

Conflict in Collaboration

by Fatima Lasay

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The most valuable learning that I have experienced transpired outside formal education. This is because formal education blocked what I think is one of the most important elements of learning: conflict.

It is within the dynamics of learning and conflict that I look upon the meaning of collaboration.

Collaboration, like cooperation or partnership, has often been regarded as benign or positivist, even as the language of cooperation especially at the international level, is used to obscure power and inequality from which conflict may arise. The altruistic language of collaboration, cooperation and partnership is used precisely to block that important element of learning: conflict.

In my experience, international collaborative art projects often denied the presence of conflict. It was always crucial to give a semblance of creative cross-cultural transformative harmony. Like the mental prison of formal education, collaborative art projects (as are curator-artist relationships) often needed to exude positive feedback and, as much as possible, reject (kick out) or rehabilitate (tutor), if not altogether deny, failure.

But failure, like conflict, are conditions that need to be openly discussed if problems are to be redressed and if the parties to any collaboration are to be empowered to take action for change. This empowerment I call **self-intervention**. I call it self-intervention in order to emphasize and raise an awareness of the presence and dynamics of dependency and imperialism (export of surplus and symbolic resources from periphery to center) in collaboration. The concept of dependency and imperialism enables an analytical position of collaboration as a form of capital export.

As with learning, I see collaboration within the conceptualisations and practices of development. Artists, curators, funding and art institutions, engage in collaborative art projects in terms of what such projects can contribute to cultural development and transformation. As with collaboration, there is a prevailing optimism about the nature of development especially within the international multi-cultural sphere. If conflict entered the dominant positivist model of collaboration, then we would have began a questioning of the conventional conceptualisations and practices of development. To allow conflict to enter the conventional model of collaboration means to articulate an alternative and appropriate paradigm.

Modelling Conflict Collaboration

Conflict comes from the Latin *com-*, together and *fligere*, to strike. The term means a sharp disagreement, as in interests or ideas. Conflict is difficult because of the emotional and psychological tension that it entails. But conflict can also be empowering because of the action and solidarity that ensues from it.

Social processes – like collaborations – are unique because they involve uncertainty, power and interests, and they employ language pattern whose structure and meaning can change. The altruistic language of designing an international transcultural community that facilitates understanding and cooperation through mutual knowledge obscures the processes - and the language – of hegemony of one culture over another. Altruism relies on utilitarian knowledge working towards a common developmental path. It relies on the condition that collaborators without interest can lead to non-problematic cooperations. It relies on the condition that collaborators have neither norms nor ideas, that they have no ideological commitments. But language is normative, and people do have norms and ideologies. Rational and cognitive belief formation is not straightforward under conditions of uncertainty and strategic interaction.

The danger there becomes apparent when we place knowledge within the reality of interest and power, when it becomes clear that collaborative practices are not benign - that they occur in conditions of uncertainty, inequality and distributed interests, and that under such conditions, manipulation can gain importance. These need to be articulated, and not obscured or denied by altruistic language.

In a model reconstruction of collaboration, we need conceptual tools for analyzing contextual factors - endogenous and morphogenetic processes - that both define and influence the nature of collaboration in practice. We need a conceptual framework that analyses conditions in terms of the social organization and the relationships between classes, gender and race. We need an approach that can explain individual behavior and experience in the collaborative setting in relation to the wider socio-historical context. We need an approach that takes conflict into consideration, not simply as a problem or obstacle to successful collaborations, but as a symptom of new social relationships that arise from such practices.

What I would like to do now is to bring up past collaborative practices for this discussion, to analyze them within the dynamics of economic and cultural imperialism, to articulate the conflict, and thereby clarify some of the conceptual frameworks we have in the analysis of contextual factors in collaboration.

Conflict: The alternative to the collaboration model

What I would like to propose is an analytical tool that can guide us in the organization of collaborative practices, rather than a single model for collaboration.

In a positive feedback loop, the collaboration model can be seen as a deviation-amplifying process, thereby amplifying conflict. When conflict is amplified, learning can take place. Here, we have circular stimulation of collaborators and motivations, but even if the initial conditions are similar, there is no certainty that their effects will be similar. There is no certainty likewise, that dissimilar results come from dissimilar conditions. Social processes like partnerships and collaborations take place under conditions of uncertainty and not simply towards a coherent rational or normative developmental path. (This is one of the reasons why I also propose that we challenge the dominant model of development). We may be able to model biological processes as a dynamic system, but modeling social processes need some modification.

At present, I am using and testing an analytical tool called a Triad, derived from a tripartite social structure that predates the asymmetrical development that modern capital systems create. This Triad consists of: **Communal Ownership**, capital flow, economic freedom, the materialist basis of development; **Sovereignty**, the competent practice of independent political and social authority – the freedom to develop, use and sustain indigenous knowledge; and **Autonomy**, self-determination and self-government.

Applied to any collaboration model, the Triad will inevitably articulate the presence of conflict. This is the usefulness of the Triad – it allows for a closer inspection and introspection of collaborative processes.

