching some agreements and (epistemic) outcomes.

In late June 2025, after German Chancellor Friedrich Merz made his highly controversial statement about Israel attacking the Islamic Republic of Iran and doing "die Drecksarbeit für uns" [the dirt work for us],[4] members of the German Iranian diaspora members (including you) started a solidarity campaign calling for political and legal processing.[5] While I shared the outrage and critique at that moment, our conversations and exchange noticeably decreased. I began to wonder: How relevant are timing and the "right moment" for collaboration? Writing about co-producing knowledge in the recent situation also becomes a way to ask: What conditions enable working together, and how do we navigate the unequal constructedness of collaboration? What kind of knowledge arises in times of "crisis" that is not experienced and shared by everyone in the same way? And do we understand "working together" and the "knowledge" it produces in similar or divergent ways?

Perhaps this blog post already offers a partial answer to these questions. Its writing is clearly shaped by the present war and political escalation, and my hesitation, unease, and the simple fact that only my voice is represented here. Originally, I had hoped to use this space to continue our earlier discussion about the nature of our collaboration, about what working together means for each of us. I wanted to include your voice, your perspective, and to co-write this blog with you. But that, obviously,

did not happen.

For now, it's particularly me who encounters this sharp demarcation between our very different life situations, personal challenges, and realities. As I see it, the tension between time, collaboration, and differing values has only become more complex. It reminds me of the "'liquid times' we live in where 'negative globalization' is promoting endemic uncertainty, and where social and ecological relations are seen to be in crisis" (Schneider 2023, 270). Emphasising a "multi-temporal understanding of research time as commitment," one that values "rapport, positionality, and depth" (ibid.), resonates strongly with my own experiences and observations. And while I self-critically reflect on my privileges and working priorities, I cannot ignore how deeply my professional settings, academic deadlines, and positionality—marked by whiteness and institutional embeddedness—shape this work. And this is true regardless of my personal, moral, and ethical obligations.

Here, I see what the editors of this *boas blog* expressed in their call for contributions: Thinking about co-producing knowledge requires a critical eye on "how power dynamics, disciplinary boundaries, and diverse epistemologies shape the research process and its outcomes" (boas blog 2025). In response, I want to say that, despite many challenges, I am neither willing to dismiss the meaningfulness of the co-production of knowledge in ethnography nor do I want to fall into the simplicity of stating that differences and frictions are part of the process. Instead, I find resonance in George Marcus (2013), who is less concerned with "crafting of core arguments themselves for disciplinary debate" and more with "the forms, embedded contests, and stagings of contemporary thinking about value, occasioned by the design and implementation of collaborative research [...]" (198).

So, despite my initial hesitation, I accepted the invitation to write this post—as a form of reflexive writing and as an explicit response to our shared and individual present "*non-conditions*" for co-producing knowledge in and outside times of crisis. **And because I cannot discuss or write this text with you in this moment, I decided**

to address you directly—the absent-present artist—as my epistemic counterpart and partner. I will also share some further reflections on our project and the efforts we've made to design different ways of working and knowing together in our conversations, when working with your photo archive, co-authoring texts, and in writing proposals for future projects. I hope there will come a time when you have the freedom, the energy, and the space to read this—and perhaps to share your thoughts and ideas about it, too.

Therefore, this blog post offers an ideal starting point for me to discuss the constant twists in our collaboration. As I see it, these twists are closely tied to socio-political developments that sometimes evolve into forms of co-producing knowledge. To be more precise: I recall many instances of what Criado and Estalella (2023) call a mutual "para-sitical collaboration" in which we encountered "disciplinary frictions, differing knowledges, epistemic diversity, and social misunderstandings" (10–11). These tensions were closely intertwined with moments of "joint epistemic explorations" in which we acted as "epistemic partners" (ibid., 10). One moment that stands out is when you acknowledged my interpretation of our work as a *collaboration* and later proposed changing the title of the text in your planned publication to draw more attention to it. That, to me, marked one of those rather unpredictable shifts—crossing the line between collaboration as method and co-production of knowledge as its result.

