

# Arts–Research Collaboration: Reflections on Collaboration as Creative Method

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## Abstract

What is arts–research collaboration and how does it work? What does arts–research collaboration as method for qualitative inquiry do? What is the effect of collaboration on creative practice and academic research? Drawing on a collaboration between an anthropologist and an artist, this article addresses a surprising lack of qualitative inquiry into collaboration between creative practitioners and academic researchers. By recounting how the authors developed and used collaboration as method, the article identifies and analyzes underpinning qualities of how they worked together through arts–research activities. It advances existing debate by agitating for more theoretically grounded accounts of collaboration, including those that take a processual view on making and creativity to argue for considering collaboration, itself, to be materials from which creative practice and outputs emerge.

## Keywords

collaboration, methodologies, arts based inquiry, methods of inquiry, qualitative research, methodologies

## Introduction

What is arts–research collaboration and how does it work? What does arts–research collaboration as method for qualitative inquiry do? What is the effect of collaboration on creative practice and academic research?

In this article, we address such questions by examining a collaboration between the authors: Shelley Castle (SC), an independent creative practitioner working on participatory arts projects, and Jennie Morgan (JM), a university anthropologist researching and teaching in the interdisciplinary field of heritage studies. Undertaken as part of a large, interdisciplinary heritage studies research program (Harrison et al., 2020), our reflections are positioned within an emerging yet *limited* field of arts, humanities, and social science literatures exploring “deceptively simple questions” (Shaw, 2019, p. 1136) around “what” collaboration is, “how” it is done and “why” (Konrad, 2012, pp. 8–18). Existing literatures have raised such questions by considering peer-to-peer academic teamwork (e.g., Bassett, 2012; Paulus et al., 2010; Spiller et al., 2015), co-writing (e.g., Alexander & Wyatt, 2018), and collaborative partnership between qualitative researchers and participants (e.g., Criado & Estalella, 2018). Yet, there remains a lack of sustained discussion on collaboration, and, more specifically, collaboration between creative practitioners and academic researchers.

This gap is surprising given enthusiastic embrace of creative practice and arts-based research for qualitative inquiry, especially for participatory, community-based

research (see van der Vaart et al., 2018 for review). Indeed, when reviewing literature for this article, it was curious to find such discussion largely missing within writing on “arts-based research” (Barone & Eisner, 2012; Mannay, 2016; van der Vaart et al., 2018; Ward & Shortt, 2020), “creative practice-led research” (Smith & Dean, 2009), “arts-based ethnography” (Degarrod, 2013), and “creative research methods” (Kara, 2020). This is even more surprising given passing acknowledgment that collaboration *itself* is an arts-based “form of enquiry” (Ward & Shortt, 2020, p. 2). This lack of focus on collaboration in arts–research contexts was further noted by Sociologist Patricia Leavy (2020, pp. 309–314) who recently coined the term “collaborative arts-based research” and offered a brief account of why such partnerships might develop, thus agitating for increased attention to collaboration between creative practitioners and researchers.

In what follows, we do not intend to provide a definitive account or a “how to” guide for such collaboration. Rather, by critically reflecting on notes and recollections of our thoughts, conversations, and actions that informed a series of co-designed and co-delivered arts–research activities, we

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take initial intellectual steps into this gap by offering insights to examine collaboration *as method*. While beyond the scope of this article to enter into definitional debate, we hold that our collaboration fits within an understanding of arts-based research as “a transdisciplinary approach to knowledge building that combines the tenets of the creative arts in research contexts [. . .] during any or all phases of research, including problem generation, data or content generation, analysis, interpretation, and representation” (Leavy, 2019, p. 4). We are motivated by a desire to step beyond dominant emphasis within wider scholarship on analyzing creative outputs for knowledge generation (e.g., van der Vaart et al., 2018), or understanding how, to quote anthropologist Francisco Martínez (2021), art “objects and exhibitions” can become “instruments of social research” (p. 1) “in their own right” (p. 5). We do not dispute this emphasis has been a crucial step in validating arts-based and creative practice within (and indeed, understood as) scholarly research. Yet focusing analysis on the content and reception of creative outputs (“objects and exhibitions”) risks ignoring the underpinning rationale, assumptions, and conduct of collaboration that shape knowledge production within specific research contexts. We shift attention from creative *outputs* to the collaborative *process* of working together. By doing so, we aim to advance dialogue by responding to calls to go beyond scholarly use of collaboration, as anthropologist Sarah Pink (2018, p. 205) argues, simply as a “descriptive term” to offer a more theoretically grounded account.

