

# EPISTEMIC COLLABORATIONS IN CONTEXTS OF CHANGE: ON CONCEPTUAL FIELDWORK AND THE TIMING OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

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In order to examine the methodological potential of a more experimental form of fieldwork, I present three examples of conceptual interventions in my fieldsite, Hoyerswerda, Germany's fastest shrinking city. My deployment of weekly anthropological columns in the local newspaper, an anthropological research camp for local youth, and a communal art project in a soon to be demolished socialist apartment house as ethnographic tools might be criticized for changing the field. However, my informants are themselves continuously adjusting their concepts and narratives in order to make sense of current rapid alterations. By actively intervening in local debates concerning the city, I have aimed to transform ethnographic interference from a necessary vice to a methodological virtue. Since my conceptual fieldwork was particularly helpful in studying epistemic change, I propose a reconsideration of the timing of anthropological knowledge, arguing for a more timely strategy of its representation "in the making" and an expanded facilitation of epistemic collaborations during fieldwork.

**Keywords:** Local Knowledge; Change; Shrinkage; Methodology; Conceptual Fieldwork; Epistemic Collaboration; Timing

This article asks a straightforward question: How to study local knowledge that is constantly being reconfigured to adapt to dramatically changing socioeconomic circumstances? One answer is that, especially in times of epistemic change, it can be useful to cultivate during fieldwork a form of what Nikolai Sstorin-Chaikov calls "ethnographic conceptualism" (see Sstorin-Chaikov, introduction, this issue). By this, I indicate a different way of relating to and collaborating with the people we study, which entails a different timing of the dissemination of anthropological knowledge. What I call "conceptual fieldwork"—an interventional form of studying local economies of knowledge—configures the objects of anthropological analysis as being continuously subject to change and its epistemic repercussions. To track such epistemic repercussions, conceptual interventions are a timely and promising

methodological supplement to the contemporarily expanding ethnographic toolbox. I will demonstrate this with the help of ethnographic material collected in a context of accelerated postsocialist and postindustrial change.

I conducted fieldwork in Hoyerswerda, a former socialist model city of the German Democratic Republic that was officially declared Germany's fastest shrinking city in 2009. Like many other contemporary fieldsites, Hoyerswerda can be accurately described as "inchoate" (Carrithers 2007) and "unstable" (Greenhouse, Mertz, and Warren 2002). Its inhabitants' lives are shaped by a substantial "loss of coherence" (Collier and Lakoff 2004:422), something that James Ferguson (1999:14), writing in the context of Zambian postindustrial decline, described as a "crisis in meaning." In response, many Hoyerswerdians participate in the production, dissemination, and critical evaluation of knowledge about their city's problematic present, making it a prominent concern of local sociopolitical negotiations. The omnipresent negative effects of socioeconomic decline evoke a multiplicity of occasions for "conceptualizing, narrating, and experiencing socioeconomic change" (Ferguson 1999:21), as much among professional experts in the local government as in the everyday lives of many Hoyerswerdians. Throughout my fieldwork in 2008 and 2009, both groups talked about Hoyerswerda's problematic present; the concepts of "shrinkage" (*Schrumpfung*) and "no future" were their key epistemic tools. "Shrinkage" refers to the tremendous loss of inhabitants that has occurred since reunification and the subsequent considerable deconstruction of emptied apartment houses. "No future" refers to the way that this dramatic decline poses a real threat to the city's future survival. Both concepts construct a bleak vision of Hoyerswerda's future and remained largely uncontested throughout the 2000s. However, by mid-2009 they had lost much of their currency. How can anthropologists best study such a particular, and still very complex, change in local knowledge?

To answer this question, I use Sstorin-Chaikov's intriguing idea of ethnographic conceptualism. His conceptualist approach establishes a space in which to envision the ethnographer as intervening in the field, akin to a conceptual artist.<sup>1</sup> In the following sections, I focus on the epistemic side of such conceptual interventions. By "epistemic" I understand all aspects relating to the local economy of knowledge, such as particular narratives, dominant ideas, and contested meanings. In contrast, by "conceptual" I mean that fieldwork is deliberately constructed as an intervention. However, I play with the meaning presupposed for such interventions in art and, in extension, in anthropology: that the conceptual artist/ethnographer intervenes on a *conceptual* level. Indeed, to do fieldwork in knowledge conceptually is based on this double meaning of conceptual and, furthermore, changes our approach to local knowledge, which, as an object of inquiry, is considered to be inherently changeable/changing and contestable/contested. This dynamic, complex, and processual understanding is what allows us to intervene in local knowledge practices in the first place.

Given the dynamism of local knowledge practices, the ethnographic study and representation of local knowledge can only ever lag behind epistemic change

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Marcus (2008) for additional similarities between anthropology and conceptual art.

(Rabinow et al. 2008). For representational but also for methodological reasons it seems impossible to catch up with such transformations. In corresponding ethnographic cases it is hard to see fieldwork as a cumulative process, at the end of which we have “the full picture.” But that should not pose too big a problem. Rather, we should try to account for changes in knowledge as they happen, which in itself is a methodological quest. As such, I want to consider the conceptualist intervention as a mode of studying epistemic change and knowledge “in the making” in a more timely fashion. To do so, I introduce my fieldsite’s local economy of knowledge and present three cases through which I actively and publicly took part in local communal life. By analyzing these conceptual collaborations, I track how I came to understand some of the ways in which a majority of the Hoyerswerdians continuously altered their knowledge about themselves in a time of rapid change. To conceive this alteration of knowledge as an expression of “crisis” should not be read as an indication of local passiveness. On the contrary, as I point out above, I was impressed by the widespread commitment exhibited by inhabitants to their city. Therefore, crisis stands here for the productive dynamism in Hoyerswerda’s local economy of knowledge.

### **KNOWLEDGE IN CRISIS**

Hoyerswerda is a place where the failure of the postsocialist transformation has created an unprecedented decline. Two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the once proud industrial settlement of socialist Germany’s “miners and energy workers” had lost half its population. With only 35,000 inhabitants remaining, it has seen a third of its “vanguard,” industrially prefabricated apartment blocks demolished. The last houses to be constructed before reunification in 1990 were, less than two decades later, the first to be deconstructed. There is no end in sight for this process of demographic and physical decline. Since Hoyerswerda has changed from being Germany’s demographically youngest city to its oldest city, almost doubling the average age between 1970 (27 years) and 2013 (50-plus years), many of my informants fear that, once the older generations perish, the city will face yet another demographic implosion.

