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Narrating Disaster through Participatory Research

Perspectives from Post-Earthquake Nepal

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Abstract: This essay describes Narrating Disaster, a collaborative research project that the authors designed in response to Nepal's 2015 earthquakes in order to document survivors' nuanced and diverse experiences of living through a natural disaster. The time-sensitive research conducted in four highland valleys of Nepal (Mustang, Manang, Nubri, and Tsum) in a chaotic, post-catastrophe environment required the development of multi-layered participatory elements: community researchers influenced the project design, had flexibility with regard to sampling procedures, determined how to present the research in the beleaguered communities, and made final decisions on interviewing styles and the most appropriate questions to ask. The authors reflect on the epistemological nature of a rapid academic response to human tragedy that could not have been accomplished without deep and meaningful research collaborations with people from the affected areas.

Keywords: participatory research, collaborative ethnography, linguistics, earthquake, Nepal

Introduction

Jhangchuk Sangmo and Lhakpa Lama perch on a stack of reclaimed beams, the tawny stubble of harvested barley fields stretching out behind them. Beyond that, snaking stone walls demarcate fields from alpine forest, as the sharp angles of this Himalayan valley meet sky.

"After the earthquakes came," Lhakpa begins, "we went out to ask

people about their experiences. We went to take interviews.” In a mix of Tibetan, English, and Nepali, Lhakpa and Jhangchuk acknowledge people’s sadness over the devastation and deaths that occurred in their community and talk about the way people tried to make sense of the events.

“Many older people say that the earthquakes were caused by an elephant,” Jhangchuk offers. The elephant she references is a creature that, according to regional Tibetan cosmology, balances Earth on its back. In other areas the creature becomes a white ox, a tortoise, even a fish, but the meaning remains the same: the earth quakes when the creature lumbers and shakes. “The monks and educated people say that it comes from water, fire, wind, earth,” Jhangchuk continues, referencing the elements in Tibetan tradition that make up both our bodies and the body of this planet. “But the *students* say the *science definition*,” she concludes, code switching between Tibetan and English.

Educated, articulate, dressed in down jackets, these young people are at once at home here in Nubri, in the Gorkha District of Nepal, and also accustomed to life in Kathmandu, the country’s capital. Ever since the first major 7.8 earthquake occurred on April 25, 2015, Jhangchuk and Lhakpa, like so many Nepalis, have been navigating life in the wake of natural disaster: reconciling loss, volunteering time and labor, sharing information, surviving and adapting. These two have also been engaged in a collaborative research project to document their communities’ recollections of the seismic events that killed more than nine thousand people and displaced more than half a million, most of them from the hills and mountains in the central and eastern regions of this landlocked, under-resourced, ethno-linguistically diverse country.

Emergency rescue crews and international aid agencies swept into Nepal following the April 25 and May 12 earthquakes. However, as observed in the aftermath of other disasters such as Hurricanes Andrew (1992) and Katrina (2005) in the USA as well as the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami in Japan (2011), response has focused primarily on addressing biomedical and infrastructural needs. Media coverage of Nepal has been trained more on the politics of aid distribution and crises of governmental leadership than on the cultural understandings, social responses, and psychological impacts on those who experienced these events.¹

As scholars of Nepal who have spent significant portions of our lives in this country, we found our concerns were captured by the initial news of these earthquakes and our fears for our friends and collaborators.

Soon, however, we realized that without immediate action to document survivors' experiences and voices, their nuanced and diverse stories would risk being amalgamated into more generalized narratives, influenced and homogenized in the quest to distill the many facets of tragedy and faces of resilience into digestible soundbites and iconic images. We responded with an interdisciplinary project (NSF BCS 1547377, PI Kristine Hildebrandt) that addresses these understudied dimensions of disaster response.

Jhangchuk and Lhakpa are part of a team of sixteen research partners collaborating with four scholars based in the USA and Australia (two anthropologists and two linguists) and two Nepali linguists. Working across four affected mountainous areas in central Nepal (from east to west: Tsum, Nubri, Manang, and Mustang) and the nation's capital, Kathmandu, areas that represent diverse religious traditions, cultural practices, and languages, this project asks survivors and responders what they know about earthquakes based on their lifelong cultural and environmental experiences, and how people responded to these devastating events. How do they view their world through these earthquakes and the aftermath, particularly in terms of cause and consequence? How can they explain a natural disaster using their linguistic resources?

In the introduction to the journal *Collaborative Anthropologies*, founding editor Luke Eric Lassiter points out, "Although 'collaboration' has become an oft-heard motto in our field, the deeper complexities of collaborative anthropologies remain elusive" (Lassiter 2008, ix). Deep complexities, indeed. Each of us is a seasoned field researcher accustomed to meaningful collaborations with research partners in Nepal, yet most of us had never embarked on a project that, from conceptualization to execution, could completely be labeled collaborative ethnography or participatory research. While one of us had some experience with these methods and approaches (Blaikie et al. 2015; Adams et al. 2007; Craig and Bista 2005), none of us had done this sort of fieldwork in response to an urgent and rapidly unfolding set of circumstances.

Our RAPID-funded project, *Narrating Disaster*, is an attempt to capture ephemeral memories in politically unstable post-earthquake Nepal, bringing together researchers of different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. Our original plan was one of delegation and instruction: write an academic grant proposal; identify Nepali academics with whom to collaborate; train educated locals as research assistants;

have them record interviews and freeform narratives with village residents; and use these data to produce academic work and a public archive. But fieldwork always conjures obstacles and opens unforeseen possibilities for learning. The planning and execution of this research has evolved through complex interpersonal negotiations between foreign and Nepali academics, between these two groups and community researchers, between local researchers and villagers, and between us as a research team and the communities with whom we are working.