At this point, it became clear to me that "methods are shaped by the social, and in turn they act as social operators to do the social" (Law and Ruppert 2013, 233, as quoted in Criado and Estalella 2023, 17). I also came to understand the "precarious, processual and creative nature of methods", their situatedness and boundedness, and the fact that what counts as a method always depends on one's questions and agendas, and their inherently performative character (ibid.). As our collaboration continued to evolve in response to changing social situations worldwide (e.g., pandemics, the *women life freedom* movement in Iran since 2022) and your related

artist-activist work, so too did our practices—ranging from regular phone and WhatsApp conversations to working sessions on photographs, discussions about our next steps, collaborative writing, and public events. **However, in this current moment of increasing detachment, I find that the question of the meaning and form of co-produced knowledge has become more difficult to answer—and perhaps even less important.** In my view, the discussion should shift toward the complexities and frictions inherent in collaboration, especially as it is shaped by "a certain clash of different forms of knowledge and different energies" (Criado and Estalella 2018, 11), rather than focusing solely on how "co-producing knowledge" might be made possible. Collaborating is not only about designing ways of knowing with others but also about learning to slow down, to unlearn certain classical practices of documentation and analysis, and to pay closer attention to moments of confusion, frustration, laughter, and grief.

Criado and Estalella (2018) put the anthropologist somehow at center stage, describing their role as one of "organizing events, introducing interfaces in the field, utilizing friction as a relational mode, and managing rhythms [whereas] these accounts present a vocabulary to illuminate the presence of fieldwork interventions that 'device' ethnographic venues for epistemic collaboration" (17). And because "collaboration entails joint production, but with overlapping mutual as well as differing purposes, negotiation, contestation, and uncertain outcomes" (Marcus 2001, 521), the field situations in which I have worked side by side with you—the artist and activist—also meant to change my role as a researcher. It required giving up control. It meant learning to "intertwine with different forms of expertise, problematizing their conventional practices of knowledge production in fieldwork" (Criado and Estalella 2018, 11). Here I feel reminded of our lively conversations and working sessions around your photo archive. Despite prior agreements on time frames, formats, objects, and topics, I often found myself entering yet again changed settings. When we meet, we frequently pick up where we left off, saying things like "I've been thinking about this again" or sharing things that have happened since our

last conversation. These updates often sparked new questions for both of us. It wasn't necessarily our roles as artist and anthropologist that drove the shifts in different directions, but rather external events and changing circumstances. At times, it took us a while to share doubts about what we had previously agreed upon: for example, when you pointed out that a certain approach did not feel particularly innovative from your perspective as an artist or when I insisted, as the anthropologist, on the importance of something you found less significant. For me, this highlights what it means to no longer be the researcher who controls what fieldwork is. It requires one to let go of the observational stance in favor of more spontaneous and experimental approaches (Marcus 2013)—what Criado and Estallella (2018) describe as "para-sitical collaborations". And now, once again, our collaboration is being shaped by new and unexpected circumstances outside of anyone's control.

I pause my writing again and check the news. It's still Sunday, June 15th. I read about U.S. President Donald Trump's warnings to the Iranian regime against attacking the United States. At the same time, reports of the rising death toll in the ongoing escalation between Israel and Iran deepen my sense of unease. I scroll through your recent posts on social media. We haven't been in personal exchange for a while. And yet I still hold onto the spirit of our collaboration. Even though this post does not explicitly draw a clear line between co-produced knowledge and collaboration, it reflects on how collaboration itself shifts and evolves to generate new ways of knowing. It is also about how crises—global, personal, and political—can shape and challenge collaboration processes and the meaning of knowledge.

Above all, it is about staying attentive to this tension. And about writing— however uncomfortably—from *within it*.

Acknowledgement

By the time this blog post is published, personal and political situations may have changed again. Meanwhile, news outlets have shifted their attention to other parts of the world. Although Israel and Iran may have stopped launching bombs and missiles, the tensions in the Middle East remain, as do the difficult living conditions for people in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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[1] https://www.aljazeera.com/news/liveblog/2025/6/15/live-iran-fires-missiles-as-israel-strikes-oil-facility-in-tehran

[2] https://www.zeit.de/news/2025-06/15/israels-armee-wieder-raketenbeschuss-aus-iran

[3] Translations of the artist’s words throughout this text were performed by the author.

[4] https://www.tagesschau.de/inland/innenpolitik/merz-drecksarbeit-debatte-100.html

[5] See the following petition, which not only sparked solidarity but also criticism and discord within the Iranian community: https://secure.avaaz.org/community_petitions/de/an_unsere_mitburger_innen_zur_juristischen_aufarbeitung_der_aussagen_von_bk_merz_im_kontext_angriffskrieg_auf_iran_

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