This accelerated change is made visible in the continuous abandonment and demolition of former apartments, schools, kindergartens, supermarkets, streets, and other parts of the urban infrastructure. However, it also poses problems other than for demography and urban planning. These problems include everyday relational and practical impediments linked to the holes in the city’s still surprisingly vibrant social fabric, technical repercussions affecting the urban collection and supply systems (due to an imbalance between built infrastructure and actual population), and financial shortages that make official investments virtually impossible. Of particular relevance for this article are the epistemic repercussions of shrinkage. By this I mean the many problems Hoyerswerda’s decline poses for understanding the city’s past, present, and future. These problems are understood and felt in different modes of knowing, which comprise—akin to Thrift (2008)—straightforward representational as well as affective ways of knowing the city. For instance, I discuss the public

production, dissemination, and contestation of images of Hoyerswerda's future as well as expressions of hopelessness, despair, or lethargy, which are so often evoked among Hoyerswerdians.

The very simple question of whether Hoyerswerda does, after all, have a future is the most prominent example of instances where conceptual tools fail to create meaning. As the pessimistic notions of "shrinkage" and "no future," which were commonly deployed during my fieldwork in most public debates, prevent the local citizenry from imagining their city's near future in any concrete terms, this temporal domain remained widely "evacuated" (Guyer 2007), particularly amongst members of the local government. When do new ideas emerge to fill this gap, and how can we study their emergence? With the help of my ethnographic material, I track the ongoing reappropriation of the city's future by several of its citizens. This epistemic reappropriation was achieved by Hoyerswerda's inhabitants beyond the dystopian narratives woven around its unforeseen decline. An interventional approach was particularly effective in allowing me to follow these reappropriations in the context of Hoyerswerda's current epistemic crisis.

The problem of how to access such a fieldsite's contested and complex economy of knowledge beyond the already questioned notion of a coherent, homogeneous "field" (Gupta and Ferguson 1997) has been posed by James Ferguson, who asks, "What happens to anthropological understanding in a situation where 'the natives' as well as the ethnographer lack a good understanding of what is going on around them?" (1999:19) In Hoyerswerda, too, people seem overwhelmed by the changes they experience. However, as I underlined above, they are constantly working on their understandings. Ferguson's own answers blur the "sharp line between the natives and the ethnographer, the locals and the foreigner, under such circumstances" (19), and I want to add a collaborative character to this blurring. Whilst we have to get used to "[d]oing fieldwork without the comfort of a bounded local community, working in the midst of rapid transformations" (20), I propose we should accompany our informants' efforts with our own attempts at making sense of current transformations.

Fieldsites in crisis often invite the active participation of the fieldworker. In my fieldsite, I—a German-born anthropologist from a British university—unexpectedly found myself in the position of being asked to comment on Hoyerswerda's present from my (perceived to be informed) outsider's perspective. This pushed at the limits of both collaborative research and traditional participant observation, creating new epistemic relations through intervention. In such forms of ethnographic conceptualism, the fieldworker not only partakes in the field but also potentially affects it by changing the timing of anthropological knowledge. S/he pursues its representation before post-fieldwork publications and thereby fosters epistemic collaborations through public "experiments in meaning making" (Basu and Macdonald 2007:4). In my own attempts, I intervened in local concerns about hope, change, and the future, about which "meaning" was publicly made and remade simultaneously by informants and ethnographer. These collaborations brought to the fore similarities between my informants' and my own (anthropological) hopes for "better" knowledge

(cf. Ringel 2012), which so often seem to be disappointed because we cannot keep up with the epistemic change happening in the world (Rabinow 2011; Rabinow et al. 2008).

At first glance, these interventions might be criticized for actively changing the field. However, since my informants were themselves continuously trying to make sense of present alterations, they appreciated the part I took in this complex process of self-affirmation. In addition, such interventions do not, in general, seem to be problematic for contemporary anthropology, as Low and Merry (2010:S222) observe (cf. Susser 2010:S232) and as the proliferation of "collaborative," "shared," "engaged," and "public" anthropology indicates. I advocate conceptual fieldwork as the ethnographic exploration and facilitation of the production and dissemination of our informants' knowledge. This includes the active production and dissemination of anthropological knowledge during fieldwork. In the following sections, I present three different sets of epistemic collaborations. Whilst discussing the social role and effects of anthropological knowledge (in the form of weekly newspaper columns and an anthropological research camp for local youth) and the epistemic (representational and nonrepresentational) change experienced at a local communal art project initiated by the ethnographer, I trace a set of intricate changes in the local knowledge economy. Their analysis allows me to explicate the citizens' reappropriation of Hoyerswerda's near future beyond the concepts of "shrinkage" and "no future." I conclude by proposing that a more committed and interventional approach to fieldwork in general and to studies of local knowledge in particular effectively enable such insights. This is particularly important in times of uncertainty and change.

Furthermore, although thoroughly committed to my informants' concerns and problems, my interventions are not primarily driven by the increasing hope that anthropological knowledge can "have an impact" and "make a difference" (cf. Low and Merry 2010) in activist, political, or revolutionary terms. Despite combining some of their elements ("public" and "collaborative"), my interventions differ from recently fashionable modes of engagement with one's informants. What has come to be seen as "collaborative anthropology" (cf. Fluehr-Lobban 2008); "public anthropology" (Dietzsch 2010); "public sociology" (Burawoy 2005); "engaged anthropology," "participatory action research," or "collaborative ethnography" (Low and Merry 2010) all have their own advantages and disadvantages, which—given the diversity of these approaches—would be impossible to discuss here. However, proposing yet another variant shall enable us to facilitate the explication of knowledge in particular epistemic collaborations as an essential methodological part of fieldwork (cf. Sstorin-Chaikov, introduction, this issue). This variant helps to establish a committed *conceptual* relationship between informants and ethnographer as "epistemic partners" (cf. Holmes and Marcus 2005), whose difference in knowledge practices are not overcome but remain characterized by differing methods, modes, and aims of knowledge production. Accordingly, conceptual fieldwork does not depart substantially from the contexts of ethnography. As much as the conceptual artist, the conceptual fieldworker draws things into an ethnographic context (cf. Hastrup 1990:51). In an urban setting like Hoyerswerda, such publicly mediated collaborations

also follow Low's observation that "a concern with the public realm is integral to the conduct of 21<sup>st</sup>-century anthropology" (2011:390). With these aspects in mind, I discuss three different examples of conceptual fieldwork in more depth.