In the months since the earthquakes of spring 2015, our collaborative team has collected almost four hundred interviews and narratives from these four diverse areas in central Nepal as well as from members of these communities living in the capital, Kathmandu. As we work to sort through and make sense of a voluminous data set as well as make progress on translations and transcriptions that will produce a publicly available digital archive of this material, we have decided to pause and reflect on the epistemological nature of a project that has provided us, and our research partners, a collective and cathartic inquiry into the lived experience of tragedy. The purpose of this paper is to describe how an academic endeavor to capture personal experiences of a natural disaster in the months following the event could not have been accomplished without deep and meaningful collaboration with research partners from the affected areas.

Collaborative and Participatory Research

In the 1980s Salzman (1986) urged cultural anthropologists to abandon an outmoded, lone-adventurer research model in favor of a team approach. Since then, team research has become more inclusive, involving not just a collection of PhD-credentialed scholars, as Salzman's version of collaboration envisioned. Many scholars now design and execute projects with significant input from local participants and apply various labels to their strategies: collaborative ethnography, collaborative research, community-based (language) research, participatory research, participatory peer research, and participatory-action research. Despite these different names, a fundamental goal of such approaches is to realign the hierarchy of investigatory practices and respond directly to a need to "decolonize" research (Harrison 1997) and methodologies (Smith 2012) by co-producing knowledge. Emblematic of the turn to a

more collaborative research model in anthropology is a new chapter in the *Handbook of Methods in Cultural Anthropology*, titled “Participatory Methods and Community-Based Collaborations.” The essay begins by declaring a “commitment to an anthropology that seeks to reduce the power imbalance for underserved and marginalized populations in society” by way of changing “the model of research from solely scientist directed and implemented to approaches involving members of under-represented communities and groups as research collaborators” (Schen-sul et al. 2014, 185).

Despite the seeming “newness” of these trends, meaningful collaboration is nothing new in anthropology. As Lassiter reminds us, in the mid-1800s Lewis Henry Morgan relied on and openly acknowledged the contributions of his Seneca interlocutor (Lassiter 2005b, 85). We also recall Sol Tax, whose lifework exemplified efforts to bring diverse voices into the research conversation and to acknowledge their contributions and perspectives. This was true regarding Tax’s founding of the journal *Current Anthropology*, with its unique form of academic commentary; it was equally if differently true with Tax’s research with North American Native communities, which earned the moniker “action anthropology.” Tax defined this approach in an address to the American Anthropological Association in 1950: “Action anthropology is an activity in which an anthropologist has two coordinate goals, to neither one of which he will delegate an inferior position. He wants to help a group of people to solve a problem, and he wants to learn something in the process.”³ Tax’s work—specifically the stress in action anthropology on democratizing practices of research and using social science methods to address social problems—can be seen in the development of a wider movement toward “action research,” an approach that grew out of social psychology and industrial democracy movements in the post-World War II era in Europe and North America, and that has come to include a focus on ethnographic method across disciplinary boundaries (Greenwood and Levin 2006).

Lassiter defines collaborative ethnography as “an approach to ethnography that *deliberately* and *explicitly* emphasizes collaboration [with community co-intellectuals] at every point in the ethnographic process, without veiling it—from project conceptualization, to fieldwork, and especially, through the writing process” (Lassiter 2005a, 16, emphasis in original). Similarly, proponents of participatory research see it as a means to move beyond treating people as mere “subjects” by allowing local col-

laborators, referred to as “research partners,” a meaningful role in the process of generating knowledge (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Participatory research is a “research style” that “argues in favor of the possibility, the significance, and the usefulness of involving research partners in the knowledge-production process” (2). Collaborative ethnography and participatory research derive in part from feminist methodologies and the postmodernist turn in anthropology that prodded researchers to pay more attention to power dynamics and representation, and in part to participatory development in applied anthropology (Lassiter 2005a) that emphasizes collaboration from project conception through implementation and evaluation (McConnell et al. 2014). Importantly, involving research partners in the design of a research project creates the opportunity for them to be active stakeholders in the process and outcomes (Bergold and Thomas 2012; Lassiter et al. 2004).

Scholars have deployed variations of collaborative ethnography and participatory research for some time in sociology (Hall 1992), health research (e.g., Nichter 1984; Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Wang, Burris, and Ping 1996), industrial democracy, organizational culture, and community development (e.g., Greenwood, Whyte, and Harkavy 1993; Gustavsen 1992; Levin 1993). Participatory peer research is increasingly popular in the field of social work as a means to redress the reluctance of young or disadvantaged individuals to express openly their emotions and problems with researchers (Lushey and Munro 2014) by employing “members of the target population who are trained to participate as co-researchers” (Roche, Guta, and Flicker 2010, 4). Parallels in the social sciences include a study by Swidler and Watkins, who hired high school graduates to record “hearsay” evidence about AIDS and family planning overheard in everyday conversations (Swidler and Watkins 2007, 148–50); and Plummer and colleagues, who hired six young researchers to reside in the homes of participants in a reproductive health program so they could shadow people engaging in their daily routines and document spontaneous conversations about family planning (Plummer et al. 2006, 31–32). In both cases the community researchers were not involved in the study design or ensuing publications but had considerable latitude when it came to gathering primary data.

In language documentation, the movement toward community collaboration has been gradual but has nonetheless started taking shape. Traditional approaches to field linguistics have been “data-centered,”

with personnel structure, methods, and outputs oriented primarily on descriptions and publications of the investigator(s) (Czaykowska-Higgins 2009). However, more contemporary approaches range from ethical linguist-focused (an effort by the researchers to minimize inconveniences to the community), to advocacy-centered (research both on and for the community), to empowering-centered (research on, for, and with community input and feedback), to community-based (research that is on, for, and with methods and approaches co-constructed by the community in tandem with researchers) (Cameron et al. 1992; Yamada 2007; Leonard and Haynes 2010; Stenzel 2014). The Linguistic Society of America is a member of the Coalition on Science and Human Rights; a responsibility to communities is stated in its ethics code that acknowledges the diversity in community investment and ownership of language as a form of cultural knowledge. Similar to the objectives of collaborative and participatory research, the code advises community guidance and involvement from the earliest stages of research design.⁴