At the Forum on Collaborative Practices organized by “Pananaw” at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, I looked into a multi-cultural collaborative art project organized in 2002 by five German artists through the Internet in which myself and a collaborator from Brazil became involved. In hindsight, it was a successful collaboration largely on the part of the German organizers, who received funding, publicity and promotion for setting up the stage upon which the work of 10 foreign artists could be elegantly presented. For my Brazilian collaborator, perhaps there was an advantage through symbolic resource because he was able to show it at an electronic poetry exhibition in Sao Paulo, good especially for his career as an academic.

Seen in terms of communal ownership, the flow of capital was from the periphery to the center, from Manila and Sao Paulo to Germany. In terms of competent authority over the work, the Germans benefited the most because they have amassed the capital and symbolic resource of 10 foreign artists. In terms of autonomy (self-determination and self-government), we may ask what was the role of the collaboration in terms of the capacity of the individual collaborators to choose and use methodologies for local development? The advantage for the German artists is clear because they have acquired all the resource needed to install the works. There was a second round of the project in which the German artists approached us again asking for expressions of interest in the new project so that they can get funding for it. I refused to participate again. At that time it was clear to me the asymmetry of the “collaboration.”

An example of a successful collaboration was a project organized by a foreign organization and a Yangon City collective of artists in 2002, an international symposium and workshop called on collaboration, networking and sharing in Myanmar. I thought that it was successful because it did allowed the discussion of the asymmetry of positions between the different participants and organizers, and it also manifested the logic and the outcomes of such conflicts: the partnership between the foreign organizers and the local art assembly was broken, the local art assembly was dissolved, the relationships between artists in an older art assembly was strengthened, and the foreign delegates who were serious about the work that they have done in the country continued their contacts with the organizers, the local art assemblies and individual artists, and those who found it too difficult did not pursue anymore.

The learning experience in Yangon was tremendous and the flashy German project pales terribly in comparison. The struggle for communal ownership, sovereignty and autonomy persists to the present time among the collaborators in the Yangon project,

and this struggle enables a way out of a culture of silence present in some societies with powerful hierarchies, although such hierarchies also have their advantages. But the challenge to a silent and dependent society means a challenge to the passive, submissive and uncritical acceptance of things even when they are becoming oppressive. In a “conflict collaboration”, the human partner becomes a material in the collaboration; the human partner as material can give voice to a critical consciousness that can question dominant socioeconomic structures. This might be called **linguistic conscientisation** because it is a form of self-reflectivity through the challenging of linguistic norms, including that of silence.

Identifying the actors in a collaborative undertaking may also be crucial – it may also not be so simple.

When one looks at the **cooperation between the Philippine government and the MILF in locating and destroying the Abu Sanyaf Group**, we will notice that a third collaborator (by force) has been left out, and a fourth collaborator is being hidden from scrutiny. Karapatan and Bantay Ceasefire civil society group in Maguindanao have numerous accounts of the destruction of schools, mosques and civilian homes. This is the result of the cooperation between the government and the MILF in evacuating over a thousand people in the villages to give government troops the freedom to conduct their war operations. There are also reports of the presence of what appear to be a P-3 Orion plane used by the U.S Armed Forces in surveillance operations. German interns of Bantay Ceasefire visiting the villages have also found empty plastic bags of MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), or meal rations that are standard issue to U.S. soldiers.

What has happened to the communal ownership, the sovereignty and the autonomy of the villagers in Maguindanao? Why are the Americans there? Why isn't the Philippine government letting the people know of the reality of their “collaborations”? Clearly, the altruistic language of collaboration (with the MILF, with the Americans, and so on) is being used to obscure the reality of destruction. This is not a “conflict collaboration” but a subterfuge of the people. Our conceptual tools for explaining individual behavior and experience in the collaborative setting in relation to the wider socio-historical context would be of little importance if the actors of a collaboration are erased or hidden from view. This is why it is crucial to ask, and to demand to know, and not be carried away or silenced by the linguistic deceptions perpetrated by those who have the greatest advantage in collaborations.

For what, after all, has been the role of the “collaborator” in Philippine history – from our experience during the Japanese occupation to the Aguinaldo government under the American colonial period up to the present time? With greater linguistic conscientisation and a more critical consciousness, perhaps it will be sooner than later that we claim our right to speak, transform ourselves and haul our lives out of the mental prison of “collaboration.”

Author biography:

Fatima Lasay (b. 1969) is an artist, independent curator and educator working in digital media. Her work investigates ownership, sovereignty and autonomy in the practice and theory of technology-based arts, and cultural (re)definitions of technologies within the context of neocolonialism. She has presented her work in Denmark, India, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Singapore and Taiwan, and has conducted workshops and worked with artists in Myanmar (Burma), Switzerland and the Philippines. Fatima was professor of computer art at the University of the Philippines where she developed its first computer art elective courses and organized the Digital Media Festivals.

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