### **CONCEPTUAL FIELDWORK IN REPRESENTATIONS: WEEKLY ANTHROPOLOGICAL NEWSPAPER COLUMNS**

I started writing the (approximately 400-word) columns in the local newspaper after four months of fieldwork. The editor-in-chief and the publisher requested the combination of local topics and an anthropological perspective. To them, "anthropological" meant both "exotic" and "external." My first columns comprised general topics, such as social relations in times of shrinkage, or anecdotal details such as local culinary and linguistic trends among local youth. The intended anthropological twist usually paired local phenomena with some theoretical problem or ethnographic comparison. Later columns took a more informed and critical stance: questioning the general concepts with which people from Hoyerswerda tried to make sense of the city's present, such as globalization, growth, shrinkage, quality of life, urbanity, mobility, and change. Both strategies were intended to exoticize the local by putting it into a broader context and offering an "outsider's" perspective. The comparison of the constitution of kinship relations through shared food consumption in Malaysia and the social function of shared meals in a declining city is only one example of the invocation of such an external perspective.

Already the writing process allowed several insights, of which I present only two here. First, in all of the columns I intended to contribute to public debates on Hoyerswerda's present. However, it is retrospectively telling that many columns entailed what Sara Ahmed has rightfully criticized as the tendency amongst social scientists to retreat in their critique of contemporary transformations to providing things social. As she convincingly describes, the urge to putting social "glue back into communities" (Ahmed 2008:122) entails an unreflected ethical response to a situation presumably in crisis. Still, through formulating my own (presumptive) hopeful suggestions, I was able to share and understand my informants' widespread hope that the realization of a sense of togetherness and belonging might be the first step out of the common pessimistic and lethargic reactions to shrinkage. Writing the columns thereby increased my own self-reflexivity regarding the knowledge anthropology has to offer. My second example is more ethnographic. The usual procedure before publication was that I wrote drafts of three columns, had Heike, a good friend and temporary host mother, correct them, and then sent the amended drafts to Mirko, a local journalist. Mirko added his feedback, and after final amendments the columns were once more adjusted to fit the newspaper's space constraints. The feedback was telling: Heike usually wanted the columns to be more critical; I ought to have named particular culprits, like an investigative journalist, or changed particular phrases since they were not straightforward enough. For her, the columns should have an impact and incite concrete change. However, she also asked whether my interventions were up to academic standards—whether they were changing the

field or still allowed for some degree of “objectivity.” Second, she predicted, like Mirko, that if a specific argument was not welcomed by a group or person, these people could refuse future cooperation or—even worse—actively agitate against my research, publicly or behind my back. Our epistemic collaborations therefore helped to make explicit some of my informants’ ideas about the politics of knowledge in Hoyerswerda, specific political fissures and partitions, and particular hopes and fears that go along with the public dissemination of knowledge. My columns’ publication heralded similar effects.

Overall, I published fifty-two columns under the title “Seen from the outside” in the *Hoyerswerdaer Tageblatt* (Hoyerswerdian Daily), the local section of the *Sächsische Zeitung* (Saxon News). The four-to-eight-page local daily section covered the news relevant to Hoyerswerda and its immediate surroundings. As elsewhere in Germany, this particular public arena is seen to have great influence on communal life. With subscriptions increasing despite the shrinkage, the newspaper continues to have a powerful voice in the city’s public sphere. Older generations and the current local elites, in particular, use the *Tageblatt* as a public platform. Politicians, entrepreneurs, and sociocultural club representatives court well-known journalists in search of (better) public representation. Articles published in the *Tageblatt* can cause anger, disappointment, relief, and hope depending on their content, tone, and presumed efficacy. Some are much talked about in everyday conversation, ranging from expressions of agreement to the detection of conspiracies and the production of rumors regarding particular headlines, photos, phrasings, or arguments. The editors’ choice of what is represented, and how, is of enormous relevance—with presumed existential consequences for whoever is (not) depicted.

For instance, the local schools’ competition for a declining numbers of pupils is strongly linked to local media. Teachers and headmasters believe that their institutional survival depends on their school’s representation in the local newspaper. Reporting on a competing school’s big sporting success just before the registration period for new students regularly caused outrage. Such affective outbursts can be understood as a sign of the vitality of the local public sphere and of the power the local newspaper and its journalists are seen to have, but more so it underlines a local belief in the efficacy of public(ized) knowledge. In turn, this also explains why most teachers, but also business (wo)men and politicians, learn to improve their media skills and nourish their relations to those who can represent them in the public arena. On entering this minefield, the risk of provoking resentment, spoiling hopes, or hurting others’ feelings also applies to the intervening ethnographer.

In anxious expectation of such repercussions, I ended up censoring myself a great deal while writing the columns. Although most of the feedback was encouraging, typical critical responses were statements like, “But Mr. Ringel, why didn’t you mention X and only talked about Y?” More extreme critical reactions came from a group of local neo-Nazis, who put me on their list of “main enemies” after I made some critical remarks on the sale of right-wing clothing in the local shopping center. The self-censorship I applied after such critical reactions extrapolated local power

dynamics and lines of confrontation.<sup>2</sup> However, it was also compounded by another local epistemic peculiarity: my informants' troubled relationship to (mis)representations of their hometown in translocal media. Hence I took greater care in representing the city or particular aspects, groups, and persons associated with it. The comparison to outside journalists' negative representations was constantly lurking in the background. These representations were usually debunked in public and personal comments through accusations of misperception and misrepresentation.