Scholarship in the greater Himalayan region is trending toward co-authorship with local researchers and embracing new forms of knowledge generation and dissemination. Examples include linguistic collaborations such as the Bhutan Oral Literature Projects and community-oriented dictionaries (Turin and Thami 2004); ethnography conducted and written across languages and cultures, and reflective of longitudinal research (Holmberg, March, and Tamang 1999; Tamang et al., 1995; Holmberg 2012); ethnographic accounts that explicitly highlight knowledge produced in dialogue with interlocutors (March 2002; Childs 2004); collaborative feminist ethnography focused on gendered identity, place, and positionality (Nightingale and Rankin 2014); and research that brings together traditional medical practitioners with anthropologists to produce, among other things, a collaborative event ethnography (Blaikie et al. 2015).⁵ In addition, scholars of Tibet and the Himalaya have been early adopters and consistent innovators of open access digital platforms to facilitate collaborative research, teaching, and learning across disciplines, institutions, languages, and cultures. The Tibetan and Himalayan Library (THL) based at the University of Virginia and the research repository Digital Himalaya are two examples of such work.⁶ We have chosen to partner with THL to create a publically available repository of the data from *Narrating Disaster*.

Narrating Disaster

At the time we conceived and launched Narrating Disaster we knew that this project would necessitate new forms of collaboration and trust, but we did not know exactly how this would materialize in and beyond the field. Because the project was essentially reactive (to a natural disaster) and time sensitive (the imperative to gather recollections while still fresh in people's minds, and before they were normalized into a local or regional narrative), our research design converges with and diverges from the approaches already outlined. In order to secure NSF RAPID funding, we did not have time to envision all the ways we could deliberately and explicitly incorporate collaboration at every point in the research process. That is not to say we avoided local input. All of us had been in contact with people in the quake-affected areas, so when the project began to take shape we consulted with individuals about project feasibility as well as potential benefits and challenges. As we were writing the grant proposal, we began a conversation about the ethics and practicalities of this work, including challenges of reaching quake-affected regions and asking people to reflect on traumatic events. These conversations have continued through data collection and are helping to shape our analysis.

From the outset, we decided to involve Nepali academic colleagues as well as young, educated individuals as community researchers. Our plan to train and work with them as research partners reflected our concerns, as foreign academics, about the impacts of hierarchy, power, and difference in the elicitation of difficult stories at a fragile time. So too did our desire to resolve (or at least minimize) aspects of the observer's paradox and approximate what Leonard and Haynes call "collaborative consultation" (2010, 269) in which academic and community needs are considered in project design and implementation. The process began smoothly enough. We approached Nepali linguists, applied to the NSF, recruited researchers from quake-affected areas who were willing and excited to be involved, purchased and couriered equipment to Nepal, and obtained ethics clearance from our universities—all in two months from grant submission to implementation.

Even so, collaboration and participation took organic and unexpected turns. Co-author Kristine Hildebrandt set off for Nepal in midsummer to train the community researchers and make connections between them

and our Nepali academic colleagues. By the time she arrived, one of the research teams (who had worked together as a team with one of us in the past) had already gone to the field in Mustang and collected more than two hundred narratives. To this enthusiastic group, even our most efficient academic process seemed, to them, glacially slow. We note this team's willingness and desire to contribute to this project as well as a sense of ownership over the project itself. They felt it was best to return to their communities as soon as possible because they knew their village contexts well enough to understand that in another month or two people would be more focused on rebuilding before the onset of winter than on making time to recall their experiences of the earthquakes. However, the fact that one team had already completed a significant amount of data collection by the time the co-author arrived meant that a day-long intensive project gathering that was initially planned as a training session became a workshop, familiarizing community researchers with recording equipment and interview methods using the first team's fieldwork as examples.

Since the national university had suffered earthquake damage, we needed to convene at a hotel with conference facilities. Here public scholarship converged with political interests and private investments. The hotel in which we met, offered to us for free, was owned by an individual from Manang District (one of our data collection areas), who also happened to be the current minister of labor. His generous act was matched by the fact that he then wanted to inaugurate the event officially. And thus what was meant to be a creative, scholarly space for discussing the project plans began with several hours of dealing with security details, formal speeches, photo ops, and media interviews. By publicly acknowledging the importance of this research, this politician-entrepreneur was positioned to benefit from this project—at least for the next media cycle. While these speeches and PR attention lent an atmosphere of importance to the project, they also immediately cast all of us into a more public space. Such moments raised questions about who we were working for, who these materials were for, and how they would be presented and represented beyond the academy.

In more private moments of this workshop, we also began to uncover profoundly different assumptions, concerns, and expectations from individual team members about how data would be processed. The Nepali academic linguists held concepts of “research” and experiences of data

processing that, at times, would be at odds with those of community researchers or, less frequently, distinct from our goals as foreign academics. With the first (Mustang) team as an example, we began to consider the volume of data this project was bound to generate. This required that we contemplate different strategies for transcription and translation selection and triage. Were we transcribing materials for linguistic analysis, for general event representation, or with the lens of cultural interpretation? How many texts should be processed toward a specific analytical goal (e.g., linguistic analysis)? What would be most useful for a merger of anthropological linguistic analysis? What would be most meaningful to the communities in which this research would be conducted? These and other questions involved wrestling with crucial issues in collaborative, participatory work: Who is research for? What is it for?