In what follows, we first situate our collaboration within the larger project and our building of arts–research collaboration *as method* by finding shared starting points for working together. Next, to give greater visibility to the typically hidden process of collaboration between creative practitioners and researchers, we tease out the specific “ingredients,” or qualities and conditions, not only from which our collaboration emerged but through which we created the space (social, physical, affective, epistemological) in which it existed. Using our journey as an analytical lens, we recount our routes of inquiry while referencing the wider project field, including participant input and the time in which it existed. Three key “ingredients” are revealed leading to an understanding of the collaboration as *anthropological*, *interventional*, and *reflexive*. By examining such qualities, we explore the evolving techniques we applied to think, to question, and to make together and with other people. To conclude, we return to Pink’s (2018, p. 205) proposal to approach collaboration as a concept (rather than simply a description) by reflecting on what our activities revealed about the principles underpinning our partnership.

## Background and Context: The “Arc” of the Collaboration

The collaboration on which this article is based was undertaken as part of a large, interdisciplinary heritage studies

research program running between 2015 and 2019 (Harrison et al., 2020). The project investigated how what will become future heritage is being assembled in the present across diverse natural and cultural domains through shared—yet extremely varied—practices of collecting, curating, conserving, and communicating. It examined how these processes navigate global challenges (including uncertain futures, preserving diversity, the transformation of landscapes, and sustainability), and in doing so recognized how heritage practices offer scope to build different kinds of futures. Within this frame, across 2017 and 2018, we set out to jointly investigate the specific challenge of how people assemble future heritage in the face of “profusion” (Macdonald et al., 2020), or the abundance of material and digital things characteristic of many societies today. We explored what people in their individual lives, homes, and communities keep for the future and conversely what they do not. Within this broad “arc,” our collaboration was characterized by three phases of activity.

*Phase 1* was collaborative fieldwork exploring Profusion research questions by visiting six households (August 2017) over a period of 3 days in the Torbay area on the south coast of England where SC worked as a creative practitioner, primarily with Encounters Arts (an organization specialized in designing participatory arts projects). Feeding into research objectives, these visits were to talk with people about their future-keeping decisions. People were invited to show us a single item, or many, that they felt warranted holding onto for posterity, and to tell us about their selections. We hoped to gain insight into how people manage material (and increasingly digital) profusion by making choices about what to attribute value and longevity to, and their associated practices of care. JM made audio recordings, photographs, and videos documenting householders’ narratives and selections, while SC took photographs, made in situ sketches, and wrote labels for objects to capture the rich associated meanings and stories.

*Phase 2* was led by SC using the fieldwork from Phase 1 to inform an artistic contribution to the Agatha Christie International Festival in Torquay (England) through an installation *Story in the Object* (September 2017). Inspired by Agatha Christie’s 1946 autobiographical book *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, this participatory, evolving artwork took the form of an installation at the Torre Abbey Museum based on the idea of a cabinet of curiosity. Exploring the personal stories behind peoples’ relationship to objects, the installation revealed what individuals’ care about and what they want to treasure for the future, placing seemingly ordinary objects offered by participants next to museum objects.