Such local reactions show how the dissemination of anthropological knowledge (although in a very different form) incited, like conceptual art, feedback—both positive and negative, but always telling. Also, they followed a certain structural logic. The practices of writing and reading columns built upon and reinforced the division between internal (informant) and external (observer/ethnographer) perspectives. They created a sense of the unity of the field vis-à-vis its commenting observer, performatively unifying the city of Hoyerswerda and its inhabitants. The anthropologist, granted with external expertise and representational powers, provided a foil for social self-reflection by addressing all Hoyerswerdians as a social whole. Retired architect Peter Biernath detected the columns' impact in relating people who would usually emphasize their differences. As he put it, in a conversation amongst architect friends, "with him [the ethnographer] ... we seem to talk more about certain topics, and especially more with one another." For Biernath, the columns sparked hope by inciting a shared sense of belonging and a (re)new(ed) form of self-confidence through self-reflection.

Indeed, for many readers, the columns quickly became a familiar invitation for self-reflection. Many people described debating them with their families over breakfast or with friends and colleagues at work. Some columns were applauded, others critically assessed; sometimes, they were accused of being too complicated. At other times, people stopped me randomly on the street to tell me "Good job, Mr. Ringel!" or "Finally somebody puts this in the paper!" In particular, the more politically charged columns created feelings of satisfaction: some grievances had at last been openly voiced. However, my public advocacy against incoherent deconstruction strategies or for a different approach to Hoyerswerda's GDR past was only acceptable because I could not be easily positioned in one of the local sociopolitical factions. This gave me the freedom to publicly ponder unrealistic marketing concepts, plan the exemplary rescue-purchase of an abandoned block in Hoyerswerda's socialist-era New City, or playfully dream about grand goodbye parties for every single person leaving Hoyerswerda.

Some columns provoked letters that were ultimately published in the local newspaper. For instance, my column on "forced migration"—a remark on Hoyerswerda's embeddedness in the global political economy—became the subject of a letter from

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<sup>2</sup> In another example, the federal emissary who had been sent to restructure the nearby lignite industrial complex after reunification asked me for a meeting in response to one of my columns. He wanted to rectify my, as he put it, "one-sided account" of the early 1990s structural adjustment period and reproached my general remarks for being biased (and indeed the complex's former GDR director had been my main informant for the column).

the head of a leftist organization, in which he used this idea for a general critique of capitalism. He suggested that I should write my whole PhD thesis on this topic. Other columns were cited in public speeches, for example by the mayor who quoted one of my remarks about current urban marketing strategies in the city council. Intervening publicly, however, led to considerable confusion about my position, as I was suddenly also “the guy from the newspaper.” Several people asked me to write about their social club or workplace, providing them with some much sought-after public relations. Blurring the distinction between journalist and anthropologist also made some of my informants wary at times—“You won’t put this in the newspaper, will you?”—fearing the representational power of the local newspaper, which I, in turn, came to understand through publishing the columns.

Another common feedback was the expression of surprise: “I have never seen Hoyerswerda like this before.” Integrated into the local knowledge economy, the column’s external perspective, importantly, also helped to reappropriate the city’s near future by inciting new intellectual grip on the process of shrinkage—or at least so I hoped. By naming particular aspects of shrinkage, the columns publicly created new objects of knowledge, transforming the city’s changes into a public object of thought open to public critique. Hoyerswerda as a whole was turned into one such object, presented to its citizens for practical and conceptual reconsideration and resulting in intensified conceptual work. The columns, indeed, partook in epistemic change. This shared dialogical process is one example of what I call “epistemic collaboration,” through which informants and ethnographer cocreate knowledge about Hoyerswerda in order to make sense of its fragmented present.

However, the publication of my thoughts also made me accountable for my knowledge. The personal and professional exposure this required made me vulnerable. Such vulnerability proved productive. Publicly taking a stance towards the field and its problems during fieldwork helped to clarify and—for the first time—to explicate my emergent knowledge whilst simultaneously rendering my informants’ knowledge ethnographically accessible. Such early explication might also help to circumvent our informants’ disappointment regarding our *post-fieldwork* representations (Mosse 2006; Dietzsch 2010)<sup>3</sup>. Although only one of many methodological strategies one

<sup>3</sup> Ina Dietzsch (2010) has reflected upon the problems of her own “public anthropology” in the East German town of Wittenberge. A famous German weekly newspaper had published a report on the presumed outcomes of the elaborate social scientific and artistic project she was part of. The report sparked the bitter disappointment of Dietzsch’s informants, who felt misrepresented, fearing very real negative repercussions emerging from that article. They accused her and her colleagues of having “made an experiment with 19,000 people not thinking about the consequences” and of having “destroyed financial capital which is so desperately needed in this town.” Indeed, who would invest in a city with a bad reputation? As Dietzsch describes it: “we found … a gated public sphere of a community wounded by out-migration, loss and consecutive failure, dominated by public distrust.” As a result, the “project, originally intended as one of dialogue, soon appeared as a battlefield of more than two interest groups competing for intellectual authority.” As David Mosse (2006) shows, his anthropological representations also resulted in anger, disappointment, and conflicts among his informants. This does not mirror the “widespread skepticism about the efficacy of knowledge” (Miyazaki and Riles 2005:320), as seemingly typical for societies affected by the

could follow, writing and disseminating the columns allowed me a last and most important insight, which I would not have gained without them: a deeper understanding of the role of knowledge and its presumed and actual agency in the local knowledge economy, which entails the appreciation of local hopes for salvational knowledge.

Angry about recent decisions made by the city council and local government regarding Hoyerswerda's future and the distribution of public funding, I used the final three columns to release my disappointment. In harsh terms, I publicly criticized the local government for not having any visions, plans, or concepts for the city's future, for not working transparently enough, and for malevolence and nepotism. This led to a last unexpected outcome. Due to the absence of any critical response from the accused, I realized that—as many local activists—I had naively thought it was possible to change the attitudes, knowledge, and perspectives of those officially in charge of the city's future by providing them with the “right knowledge.” As a result, I felt as disappointed and helpless as many of my friends, who had continuously tried to convince councilors and the administrative elite with better arguments and their own heartfelt worries and concerns. More profound knowledge did not help; internal fissures and external political and economic constraints prevented the hoped-for changes, and these officials indeed lacked real power to change things. The hope in the efficacy of knowledge, which lurked behind others' and my public interventions, became methodologically accessible through my own disappointment. To understand this (false) hope proved most relevant for gaining insight into the local reappropriation of the city's near future, which is the focus of the remaining sections. As shown in this section, the impact of publicly disseminated knowledge is complex and diffuse—and thus deserves a different methodological approach. The next two sections shift attention from representational knowledge concerns of conceptual fieldwork to issues of method and affect. The first section discusses the public exposure of ethnography as methodology—and the critique and (self-) reflection this inspired. The second section focuses on hope and scrutinizes its affective role in local knowledge production.