From the outset of *Narrating Disaster*, the conditions in Nepal also confronted us with serious ethical issues that went far beyond issues of privacy, dignity, and the co-creation of knowledge. After all, we were asking our research partners to travel long distances over unstable ground in order to reach their natal villages and to then embark upon emotionally demanding work. The trail to Nubri and Tsum, our field areas in northern Gorkha District, remained impassible into the autumn of 2015 due to recurring landslides. The Nubri team decided to travel a longer alternative route home in late summer, enduring frigid temperatures and snowfall while crossing the 5,100m Larkye Pass from Manang. En route to villages for data collection, they learned of tragedies, including aftershock-induced avalanches that had recently killed people. Meanwhile, the Tsum team had to wait until October for the trail to become passable because the only other way into their valley is from Tibet. Although they were eager to commence the research, they were also relieved that we simultaneously emphasized “safety first” and allowed them to make the call to trek to Tsum once they were confident that it was not too dangerous.⁷

Some research teams, particularly those who went to the field first, met locals who were still waiting anxiously for material aid. As we illustrate in more detail below, some people registered disappointment or confusion when they realized that the teams were armed only with video cameras and audio recorders, not tins of food or cash or medicines. However, after community researchers explained the project, local participants often saw the value of creating a public archive of these stories to retain collective memory in these communities and share them with

the wider world. To some of these individuals, the fact that Narrating Disaster involved interactions between locals of different backgrounds and educated youth from these regions was very important. The research teams became careful listeners—witnesses—as people spoke about their feelings of neglect by the Nepali government and by international media, of ongoing hardships, and even about their understandings of what to do, or not do, in times of emergency. In Mustang, for example, teams encountered locals and migrants to the region who were responding not only to the earthquake’s physical destruction but also to the devastated opportunities for earning a living through tourism and consequently their inability to repay debt, in a region that, despite empirical evidence to the contrary, had been declared an “unaffected district” by the Nepali government.

How Participatory Is Narrating Disaster?

Because our partnership involves linguists and cultural anthropologists, we feel that “participatory research” rather than “collaborative ethnography” best describes our approach because the former suggests more methodological latitude. Nevertheless, branding the research style does not address a fundamental question: To what extent did our research partners influence the scope and direction of the project? As mentioned earlier, we did not have the luxury of time to design a completely participatory project. Rather, participatory elements emerged and evolved as we began assessing what could be done, how, and by whom—all within a post-disaster scenario.

An obvious participatory dimension to Narrating Disaster is that the individuals tasked with conducting fieldwork were born in the highlands of Nepal and were asked to collect data in their natal communities. No foreign or Nepali academics were directly involved in data collection. However, to call these community researchers “peers” is somewhat misleading with respect to their relationship to us and to those being interviewed. First, they did not actively participate in writing the initial grant proposal to fund this work, nor (at this point) are they actively engaged in the writing process. Second, since they had all been sent away from their villages at a young age for education they were not precisely “peers” with all whom they interviewed back home. These researchers are young, multilingual, educated, urban dwellers who in some cases did interview

their peers, for example other urban youths who helped coordinate relief efforts in their villages. But in most cases they interviewed people with divergent life trajectories, including monks and nuns whose education centered on Buddhist philosophy and liturgy rather than math, science, and English, as well as laypeople who never had an opportunity for education, whether secular or religious.⁸

As much as possible, we heeded research partners' ideas about the makeup of teams as well as plans for executing fieldwork. For example, one group suggested that we recruit an *amchi* (practitioner of Tibetan medicine) to be part of a team (which we did). Furthermore, because with rare exceptions we could not speak with community researchers while they were in the field, we encouraged them to conduct their own daily debriefs—time to go over what they heard and learned during a day of fieldwork, to talk about how they were doing emotionally, to foster good research environments and facilitate reflection. According to Jhangchuk, such meetings were productive opportunities to deal collectively with the stress of doing independent research. She said:

The work was a bit difficult because, before, we were used to working together [with foreign scholars] and didn't have to think about what to do; you guys used to guide us. When we go with you we don't have to decide in the evening what to do the next day, so we have no tension. But this time we had to decide when and what to do. We had to decide everything. This caused some tension, deciding who will do what. So every evening we had a discussion.

All of the research partners we recruited were well known in their respective home communities—even if they had not been full-time residents for many years. In some cases they had worked with us on previous research projects and therefore had had exposure to anthropological and linguistic research methods. However, we could only speculate on how the project would be received locally; the community researchers would be on the frontlines of this interaction and would have to navigate encounters in communities where people were still in need of humanitarian assistance. While it was understood that the research teams were not aid workers, some members had been on the frontline of emergency grassroots response just prior to the project's commencement. They carried this knowledge of community needs into the project, and their reception was at times shaped by this shared knowledge, as well as by their connec-

tions to some of us, who had visible and multi-stranded connections to these communities ourselves.⁹

Another participatory dimension of the project was the independence our research partners had in deciding how to present the project in their home regions. Nyima Samdrup explained:

[When we arrived in a village] we were carrying the tripod and video and recorders. At first they were thinking we were some sort of reporters. But they knew us because we are from Nubri. At the time there were all sorts of relief coming from different NGOs, so they were also expecting relief. We told them, “We are not relief, aid, or any NGO. We just came here to get the stories about the earthquake.” At first they didn’t understand. We had to make them understand for about five minutes, say everything we were doing, what was the benefit of this.

Lhakpa Lama added:

When we arrived in a village, we needed to explain what we were doing and why we wanted to take an interview. We would say that we want this *data* for *future reference*. For example, we know that there was an earthquake in Nepal eighty years ago [in 1934] but people here, most of them do not have memories of this. Now if we can keep the memories of this earthquake, then in the future if another earthquake comes, those who are small children will know what it was like at this time. We will have a *record*. Some people thought that we had just seized on an opportunity, maybe to make some money. But others were making some very good points about this work, such as, “In the past we know that there had been such events, but it is unclear what to do.”

Jhangchuk confided how they overcame some of the suspicions: “Some people had negative thoughts, like, ‘Oh, they are taking a video of us and showing it to others and making lots of money.’ So we told them we are from Geoff’s office [co-author Childs], because everyone knows you. Otherwise they wouldn’t believe us.”

As these comments attest, our research partners needed to confront people’s assumptions about the goals and meaning of this work. Ironically, in order to bolster their credentials, the Nubri team invoked the name of a foreign researcher, a decision that underscores the difficulties of dismantling the foreign-local research hierarchy. An ingrained expect-

tation holds that research of any sort must derive from a foreign land and thereby mirrors the perception in many impoverished settings that development projects invariably originate from and are directed by foreign “experts” (Loftsdóttir 2009). The point was driven home in a comment by one of the Tsum team members. On hearing that both the Nubri and the Mustang teams had referenced our roles (those of co-authors Geoff Childs and Sienna Craig) in the area, Tenzin Kunchok said, “It is harder for us because we don’t have our own anthropologist.”