*Phase 3* was a public participatory arts event, held over a weekend in May 2018 at the Torre Abbey Museum gardens. *The Human Bower* invited members of the public, local networks, and participants from previous phases to join us to build and decorate a structure inspired by those made by the Australasian Bower bird. This was informed by SC’s interest

in nonhuman species' habits of collection, and in particular the gathering habits of the Bower bird which builds structures of sticks and organic materials decorated with natural and, sometimes, human objects. Participants joined us in one-to-one "guided conversations" exploring what the future might look like and what needs to be held onto to make this happen. Key words were distilled and written onto willow bows, bound by participants with brightly colored thread and consciously placed into the Bower, and written also onto pebbles placed into the entrance of the structure to mimic the "artistic" tendencies of the birds. Finally, participants were invited to write their thoughts on what needs to be "let go" of to build imagined futures onto a postcard. These were physically and symbolically released into a street theater performer's barrow loaned for the event. We wrote fieldnotes, made audio recordings and photographs, and gathered participant-feedback cards. The *Bower* structure was later reassembled in a project exhibition, planned to run from December 2018 until Autumn 2021, at the Manchester Museum (England). We learned that the outreach team intended to use the *Bower* as a catalyst for further public events and conversations. JM compiled a visual essay based on the work (Morgan, 2020).

Standing back from the detail above, our activities resonate with the wider field of creative research methods, which often aim for "combining both verbal, textual and visual" in "an integrated way" (Mannay, 2016, p. 3). Across our journey, we variously gathered, made, and used a range of creative materials including objects, personal stories and memories, hand-drawn sketches, artifact assemblages, video and audio recordings, photographic images, reflective fieldnotes, and interview transcripts. Collaborative acts of gathering, making, and displaying these materials—with each other and participants—were both prompts for facilitating, and outcomes arising from, the research process. These materials, and the acts of jointly crafting them, prompted people to discuss what and what not to keep from material and digital profusion and the kinds of futures selections were oriented toward. Our experience chimes with that of anthropologists Lupton and Watson (2022), who similarly found value in using arts-based methods to inspire conversation and communication of practices in relation to future-orientated "speculative imaginaires" (p. 754) or "people's everyday experiences of and feelings about futures" (p. 755).

We will not further recount our findings on imagined futures here (see Morgan, 2020). Moreover, while for background and context this overview provides a rather neat linear account of our collaborative arc, in practice, this was a more piecemeal, iterative process of sense-making. For the remainder of this article, we delve further into the specific detail of this collaborative, creative process, given such ways of working remain infrequently discussed methodologically. This is not simply a retrospective exercise. It reflects our intent to co-design a collaboration and linked

arts-based activities "as research" rather than simply "in research" (Graham et al., 2015; also Barrett & Bolt, 2014; Martínez, 2021). Echoing wider critique of the instrumentalisation of arts in research (e.g., Clarke, 2014), this meant first-and-foremost using collaboration *as a method* to think, to make, and to do things together to generate research insights, rather than using creative activities and outputs as outreach to communicate project aims and findings.

## Shared Starting Points: Uncertainty and Equivalences

I have travelled by plane, taxi, and train to a small seaside town in the Torbay region to meet SC to plan for fieldwork leading to *The Human Bower*. We have had extensive discussion over the past months via email and video calls but this is an important opportunity to meet for two days to move remote discussions forward, including selecting a venue for the event. SC has provided instructions for where we should meet. To my surprise, a coffee shop not centrally located near the foreshore, train station, or main shopping street but rather set further back in, what SC through conversation later in the morning explains is, the "old town" and "original high-street." Before we settle into our planned meeting, SC invites me to walk with her along the street. She points out its features and I learn that it was once the lively heart of this town despite subsequent economic decline (indicated through closed shops, peeling paint, fading signage). Conscious of our limited time, I am quietly anxious to get started with what I see as the "business" I have come to discuss, outlined through a pre-trip agenda to visit possible venues, decide on event themes, running order, etc. Yet, as we walk—and walk together—I take time to see this street, this neighbourhood, and its residents through SC's eyes. I learn about her deep, embedded connections to this place and social networks. I better appreciate the juxtaposition and tensions of researching "profusion" in a region characterised by high levels of socio-economic deprivation. It seems to me the selection of this meeting place, even if implicitly, is purposeful to communicate in subtle and experiential ways the changing nature of the place in which SC's creative practice is situated. It feels familiar to me, this way of working, in a deeply unfamiliar context of planning a public art event. I relax. We will work well together! (Fieldnote, April 2018, Jennie Morgan)

Artist Kate Foster and cultural geographer Hayden Lorimer (2007) claim that "in establishing a collaborative relationship, shared interest in conduct can matter as much as a shared vision for content" (p. 427). As our opening vignette suggests, this was certainly born out in our experience where interest in *how* our collaboration would work was as important as *what* it would produce. While both experienced in our respective fields, JM had not previously used arts-based research methods and this was SC's first experience collaborating with an anthropologist on an academic research project. Our collaboration was thus characterized by uncertainty, with neither exactly sure how best to

approach this initiative, in what ways our respective skills and expertise would inform its development, and indeed what activities or understandings might emerge.