## **CONCEPTUAL FIELDWORK IN METHOD: INSTRUCTIONS FOR FIELDWORK AT HOME**

Whereas the previous example was concerned with the distribution of explicated (anthropological) knowledge, this section concentrates on the public explication of the methodology of fieldwork. AnthroCamp08,<sup>4</sup> an anthropological research camp for local youth, posed questions about the production and value of anthropological knowledge about Hoyerswerda. It was an exercise in teaching and experimenting with anthropological ideas and, foremost, with our discipline's defining method of

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postindustrial crisis—and common in our own anthropological knowledge practices. Rather, the right knowledge (whether general reputation or scientific representation) is seen to potentially have the power to solve problems—just as wrong knowledge can hinder progress. Similar ethnographically relevant risks transpired in my representational practices.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.kufa-hoyerswerda.de/anthro-camp-2008-2.html>.

fieldwork. Paralleling conceptual art, I laid out this method as an instruction for self-made fieldwork research projects. In the AnthroCamp, novice young anthropologists were encouraged to explore their hometown cum temporary fieldsite ethnographically and collaboratively. They produced exciting insights into their city while publicly testing the anthropological method used for this production of knowledge.

In October 2008, we moved into four abandoned apartments in WK 10 (*Wohnkomplex*—“residential complex”—no. 10), the youngest but soon to be demolished district in Hoyerswerda’s New City. “We” were sixteen young persons from Hoyerswerda and its surroundings, aged between fourteen and twenty-two, a social worker from the city’s main sociocultural center KuFa (“KulturFabrik”/“Cultural Factory”), the social worker’s apprentice, and myself. The idea for this anthropological youth camp had emerged earlier that year as a combination of the locally established format of youth camps and my own interest in doing interventional work. The KuFa, my partner institution, annually organizes similar camps. This time, the KuFa’s social worker Steffi and I had decided to conduct a research camp. Our moving in was already quite exceptional: these empty houses were not usually opened for temporary reoccupations, let alone to function as a research base. The leadership of the housing cooperative had fortunately agreed to this temporary squatting.

After moving in, the camp opened with a party entailing the premiere of an audiobook about Hoyerswerda (starring an ominous anthropologist endlessly scribbling in his notebook) by a young Hoyerswerdian artist. The next day began with an anthropological tour through Hoyerswerda’s New City. I presented the city’s history and its current problems, pointing out many social details and telling common stories of decline and deconstruction. I tried to establish a perspective in which not numbers (for example, the 7,000 “residential units”/ *Wohneinheiten* deconstructed since 1990) but the people affected by these processes took center stage (such as in the conflicts between the local government’s and the local housing association’s deconstruction strategies or in the everyday life of people waiting for the official announcement of their house’s demolition). We cycled through the former socialist New City’s residential complexes WK 10, 9, and 8, took a shortcut through WK 1 and 2, and ended our tour on top of Hoyerswerda’s tallest building in the New City’s center, taking a detached look over the city, which had become the young participants’ temporary fieldsite.

The tour was followed by an introduction to anthropology’s history and methodology. I presented photos of random places, objects, institutions, and political graffiti in Hoyerswerda, which I interpreted from an anthropological standpoint in order to describe possible research avenues into the city’s complex present. At the end of this day, the participants formed four research groups with their own research projects. All projects exhibited a very committed relation to their hometown: Inge, Annegret, Sophie, Johanna, and Anna had chosen to study “Poverty in Hoyerswerda”; a group of young anarchist men investigated the topic “Fear in Hoyerswerda”; “The Role of Alcohol among Hoyerswerdian Youth” was researched by Lisa, Jan, Phillip, and Max; and finally, one of my host sisters and two of her friends dedicated themselves to studying “Life in WK 10.” The following three days were spent in research: interviews, archival work, and participant observation.

The young researchers enthusiastically stormed out every morning to meet people, help out in the local soup kitchen, spend time in WK 10's last remaining kindergarten, talk to the police and city officials, or chat with local teenagers about their alcohol consumption. They all came back to the camp for lunch, only to quickly leave again in order to meet more people, reconvene their discussions, and write down their fieldnotes. Some had extremely encouraging encounters. Others were baffled by the new insights into lives lived in poverty in their hometown or by other people's fears and perception of Hoyerswerda's political youth culture. A few experienced limits they had not expected: the anarchist participants were quite angry about the fact that their position in the political field would prevent them from talking to particular people. When they arrived back for dinner, there was an endless mixture of things to talk about, and a silence stemming from bewilderment at the complexity of what had just been encountered. The project seemed like a fast-forwarded version of professional anthropology, from the conceptualization of the research project to the material's publication.

On the fifth day, the already extensive material was analyzed and prepared for the sixth day's public presentation of the research results. Most groups had more notes than expected, causing disagreement as to what to present. The presentations of the ambitious projects turned out to be very impressive: all groups put great effort into elaborate presentations, each located in one of the apartments' empty rooms. The "WK 10 group" had positioned some rubble of deconstructed houses in a former nursery and projected photos on one of the walls. The remaining walls were decorated with paintings of apartment houses filled with quotes, ideas, and analysis. Two adjacent blocks contrasted the internal and the external perception of life in WK 10. Another building listed potential reasons for the residential complex's deterioration. The "fear group" had drawn a big map of "zones of fear" in Hoyerswerda. The "poverty group" tried to chart different aspects of poverty in a former bedroom. The "alcohol group" had painted the floor and the walls of a former living room with their remarks on stereotypes about youth and insights into their actual alcohol consumption. The researchers presented these little exhibitions in guided tours to the approximately two hundred visitors.