Beyond the emotional and physical demands of this project, teams faced questions about what made for “good” data collection practices, a situation compounded by the limited guidance we could provide them while they were in the field due to severely restricted phone and virtually no internet access. Although we gave the teams considerable latitude in determining whom to interview, we also provided basic guidance to sample in such a way that would include people of different ages, genders, wealth status, religious knowledge, and social position. But the teams then had to filter this through their knowledge of local dynamics, personalities, and life experiences. Some teams discussed strategies to include young and old, male and female, lay and monastic, and even local and non-local individuals as research subjects. Other teams considered these dynamics of representation less. Jhangchuk explained how her team proceeded during the initial round of interviews in Kathmandu,

First we made a list of people from Boudha and Swayambhu [the two main concentrations of Buddhist highlander populations in Kathmandu] who are willing to speak, whom we know. We listed equal numbers of people from Lho, Sama, and so forth, the most important people from each village. After that we called them, explained this and that. Some of them were willing to speak but they don’t know how to speak, so we didn’t interview them.

The need to navigate the social hierarchy is apparent in Jhangchuk’s statement. When commencing any important endeavor in these communities one generally starts at the top of the hierarchy in order to display respect for the social order and thereby avoid creating ill will and potential obstacles. Also evident is the pragmatic need to select articulate speakers, those who “know how to speak.” The sampling bias introduced here is toward talkative people with higher social status.

While in the village, the Nubri team went about sampling in a more

systematic manner by seeking males and females from three broadly defined age groups. After drawing up a list of the best candidates in each category they would approach these individuals. If a person was unwilling to be interviewed, they would move on to the next one on the list. When asked reasons why people were reluctant to participate, Nyima Samdrup noted:

Our expectation was high, that we would get more women, more men, and more young people. But when we started doing the interviews there were many who didn't want to do it so it was hard for us. A lot of people, especially women, were not ready to face the cameras or tell their stories. Maybe they were too shy, and they are not used to doing interviews.

Jhangchuk added:

Some felt shy because we were video recording. Others said, "I don't know how to speak." Those were the main reasons. We would reply, "It doesn't matter because you experienced many problems with the earthquake, you must share those with everyone. Your difficulties with the earthquake will be seen by everyone and known by everyone. [People will know] how much Nubri people have suffered during the earthquake."

Due to participant reluctance, women are slightly underrepresented in the final interview archive. Yet note how Jhangchuk's appeal to people implies that telling about suffering can shed light on the problems people in Nubri face. Her entreaty implies that partaking in the project can help attract more post-disaster assistance to the valley.

Our research partners also had to think carefully about *how* to ask questions in a context where the shock of disaster remains fresh and where talking directly about misfortune can be disquieting. As Tsewang Gyurme, a researcher from Mustang, put it, "Our team had to be very careful putting questions to people who were mentally stressed and depressed. I could see people's energy of hope come to zero level." Similarly, Lhakpa observed, "When we were collecting people's stories, we found out that their mental states have changed from before. For example, if they were mentally strong before [the earthquake], they have changed and become more tense." Therefore, from the onset we made it clear to the teams that they could use their judgment to deviate from the es-

tablished interview schedules. Each interviewer could decide, based on the gender, age, and social status of interviewer and interviewee, how to word questions. “We each had our own style [of asking questions],” noted Jhangchuk. They could probe a particular topic, delete questions they felt were insensitive or had little relevance, and add new questions. The Nubri team even convened a meeting in Kathmandu to pare down the number of questions. Nyima Samdrup explained:

We had a bunch of questions that Kristine (co-author Hildebrandt) had given us. I think there were a few questions that were not suitable. So we didn’t ask those. Then we wrote some questions in our books so it would be easy to question again and again. What Kristine gave us, there were too many questions, and some questions were like, we could not even ask them. There were some questions about fatalities in the earthquake. But we didn’t ask them because there were not many people who died in this valley. We added some questions specific to the valley and traditions. We also asked about communications with the family, and about the hard time they faced after the earthquake.

As another example, the Mustang team soon realized that in order to learn more about the economic impacts of the quake they needed to ask more detailed questions about systems of community labor, the price of hired labor, and the fluctuating prices of domestic animals—all issues that, on the surface, have very little to do with earthquakes but that were profoundly important to how people were envisioning the possibilities of and obstacles to recovery. Without external prompting, Mustang team members took the initiative to develop this new line of questioning, demonstrating flexibility arising from the empowerment offered by the participatory nature of the project.

Team members could also choose the language in which they would interview. With older people the obvious choice was the local language, which varied from location to location. But younger people who are well educated and trilingual (Tibetan, Nepali, and English) often engaged in a significant degree of code switching if interviewed in their native dialect, or in many cases preferred one of the non-village languages (English or Nepali) to be the language in which they represented themselves when performing in a non-village activity, an *interview*. While we were well prepared to address linguistic diversity in the stories we gathered, we had not considered the possibility of an interview between two people from

the same village being conducted in English. Such surprises have turned out to be analytically rich; they also reveal how proficiency in English can be a bonding social force, especially for the younger generation, and how “participation” in research can also be a way to express social status through language use.¹⁰

Each of the teams had its own quirks, leading to different styles of data collection and delivery. While some teams worked seamlessly, others struggled. Inter-group differences became apparent when our linguist collaborators in Kathmandu worked with each team on transcription. While the Nubri and Tsum teams were most consistent in terms of sticking together and following the interview schedule, the Mustang team had to improvise because they were in the field before the training and before the interview schedule had been fully developed. Meanwhile, the Manang team split up to cover their natal territories. In some cases they recruited elderly relatives to assist when their fluency in the local vernacular was insufficient to conduct the interviews. Because they did not work together, they did not have the directive influence of fellow team members to standardize interviews, which resulted in far more idiosyncrasies in the Manang data set.

