

(#1) When Good Intention Is Not Enough: Navigating the question of ethics in research and creative collaborations in and with grassroots communities through fluid methodology – reflections on the creative partnership between the Aurora Artist Residency Program and Space and the Dumagat community in Dingalan, Aurora

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Introduction

I begin with an apology; (1) for not being able to present this paper in person. It is quite ironic that my paper presentation for this panel is about ethical research and creative practices in communities, and yet, the very reason why I am presenting to you virtually, is because of the my University's Ethics Research Committee's bureaucratic demand to delay my travel to the Philippines for field work; and (2) for revising yet again the title and focus of this presentation from "curating the Dumagat Day festival" to "reflections on the creative partnership between AARPS and the Dumagat community" in Dingalan, Aurora.

I realised that I cannot talk about my own work as a festival curator of the **(#2)** first Dumagat Day festival in Dingalan, without reflecting on the continuing community practice, methods, and principles of the **(#3)** Aurora Artist Residency Program and Space (AARPS). When I decided to set up AARPS in 2016, I originally thought of it as **(#4)** creative laboratory for my performance researches, site-specific and site-activated performance works, while **(#5)** developing and at the same time finding some grounding in praxis for my dramaturgical and creative collaboration principle and method – sublational conversations.

When AARPS had an opportunity to collaborate with the **(#6)** Dumagat community in the area to stage the first Dumagat Day festival in 2018, the initial focus of AARPS shifted from merely creative experimentations for various creative-led research projects to **(#7)** community-led and community-based creative projects. And although AARPS still accommodate creative projects that may not necessarily involve community participation, most of our past and on-going projects involve our local community partners that by the time of its formal founding in June 2017, AARPS was already going by its vision statement **(#8)** *building critical [thinking] communities, through shaping creative communities.*

The details of our vision, mission, goals and programs can be found on our website (#9) <http://thebeachhouseproject.wordpress.com> but this vision statement generally translates into practice, through research, education and creative action, applied through the five AARPS program focus, namely, Artist Residency, Research Center, Educational and Cultural Exchange, Community Collaborations and Art Space, for community empowerment and environmental sustainability.

I know right? Big words? High aspirations? And no less concocted with our purest and best intentions.

For we – artists, creative practitioners, cultural workers, community development workers, researchers, always begin with good intentions when we choose to work with communities? This is the first ethical consideration isn't it? To do "what is right and good." A principle that "stipulates that ethical theories should strive to achieve the greatest amount of good because people benefit from the most good;" and/or "to act according to one's moral virtue" – to do what is good. Whether it is to advance knowledge, to radicalize the manner in which we perceive art, aesthetics, and art processes, to give voice to the voiceless, to alleviate poverty, empower communities, sustain communities, develop communities, and so on and so forth. Countless, sometimes, eyebrow raising, conversations about socially engaged art, activism, participatory art, community art, ad infinitum, begin and end with "good intentions."

But what if good intentions are not enough?

What if, regardless of our good intentions and our pure hearts – we end up aggravating community issues, situations and/or conditions on the ground, or introducing conflicts that were non-existent in the community before we entered the community, or adding to what First Nations scholar Linda Tuhiwai-Smith had articulated as the "dirty" reputation of exploitative and etic researchers, in especially, vulnerable communities.

Does good intention really, and should, shield us from these conflicts, mistakes, or unethical practices on the ground?

A second ethical consideration is *duty* or *deontology*, which is mostly guided by a set of rules, grounded on a sense of institutional ethics or institutional accountability. Did the researcher state his/her clear intention? Did s/he ask permission from the authorities with regard to his/her project? Did she act according to the policies stipulated in the rules and regulations of the institution that hosts her project? The ethics of acting according to duty or rules, are usually in place to minimise the risks and dangers and/or legally “protect” both the participants and researcher/creative practitioner in a particular research or creative activity. A general loophole of this ethical consideration when it comes to community work and working with grassroots communities, however is, it places certain privileges on institutional ethics inspite of specific community conditions and/or demands. For instance, the fact that I am not able to travel to the Philippines at this time to continue my community commitments with the Dumagat community in Dingalan because of certain questions and demands by the Ethics Committee from my Australian University that I postpone my scheduled community meeting with the Dumagat community as well as my participation in the 2nd Dumagat Day festival, in which I serve as festival curator, clearly exemplifies this privileging – not only academic privileging over community collaborative work, but also, institutional accountability.

A third ethical consideration is individual *agency* in relation to rights, mostly revolving around the right to consent and refuse participation; while it is certainly important for agency and individual rights to be considered and highlighted when it comes to consent to participate in any activity – research or otherwise – in and with grassroots communities, it could conflict with certain cultural practices, value systems and worldviews of especially Indigenous peoples communities, that value collective consciousness and cultural practices as central to their lives.