The many visitors were surprised by the young scientists' research results. They had not expected such a critical and complex approach to their hometown and its current problems. Many visitors confessed they had previously not known much about the lifeworlds of poor people in Hoyerswerda or thought about the rarely addressed topic of fear. They also had not considered the problems people face while living in the abandoned complex. Getting visitors to come to WK 10 was in itself an achievement, and the camp provided, quite literally, new conceptual spaces for participants and visitors. However, this time it was the more general question of how to approach (rather than just to represent) the city's present. Mirko, the journalist mentioned above, reported daily from the camp, and—as the enthusiastic reactions to the publication of the research results in the local newspaper proved—the camp, as much as anthropology's methodology, was successful. In the following week the young researchers were even asked to take the housing cooperative's leadership and a group of city and county councilors on a tour through the camp.

Whilst the project inspired—similar to the newspaper columns—the production and dissemination of new knowledge about the city, it also proved to others and to me the efficacy of anthropology's methodology. The insights and perspectives it produced were much appreciated. One stood out most prominently: for the participants and the audience, focusing on human beings with their affective, social, and cultural concerns and needs had changed the usually quantitative approach to the city's problematic present. Indeed, as one visitor had it, the project added "the social" to their understanding of the process of shrinkage, thereby allowing the contestation (or replenishing) of the dominant quantitative public discourse on shrinkage with different perspectives, insights, and ideas. It thereby partook in the process of the reappropriation of the city's near future by shifting the terms in which this future is imagined and negotiated. Lastly, AnthroCamp08 also made a particular academic approach to the world explicit, opening it up for scrutiny, thereby establishing yet another form of "epistemic collaboration" between researcher(s) and informants. The method I used for my own fieldwork had been rendered explicit, making this explication part of the fieldwork process. Moreover, it revealed fascinating insights into the young participants' and their audiences' knowledges about their hometown (what they did and did *not* know). It also led to another intervention during fieldwork, an artful and less anthropological, but even more conceptual one. This last example generated a range of insights into hope and nonrepresentational aspects of the local knowledge economy, because of which the term "epistemic collaboration" is to be understood in affective terms, too.

### CONCEPTUAL FIELDWORK IN AFFECT: THE HOPE OF ART

In the same block's other three entrances, comprising altogether thirty-six flats, the PaintBlock project (Malplatte<sup>5</sup>) took place in June 2009. I initiated this project after experiencing the AnthroCamp participants' creativity and excitement. It took a long time to recruit allies and potential sponsors. Finally, Hoyerswerda's youth parliament, the housing cooperative Lebensräume e.V., and the KuFa opened this soon to be demolished space for the wider public for two weeks. The idea was simple: before these apartments were demolished, everybody was invited to fill them in a grand communal effort "with art, life, and laughter," as a friend put it. As with the columns or in the AnthroCamp, new "knowledge" was to be collaboratively produced about the city's present, though this time in the language of art, affect, and emotion. Through these art practices and the many experiences and affects they fostered, the public discourse on shrinkage was once again made explicit and thereby—if ever so slightly—transformed.

Participants could choose any of the abandoned rooms, stairways, or balconies. The façade overlooking a busy federal road became a popular canvas. The organizers provided paints, brushes, ladders, buckets, and everything else needed for transforming this empty block, including electricity, logistics, and main facilities. More than 300

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.malplatte-hoyerswerda.de>.

Hoyerswerdians, mostly teenagers but also several pensioners, worked in these empty rooms, creating very different works of art, which were then seen by more than 2,000 visitors. Before its final deconstruction, this former apartment block was painted all over, inside and outside. Disposable space was temporarily reappropriated (literally: several of the young artists had previously lived in these flats) and bid a final farewell. Instead of a passive endurance of the process of shrinkage, these art practices stimulated mostly a new affective stance towards the temporary artists' hometown; it at least temporarily reappropriated the (public discourse on the) city's present and future.

My journalist friends provide a poignant example. The four of us—Mirko, Hagen, Jo, and I—took over one of the flats on the sixth floor in the block's second entrance. Three of us started a project called "Lydia." We had found that name written in big colorful letters on the door of the flat's nursery. After entering, we faced the residues of a young life once lived here. The wallpaper, showing wild horses in a prairie countryside, particularly struck us. We never found out who Lydia was, where she had moved to, or what she had experienced in this room. We just started inventing our own narrative, exhibiting little artifacts found on site or brought with us as traces of her life with attached made-up stories about a girl growing up in Hoyerswerda's WK 10. We assembled stories on the basis of our journalistic and anthropological knowledge, with many moving details collected throughout our professional and personal engagement with these places. Our intention was very simple: to tell a possible story of only one of the many former inhabitants whose previous living spaces were so rigorously annihilated in the course of shrinkage and deconstruction. All of us began feeling close to the room, the flat, and the house. As many other participants observed, one quickly starts to relate to these abandoned spaces, detecting remainders of different times and questioning the otherwise faceless changes taking place in Hoyerswerda. Throughout the two weeks, we kept adding artifacts and stories and often talked about our imaginary Lydia. Hagen and Mirko then began another project. As their own way of saying goodbye to the PaintBlock, they filled the flat's balcony with dozens of balloons, for which they had attached a net to the balcony's exterior. Whilst cutting off the net on the last day of our project, they remarked that the building now was to exhale these balloons as if murmuring its own farewell. In the language of art, we had collaboratively produced a different stance towards the city's inescapable decline and deconstruction, a surprisingly hopeful one. This included giving voice to a soon to be demolished apartment block.

Most of the other pieces made references to the current situation and Hoyerswerda's future. In the third entrance on the second floor, a young woman in her late teens painted a wall blue and sprinkled it with photos of Hoyerswerda. The centerpiece was a fable about destruction, depicting a nightingale being eaten by two greedy ravens who rule over the world by destroying everything alive. At the bottom, she added the quote (in English) from a rather unhopeful 2004 song by the American singer-songwriter Elliott Smith: "A distorted reality is now a necessity to be free." In the first entrance, middle-aged friends had critically commented on the massive and failed destruction of the formerly socialist New City's center. Countless

little purple cardboard figures, two inches tall, ran through the staircases and flats asking the typical tourist's question, "Excuse me, what is the way to the city center?" In even more ironic terms, they depicted the center itself in the form of an old-fashioned potted plant hanging from the ceiling of a former living room, with two miniature plastic howling wolves in it. Two ten-year-old boys were occupying the flat across the stairwell. For five consecutive days, they painted several huge—as one of boys called them—“*Abreißbagger*” (his mispronunciation of *Abrißbagger*, demolition dredgers or bulldozers).