In summary, the fieldwork portion of the project has been participatory in the sense that our team members have exerted significant influence over the data gathering process—often completely independent of dialogue with us. Part of this was by design. Having worked with many of these individuals on high-level research projects, we trusted their capabilities and thereby authorized them to adapt the sampling frame and interview schedule according to circumstances. On the other hand, much of the flexibility emerges from the unique challenges of working in remote settings, under post-disaster conditions, with a limited ability to communicate with those outside the region. Out of necessity we relinquished control over data collection once the teams headed to their respective fieldwork sites.

Collaboration Beyond the Field

At the time of this writing, all data has been collected and the initial translation and transcription process is well underway. However, it has not been easy to get to this point, and many questions remain.¹¹ Not only did we underestimate the amount of materials community re-

searchers would gather; we also assumed that each team would collect similar amounts and types of materials along roughly similar timelines, and that the enthusiasm associated with data collection would extend to data processing. None of these assumptions were correct. Furthermore, we had to adapt methods for transcribing and translating. Research partners were confronted with the slow, meticulous nature of linguistic transcription and translation. Sometimes ten minutes of speech could take five hours to transcribe, translate, and annotate.

In consultation with co-author Sienna Craig, who has worked in Mustang, this team decided to create English language summaries of a selection of seventy-five narratives they deemed to be the most interesting material, balanced also for age, village, and gender; this effort has aided initial ethnographic analysis, although it was done independent of linguistic transcription and translation work performed under the guidance of our Nepali linguist research partners. Nubri, Tsum, and Mustang team members were unfamiliar with the audio and video transcription and translation procedure normally used by the linguistics researchers at Tribhuvan University. As a result our linguists developed a modified system of partial translation of some files and focused translation and transcription of other files for recordings from these areas.

Interestingly, when the time came for community researchers to select which interviews to transcribe first (limited resources induced a triage mode), they used wide-ranging criteria for determining what constitutes a “good” interview. For example, one team that explicitly recorded a wide range of people from their community initially selected a high percentage of narratives from monks as “good” interviews, worthy of detailed translation and transcription. While this ignores the careful sampling they conducted, it may reveal a search for understanding. Who better, after all, to explain an earthquake than someone versed in the cosmophysical world? Equally, it could signal community researchers’ cultural sensibilities, affording educated monastics positions of respect. Another team selected one interview for processing with excellent narrative, sound, and local content, yet which they didn’t understand! The speaker was not local, and spoke in a dialect that they couldn’t follow. When the time came to transcribe and translate, they recreated the story that they imagined the interview subject wanted to tell. Other issues surfaced with respect to which interviews to select for translation and transcription. The researchers from Mustang and Manang, for example, preferred to

choose texts that illustrated “distinct” local languages, as opposed to texts in which locals were speaking more formal or “classical” Tibetan. These and other examples reveal the richness and complexity of the data this project has generated as well as the methodological and epistemological questions that participatory research entails.

Furthermore, within our diverse group of foreign scholars, Nepali academics, and community researchers there has been some tension and confusion over control and ownership—not of the data itself but of the *equipment used to record these narratives*. NSF protocol and US academic convention dictate that recorders and computers used for the project cannot become the property of individual members or teams; but many community researchers would like to keep this equipment, recognizing not only its material value but also the ongoing work of documentation it could facilitate (not only of earthquake narratives but also of relief and rebuilding efforts, state neglect, community resilience, etc.). The structure of our grant support limits the capacity to redeploy these useful technologies.

The project has also retained some top-down elements, especially regarding presentations and publications. In public venues, for example Dartmouth’s Earthquake Summit, we did bring forth the voices of our research partners via a video in which they explained what it was like to conduct the research, and how the experience was meaningful to them.¹² And we have included transcripts from such interviews in articles such as this. However, our research partners’ input into the topic and content of writings and presentations thus far has been minimal, in part due to communication difficulties (some of them are in their home villages and out of touch), and in part because we are still figuring out how to allow them space to influence the dissemination of our findings.

Capacity Building and Other Benefits of Participatory Research

Through Narrating Disaster sixteen young, educated people from the highlands of Nepal gained valuable experience in interviewing, video-recording, and running a research project. At the end of their debriefing interview, Lhakpa and Jhangchuk expressed a sense of gratitude and accomplishment. “It was a great experience for us to learn about our own society,” Lhakpa notes, “including peoples’ experiences with both happiness and sadness. We four friends [the interview team] have had a

very good experience together.” Jhangchuk later said, “I gained a lot of confidence, how to handle [a project]. It’s quite a challenge, but I gained a lot of knowledge.” Nyima Samdrup reflected:

Well, it was a great opportunity doing this job. I’ve learned a lot of what happened in this village. There were so many stories which the old people told us. They were very mysterious, and very nice. Also I got the knowledge of how to take interviews with people. After the interviews, when we went back to Kathmandu, I also got knowledge about how to do translation in a linguistic way.

In addition to gaining skills, Jhangchuk highlighted the good that she thought came of participation in the project, saying

We were able to give people here knowledge about earthquakes. When the earthquake struck I was in my village. I said, “Come on [outside].” But they said, “I’m not coming. If I do, my legs will get broken.” So we were able to give people knowledge about what to do when an earthquake strikes. We told them they must go to an empty place [outside], and that their legs won’t get broken if they do so. They had no knowledge beyond the *ancient concepts*.