In practice, these ethical considerations conflict with one another, and applying ethical research and creative practices on the ground is much more complex than just complying. The truth is *ethics* is that liminal space that will always be a precarious matter; that will always bring out the hardest questions; that will make us question; that will always be negotiated; navigated; and eventually, guide our decisions and directions on the ground.

Methodology – whether in research and/or creative practice – has always been an important point of contention in [re]thinking about various modes of knowledge production. Historically, [the prescription of right] methodology has been used to cement privileged knowledge outcomes from research shaped from scientific, objective, and positivist frameworks; but it also has been greatly radicalized by *researchers from the margins* (Brown and Strega 2005) who sought to expose the inherent power structure of, pose a critique against, and propose alternative models to hegemonic modes of knowledge production. In other words, methodology remains to be a very important platform for debate and critique against hegemonic research no matter how “dirty” (Tuhiwai Smith 2012) it had become.

Methodology should also be a major point of contention in grappling with the question of ethics in general, and when working with and in vulnerable communities in particular. Moreover, methodology should be consciously crafted to serve as tools for self-reflexivity in research and creative collaborations with communities; and not only as a manner of gathering data and/or presentation of results. A demand to have a kind of [Bahktinian] *answerability* that guards against using the community as appendage, laborers, sometimes, slaves to the artist vision or research goals, in the guise of community participation. This *answerability* will hopefully bring about numerous ways in breaking the traditional relationship between the [active] researcher and [passive] subject as two separate entities encroached in a power structure. To set research platforms that are collaborative and participatory that will not only ensue a more equal relationship amongst research participants but also ensure the ownership and stake of the community in both the process and product of research (Conrad and Campbell 2008: 248).

In my own practice and creative led research and creative collaboration with the Dumagat community in Dingalan, Aurora, particularly on the study of cultural gatherings such as the Dumagat Day festival, as a tool for cultural empowerment and solidarity, I draw from the fields of community work/development, indigenous knowledge, [performance] curation and dramaturgy, and cultural mapping in order to design a **fluid methodology**.

Fluid methodology is perceiving research and/or creative project from a position of motion rather than a position coming from a specific framework. Fluid methodology draws inspiration from my creative practices, from performance curation and dramaturgy, that uses flow as a guide for the direction of a particular research and/or creative project. At the same time, it is inspired by the Dumagat valuation of water. Fluid methodology is anchored on the concept of water because its inherent fluidity enables the researcher to navigate through the complexities of community collaborations. In application, this generally means that the researcher is keen on the rhythm and flow of the community and is able to adapt, change course, intensity, and speed, and capture the many ripples created during the research process.

Fluid methodology allows us to engage in and listen to actual conversations on the ground, and consider these conversations as vital to setting research and creative goals. To have community integrations, consultations, and other forms of community dialogues that serve as platforms for regular assessment and check-ups if the community goals are in conjunction with research and/or creative project goals.

Fluid methodology is process-based and also process-oriented. This means that processing activities, research data, and even relationships are as important, or maybe even more important than guidelines. We have as much responsibility to abide by ethical policies and rules as we have the responsibility to process our work with the community and how it affects both the community and the research along the way. The community consultation.

Fluid methodology also allows what I call community ethics to flourish. This is generally, ethical processes, methods and principles that were shaped from practice, from the activities and/or projects and shaped by the community. A community ethics that is centered on the curare or care for relationships. For example, in one of our discussions on photojournalism and plagiarism in photos in one AARPS partnership with Photojournalist Center of the Philippines, while photojournalists are generally guided by photojournalism ethics such as authenticity; the community of photojournalists were also able to create a community ethics that is defined by a certain understanding and caring for each other, that they allow themselves to use each other's photos even for publication, even if on the onset this is plagiarism. In the Dumagat community relating to AARPS – the community went out of their way to grant me a community meeting or a traditional pasurot-surotan which is the most valuable form of collective decision making for the Dumagat community – to grant AARPS and myself to continue collaborating with the community.

These methods may not be necessarily new but bringing these practice-led, creative-led and community-led methods could certainly bring new ways in which to navigate the question of ethics in community work, research and creative practice. When we see ethics as fluid, as a process, and as time-based rather than a fixed position from where we measure and design our relationships with our community partners;

It can aid our decision making process on the ground. No apologies.

Help us perceive our priorities, including the relationships that we intend to care for the most.

It can give us the way to turn conflicts into moments of care, or gaps into learning moments, mistakes into opportunities.