Recurrent themes apart from Hoyerswerda itself were (no) hope and (no) future. One artist cited song lyrics by the band Good Charlotte (in English), ending with the bleak quote: “The world is black / And hearts are cold / And there is no hope.” In contrast, a young friend wrote a German sentence next to a little anarchist manga warrior: “Who doesn't dare to dream, does not have any strength to fight.” On the opposite wall, one of my host mothers posted a big photograph of the Braugasse building, the much fought-for abandoned building of the former sociocultural center in Hoyerswerda's Old City, expressing her hopes for its reconstruction by attaching pictures of its former life, cheery quotations, and little “wishing scarves” to its fence (as had been done at the real building in an act of public protest). The many paintings of the city and its deconstruction were accompanied by artful treatments of more general topics (capitalism, change, migration—all indirectly related to the local situation) and colorful outbursts of creativity. One artist-participant ironically remarked in big red letters: “*So'n Aufriß für'n Abriß!*” (“That much construction for deconstruction!”)

Some artists came every day, others only joined for a couple of hours. The project saw the premiere of a self-produced movie, parties, workshops, and meetings of several social clubs that wanted to show their support for the project. School classes from primary and secondary schools, as well as a large group of mentally and physically disabled people, made excursions to the building, establishing this otherwise neglected abandoned apartment block as a public place for the exchange of affect and knowledge about the city and life in it. The event closed with another colorful outburst. After some short official speeches, the awards of the prizes for the best artworks (including the Lydia and the city center projects), as well as one of the two official prizes the project won (the NOVUM-Award from the Saxon Youth Foundation), ten participants dripped leftover paint from the second entrance's sixth floor, while a larger crowd threw water balloons filled with paint towards that emerging rainbow façade. This expression of joy differed enormously from the expected melancholy of the PaintBlock's demolition.

After the entrances were closed, the house remained in its colorful dress for a few more months, proudly exhibiting the famous quote from Goethe's *Faust*—“*Verweile Doch!*” (short for “Stay, thou art so beautiful”—as a last hopeful exclamation. Before the final deconstruction, a catalogue was assembled in the form of a booklet of postcards of artworks. Further, a short documentary about the project

was posted on the project's website and on YouTube.<sup>6</sup> The aftermath of this project consisted of many surprisingly nostalgia-free talks and memories, discussions, newspaper articles, and visual material and, as many participants observed, of a more positive stance towards their hometown—a conceptual or affective shift in knowing Hoyerswerda. To their surprise, the demolition did not hurt as much as expected. Rather, the experience of having used the block one last time made the demolition process—otherwise experienced as bleak, senseless, inevitable, and disempowering—bearable.

The fact that this project took place here, in Hoyerswerda, proved to many that (as quoted in the catalog) "Hoyerswerda is far from being a ghost town!" The often depicted "I ❤ HY" in the block had shown some efficacy. As the mayor said in his introduction: "In Hoyerswerda, there was and is an especially creative spirit of art. And this spirit will survive the hard times of the demographic ruptures—of that I am certain." By "the spirit of art" he also meant the city's spirit, the hopes, lust for life, and creativity of its inhabitants, which were so colorfully expressed in the PaintBlock. Times of decline usually produce less optimistic and less hopeful statements. How could a communal art project create such a change regarding the participants' relationship to the future? One answer to this question is found in the distinctive form of knowing used to make sense of the city's present and future: nonrepresentational, experiential, and hopeful. Artful knowledge (practice) seems especially well suited to this format. To close the circle, they are also for these reasons—amongst others—the inspiration for ethnographic conceptualism and conceptual fieldwork.

Several decades ago, Ernst Bloch ([1959] 1986) drew attention to the utopian function of art. For him, "To write, to compose, to paint. To read, to listen, to view. These are human acts of hope" (in Zipes 1988:xii). Even beyond canonical masterpieces, art is a matter of incubation, inspiration, and explication of the future. The language of art allows us to reappropriate the future in different, more affective and imaginative registers; art practices become "a laboratory ... of implemented possibilities" (in Zipes and Mecklenburg 1988:214) and produce "knowledge with the help of imagination" (222). In the PaintBlock, this practical and shared experience of imagination helped to change participants' relationships and approaches to the process of shrinkage and their hometown's present and future. In this communal art project, participants were once again envisioning a hopeful future for themselves in Hoyerswerda. The concreteness and experiential immanence of art practices heralded the future into the present—and allowed, at least temporarily, a leap forward beyond their previously pessimistic relationships to the future. More so than the many and sometimes dubious public representations of Hoyerswerda's future, these events proved to participants that a certain quality of life is possible despite the process of decline—as a friend had it in one of his remarks on the project: "that you can always achieve something here!" ("dass man hier immer noch was schaffen kann!")—and that the future cannot be as bleak as it was previously imagined. Frederic Jameson described utopian enclaves as offering "the space in which new wish images of the

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3ijj7-Cb9Y>.

social can be elaborated and experimented on" (2005:15–16). Conceptual fieldwork interventions helped in creating one such enclave. Insights into the local economy of (affect and) knowledge were, again, crucial for my own work since the PaintBlock allowed me to study a sense of hope that I had not previously encountered.

As this article's chronicle of my conceptual fieldwork interventions has shown, with their help I was able to follow a process that was happening in the city's economy of knowledge but that I was not able to point out without them: the reappropriation of the process of shrinkage and the city's future. My conceptual projects were part of this process; they constituted for me a new stance to the city's conflicted present. As I have shown, they proved particularly helpful when studying epistemic change in a shrinking fieldsite. Let me close with a remark on why such methodological considerations are relevant at this moment in the discipline's history. I will use this remark for a final reconsideration of the *timing* of anthropological knowledge.