Jhangchuk’s comment speaks to an element of knowledge transfer and “participation” that we had not anticipated when envisioning the project but that came up at various points in the data collection process. Aside from training researchers in basic field linguistic and ethnographic methods as well as the mandates of informed consent, we needed to support their efforts to listen with compassion as people spoke about loss, economic hardship, and uncertain futures—often from inside a flimsy tent or beside the rubble of stone and adobe bricks that once formed their homes—and to encourage people to speak as freely as possible about their experiences of panic and instability, strength and community solidarity. At its best, this process of sharing stories with interested youth from the region who also had connections outside the village was therapeutic; but both interviewers and interviewees were often moved to tears through this process. The dynamic of giving and receiving, of “exchanging self for other” (*tong-len* in Tibetan) runs through many aspects of Tibetan culture, from Buddhist teachings to vernacular understandings of reciprocity and the laws of *karma*. Likewise, we knew from our years of fieldwork in culturally Tibetan communities that people can be skept-

tical about the utility of *talking* about traumatic events instead of trying to move past them. And yet it is precisely this convergence of giving and receiving knowledge, asking questions and listening, at times provoking difficult recollections and at other times providing care through the act of listening that has come to define this project, and that illustrates some of the ways it is both collaborative and participatory.

One of our community researchers from Mustang, Ngawang Tsering, has been so impressed by the ability to record, transcribe, and translate (with transcribing software) and then archive narratives (on an open, streaming site) that he has begun creating his own open archive of short videos that aim to capture both immigration experiences and examples of linguistic diversity within the Himalayan diaspora living in the greater New York City area of the United States. He and one of us have received an initial grant for this project, which will be facilitated by collaboration with the New York–based Endangered Language Alliance.¹³ We will continue to support his efforts, and those of others, in expanding their skills and capacities for doing such work in the future. In this sense, a project participant has been inspired to take aspects of the project and develop his own research agenda. In more general terms, this participatory project has involved moments of collaboration and confusion, of shared expectations and alternative visions. The dissonance is not always easy to reconcile, but it is meaningful, creative, and representative of engaged, public scholarship.

By virtue of involving foreign academics with long-term experience in these communities, Nepali academics, and community researchers, this project has pushed us all toward new and more nuanced understandings of power and difference. As one example, a female community researcher from Mustang, Karma Chodron, commented, after spending her two weeks at the national university working with our Nepali linguist colleagues on translation and transcription, that she had hardly ever spoken to a high caste Hindu male in her life before this project. Now she had not only had this experience but she had a new appreciation for these individuals' knowledge and interest in *her* language and culture. At a time of heated ethnic, caste-based, and political division across Nepal, fostering opportunities for collaborative knowledge production across social groups can generate a crucial helping of empathy and mutual understanding.

Moving Forward

Although we recognize the transformative nature of participatory research models, our objectives are humbler than those espoused, for example, in critical collaborative ethnography that seeks to challenge and overturn hegemonic notions of race, gender, and class (Bhattacharya 2008). Narrating Disaster is more in line with Sol Tax's "action anthropology" that endeavors to address social issues *and* generate useful knowledge (Schensul et al. 2014, 186–87). Our project can have positive outcomes, ranging from the ability to identify relief efforts that did or did not work in the earthquake's aftermath, to a culturally nuanced understanding of how people interpret a natural disaster, a linguistic conceptualization of how disasters affect language usage, and the preservation of a corpus of voices describing a cataclysmic event. It can also contribute to a growing body of literature on post-disaster responses (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2002; Petryna 2003; Button 2010; Adams 2013; Potts 2014). For example, many of our initial findings articulate with Potts's (2014) analysis of the successes and failures of social networking and media across several disasters. She concludes that in times of natural and man-made disasters, flexible and collaborative community-based models of communication and networking have multiple effects. They help to mediate communication and direct the flow of information across actors and recipients; respondents and survivors become researchers and co-experts as well as innovators in post-disaster scenarios. In this project we are not working so much with online social networking and media (although these were deployed in innovative ways in Nepal in the earthquake's aftermath) but, rather, are considering our research teams as a metaphor for this approach. By tasking our collaborators with research responsibilities, we are essentially placing them in a position to be experts on post-earthquake relief efforts. Because their feedback modifies our approach and guides our analysis, they are a crucial part of the innovation process.

Fluehr-Lobban argues, "In the twenty-first-century, postcolonial, emerging markets' global context, collaboration is the key to the sustainability of anthropological fieldwork and research, and perhaps for anthropology as a discipline" (2008, 177). The journal *Collaborative Anthropologies* attests to the rising commitment of scholars to acknowledge and address the asymmetrical dimensions of research that depends on an

often unacknowledged local involvement. Far too often researchers mute the voices and modulate the contributions of interlocutors who are relegated to the role of helping hands, tangential and nameless individuals with little if any influence over a project (Turner 2010). As Schumaker notes, “Research assistants generally are invisible in the finished texts of anthropologists both today and in the past and, like wives, often receive a token measure of gratitude in the preface” (2001,12, cited in Molony and Hammett 2007, 292). This prompted Molony and Hammett to ponder, “Is there a reluctance to admit the need to rely upon another to produce our thoughts?” (2007, 293). Although we are still navigating how best to acknowledge the indispensable contributions of our research participants—not just with respect to data collection but in terms of overall intellectual contributions as well—we offer this article as an example of how deep and meaningful collaborations can evolve in a relatively short time frame and in response to an emergent, uncertain situation.

Participatory and collaborative research set forth the admirable goals of making the research process more transparent and democratic. Nevertheless, we must concede that it is most feasible for a privileged class of academicians, namely, those with secure employment. For an anthropologist, completing a PhD and attaining tenure are contingent on distinguishing one’s credentials through what is still normatively defined as *independent* research. Those who have not achieved the status of associate professor enter precarious territory when openly recognizing the knowledge production contributions of others—especially those with less education and research credentials.¹⁴ Expectations ingrained in the academy pose disincentives to collaborative research. Unless there is a sea change in the way we evaluate early career scholars, the future of collaborative research lies in the hands of those in the upper echelons of the research community; that is, those who are likely to be more socially and economically distanced from potential collaborators like Jhangchuk and Lhakpa. We anticipate that regardless of the most egalitarian ideals, relationships of power and influence will continue to pester the application of collaborative and participatory research models. In the future, perhaps it is the research participants themselves who will tilt the equation further toward inclusiveness. Perhaps the young generation of educated individuals and the communities with whom we are working will argue for more involvement in the structure of research and the frameworks for carrying it out. This is certainly the case in First Nations contexts in Canada, increasingly

in Native US communities, and in places like South America, Southeast Asia, and New Zealand (Vallejos 2014; Odango 2015; Hicks, Martin and Pennock 2016; Smith 2012). Participatory research can certainly play a role by devolving power and recasting responsibilities and by building the capacity of others to engage in independent research.

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Notes

1. The government of Nepal formed a National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) two months after the April 25 earthquake (see <http://nra.gov.np/>). However, it was not granted full legal backing until the formation of a new national government in December 2015 (see <http://time.com/4305225/nepal-earthquake-anniversary-disaster/>).

2. From a linguistic standpoint, the narrative interviews give us a new ability to study interactions of language and affect further, beyond the standard western European/major global language models. For example, there is virtually nothing known about the long-term linguistic effects of natural and human disasters on the communities that survive these events and newcomers who arrive to assist and rebuild. One study (Gu 1991) documents the linguistic impacts of internal immigration to Tangshan, China, after the Great Tangshan Earthquake of 1976 (magnitude 7.8), which killed at least 240,000 people in the area, approximately one sixth of the city's population at the time. Repeated waves of inward migration from Sichuan and Northeast China to rebuild and repopulate the area resulted in phonological and lexical changes to the regional varieties of Mandarin now spoken in Tangshan. Another type of sound change (affecting the tone system) was observed widely in native Tangshan populations, demonstrating that both input (immigrant) and recipient (local) systems may be affected in the major population shifts and movements that follow a disaster of such scale. Our transcribed recordings will facilitate the documentation of the grammatical and lexical systems of languages in Gorkha and Mustang where ongoing population shifts due to outmigration have been exacerbated by the earthquake.

3. Address cited in the University of Chicago's obituary for Tax: <http://chronicle.uchicago.edu/950119/tax.shtml>.

4. http://www.linguisticsociety.org/sites/default/files/Ethics_Statement.pdf. Viewed 7/1/16.

5. On the Bhutan Oral Literature Projects see <http://firebirdfellowships.org/bhutan-oral-literature-language-project.html>.

6. www.thlib.org and www.digitalhimalaya.com.

7. Although Fluehr-Lobban argues that collaborative research is “ethically conscious” (Fluehr-Lobban 2008, 175; see also 2003, 242), guidelines issued by the discipline of anthropology are curiously silent on the ethics in collaborative research. The AAA's 1971 Statement on Ethics made it clear that protecting the welfare and dignity of those studied is contingent on a dualistic relationship between the researcher and research “subject” or “informant.” The document details responsibilities to the public, the discipline, students, sponsors, and governments, but it makes no mention of accountability to collaborators such as fieldwork assistants, translators, hosts, and others who play a vital role in the generation of ethnographic knowledge. The most recent version of the AAA ethics code (2012), now called Principles of Professional Responsibility, reflects—at least at the semantic level—a turn toward a more collaborative research model by replacing the terms “subjects” and “informants” with “research participants.” Still missing is an

overt discussion of responsibilities toward people who are key facilitators of research, including research partners in a collaborative ethnography paradigm. The same omission also plagues lengthier discussions of professional ethics from the past (Rynkiewicz and Spradley 1976; Appell 1978; Cassell and Jacobs 1987) and closer to the present (Caplan 2003; Whiteford and Trotter 2008; Fluehr-Lobban 2003).

8. The fact that our research team members, as educated individuals with village roots and urban residences, can navigate a variety of social situations adds layers of complexity to the work they do. But nuances to the “insider-outsider” dichotomy are not an entirely new phenomenon in these areas. These regions of Nepal have experienced a blurring of such boundaries over generations because their communities often comprise different ethno-linguistic groups (for example Gurungs and Manages, Nubriwa and Kutangpa) and are situated along trade routes that expose them to a regular flow of itinerant traffic and cross-cultural interactions. Many people make annual forays to lowland Nepal and India, where they interact intensively with people of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Our point in highlighting this “insider-outsider” distinction is to illustrate that residents of the Himalayan highlands regularly traverse complex social geographies, involving people of different social statuses, religious backgrounds, educational capacities, and worldviews. Thus the challenges our research team members faced are contemporary twists on an enduring social phenomenon.

9. It is important to note that our connections to the communities in question have also included direct involvement with local NGOs and other community based organizations, Nepal SEEDS and DROKPA in particular.

10. Actually, studies of code switching and emotional affect abound (e.g., Isurin, Winford, and de Bot 2009), but data are drawn primarily from languages like Spanish, Hindi, Mandarin Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. The language from the interviews and narratives we collected, speech contextually situated in experiences and emotions surrounding great and sudden physical movement and change and in languages often not anchored to a stabilizing national identity and prestige, can contribute significantly to our understanding of this topic.

11. Significantly, we did not anticipate—and could not have predicted—political events that brought about the near complete collapse of the Nepalese political and economic infrastructure months after the earthquakes. A five-month-long blockade of the Nepal-Indian border produced a shortage of cooking gas, petrol, medicines and other basic commodities. Even though the blockade ended in February 2016, the political climate remains tense. These situations not only crippled earthquake recovery efforts but also made it exceedingly difficult for community researchers to travel to the national university where transcription and translation work needed to occur. One rented a bicycle; several waited all night in queues for petrol for their motorcycles or scooters; others wasted countless hours waiting for sporadic buses to come.

12. On the Dartmouth Earthquake Summit see <http://dickey.dartmouth.edu/global-engagement/conferences-initiatives/nepal-earthquake-summit>.

13. www.elalliance.org.

14. The recent high profile denial of tenure to Dartmouth assistant professor Aimee Bahng, who is widely recognized as a rising star in Asian American Studies, but who chose to publish one of her first books as part of an anonymous collective, albeit with the top academic press in her field (Duke) is illustrative of such risks within the academy. See <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/05/17/campus-unrest-follows-tenure-denial-innovative-popular-faculty-member-color>.

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