## CONCLUSION: THE TIMING OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

The discipline of anthropology has gone through many alterations of its own knowledge practices, "looking for new forms of representation, subjects, theories—and new methods" (Miyazaki 2004:135). Most of these remain focused on the representation and dissemination of abstracted knowledge after fieldwork. In *Writing Culture*, Clifford and Marcus (1986) initially proclaimed a "crisis of representation" and argued for a self-reflexive reconsideration of our disciplinary writing practices (cf. Rabinow et al. 2008:24ff). However, as Marcus has recently observed: "*Writing Culture* had two important effects: to make explicit the inadequacy of standard forms of ethnographic writing in dealing with the realities of fieldwork and, therefore, to encourage a critique of the actual process of research itself, of fieldwork. The former effect occurred, in excess, from the 1980s on; the latter has hardly occurred at all" (in Rabinow et al. 2008:24–25). In this article I have tried to rectify the last point by providing three different examples of conceptual fieldwork—in representational knowledge, methodology, and affect—and discussing their methodological and epistemic implications.

Recently, Marcus and some colleagues have similarly engaged with new forms of anthropological knowledge production, but only partially during fieldwork (Rabinow et al. 2008). Ideas for a "new design for anthropology" in the form of collaborative conceptual laboratories still approached these experiments as exchanges amongst anthropologists *before* and between anthropologists and their informants *after* fieldwork. In fact, these authors seem to question the very possibility of epistemic collaborations. They ask whether their approach—the "anthropology of the contemporary," which focuses on contemporary experts and elites—could be applied to any informant or fieldsite (Rabinow et al. 2008:73–74, 76ff). My ethnographic material indicates that conceptual fieldwork can help to break down the distinction between expert and non-expert informant, or professional and lay knowledge practitioner. As I have shown throughout this paper, this latter distinction includes

the widely held presumed difference between knowledgeable informant and unknowledgeable anthropologist *during* fieldwork and its reversal *after* fieldwork, when the anthropologist reclaims her epistemic and representational authority. Conceptual fieldwork, on the other hand, takes the contemporariness of fieldwork seriously—and uses it for methodological purposes.

Paul Rabinow, in particular, has argued for intensified dialogues with our informants, propounding an acceleration of the finalization of anthropological representations of knowledge after fieldwork. Since my approach to conceptual fieldwork takes place *during* fieldwork, the traditional “being there” (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009) and the experientially and emotionally rich immersion into our informants’ lives (Davis and Spencer 2010) includes more than a passive anthropological presence in the field: namely, active interference in the local economy of knowledge. It proposes interventional anthropological representations of knowledge during fieldwork and as a method. The effects of such interventions, as my ethnographic material suggests, can entail concrete ethnographic insights into the epistemic makeup and dynamics of a fieldsite in crisis. The epistemic change I tried to render accessible through my conceptual interventions entailed the local citizenry’s representational and affective reappropriation of hope and the future.

In the many increasingly unstable and inchoate fields we find ourselves working in, anthropologists should actively partake in processes of knowledge formation in order to shed new ethnographic and theoretical light on the role knowledge plays in moments of transition. For that, we can chose as our privileged analytical objects “conceptual shifts and movements” (Rabinow et al. 2008:78) and, by creating a lab situation in the field, combine our own and our informants’ epistemic work. There is however a danger in such collaborations: “finding collaborative alliances within the field of study can easily slip into being a sort of adviser or taking up the role improvised for the ethnographer” (Holmes and Marcus 2005:249). However, my conceptual fieldwork interventions built up epistemic collaborations whilst refraining from a “widespread desire for some … activist dimension to ethnographic work” (Rabinow et al. 2008:78).

Instead, I came to understand conceptual fieldwork as operating experimentally in the contemporary of the fieldwork process. It actively partook in various dynamic local epistemic processes and attempted to create, as Marcus has it, a “place for the discussion of the yet tentative, inconclusive,” for “thought experiments in need of being tested, discussed, reworked, or refuted” (Rabinow et al. 2008:115). With particular formats of conceptual fieldwork we can “find a form adequate to that process, in which the fluidity and tentativeness of things predominate” (115). Conceptual fieldwork invites anthropologists to a committed form of commentary and explorative knowledge practices, to partake and intervene in the local production of meaning. Methodologically, then, this article has shown that the right *timing* for public anthropological interventions includes the time *during* fieldwork, in which we should try to stay tuned to epistemic change as it happens, even if that involves our own interventions in it.

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## **ЭПИСТЕМИЧЕСКОЕ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО В КОНТЕКСТЕ ПЕРЕМЕН: О КОНЦЕПТУАЛЬНОМ ПОЛЕВОМ ИССЛЕДОВАНИИ И ВРЕМЕННОМ ИЗМЕРЕНИИ АНТРОПОЛОГИЧЕСКОГО ЗНАНИЯ**

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Чтобы изучить методологический потенциал экспериментальной полевой работы, я привожу три примера концептуального вмешательства в моем поле – немецком городе Хойерсверда, численность которого уменьшается самыми высокими темпами в стране. Моими этнографическими инструментами стали еженедельные антропологические колонки в местной газете, антропологический лагерь для местной молодежи и общественный арт-проект на территории многоквартирного дома социалистической эпохи, подлежащего скорому сносу. Эти три инструмента могут быть подвержены критике, так как они вмешиваются в поле и изменяют его. Однако и без вмешательства мои информанты непрерывно корректируют собственные понятия и нарративы в попытке осмысливания нынешнего стремительного темпа изменений. Я активно участвовал в локальных дебатах по поводу города, и моей целью было превращение этнографического вмешательства из необходимого зла в методологическую добродетель. Так как моя концептуальная полевая работа была исключительно полезна при изучении эпистемических изменений, я предлагаю пересмотреть временное измерение антропологического знания. Я выступаю за более современную стратегию его презентации «в режиме реального времени» и за расширение и облегчение эпистемического сотрудничества в процессе полевого исследования.

**Ключевые слова:** локальное знание; изменение; уменьшение городов; методология; концептуальное полевое исследование; эпистемическое сотрудничество; временное измерение