Rather than trying to avoid or minimize the uncertainty of this situation, uncertainty became an underpinning principle of our collaboration, embraced as holding generative potential for developing productive ways of working. To give a brief illustrative example, when preparing for this article by revisiting correspondence, it struck us how frequently in planning documents and conversations we referred to wanting to use the collaboration to “play”; or, as SC put it succinctly, “abandoning the rationale at some point together!” (pers. comm, 2018). While guided by the Profusion “frame” and objectives for project “deliverables” (outlined in the previous section), our correspondence indicates that we were alert to how responsiveness to the contingent specificities of collaborating with each other, as well as the material, social, and affective elements of the site of our collaboration, might facilitate more iterative and curiosity-driven ways of working. An ethos of play resonates with what anthropologist Tim Ingold (2013), in his writing on creativity and making, calls “the art of inquiry” (p. 6) or an openness to “try things out and see what happens” (p. 7).

Guided by a mutual starting point of embracing uncertainty to play (or “try things out”), and with a deeply shared interest in conduct, the vignette above also indicates how our collaboration was underpinned by attentiveness to recognizing and harnessing equivalences across our respective skills, expectations, and protocols, or what Foster and Lorimer (2007, p. 427) describe as “finding complimentary aspects of practice in each other’s ordinary activities.” A shared interest in conduct was not about abandoning expertise or our respective skilled practice, nor was it about using entirely new methods or skills. It was about embracing the uncertainty of working together to explore fluidity between our (supposed distinct) roles of “creative practitioner” and “anthropologist” by finding “complementary aspects” in our arts and ethnographic practice. Simply put, to make together necessitated, first, finding ways to understand each other. The vignette offers one example of finding a route to understanding via what could be called a shared “para-ethnography” “consciousness or curiosity” (Holmes & Marcus, 2012, p. 128) articulated through SC’s deep embeddedness in place with its attendant social settings and networks. Walking with SC enabled JM to experience (or to be in) place in immersive ways that opened her sensitivity toward and prompted conversation on how this place was meaningful to SC, the changes and challenges it had experienced, and relation of these to wider Profusion issues. This provided complementary entry points into a shared desire to understand peoples’ everyday lives and worlds and to bring deeper meaning to our arts–research activities.

While a necessarily brief discussion, the point we are making is that our collaborative relationship was underpinned by

interest in conduct, and more specifically in embracing uncertainty to explore the fluidity between our respective roles by finding complementary aspects across our respective practice. This meant embracing what others have called “not-knowing” (Martínez, 2021, pp. 11–15), including Akama et al. (2018) who argue (from a design anthropology perspective) that uncertainty, while a “powerful source of creativity and innovation,” (p. 33) sometimes “requires a relinquishing or shedding of control” (p. 32).

### **Ingredients of the Collaboration: Anthropological, Interventional, Reflexive**

Having briefly reflected on the shared foundations of our collaboration, we now identify its specific “ingredients” (or qualities and conditions). Our analytical interest remains focused on the conduct of our practice or, as Gibbs (2014, p. 218) puts it, “*how we do our work*” as much “as the ideas we seek to explore and communicate.” This concern with conduct was indicated by SC during one online meeting when she expressed a concern to “craft the journey to a meaningful point” (pers. correspondence, 2017). What did “meaningful” mean in the context of this arts–research collaboration? How did we “craft the journey” productively?

#### *Anthropological*

Our collaboration was characterized by what could be described to be an anthropological sensibility. In making this statement, we do not enter definitional debate over anthropology—nor use this term in a strictly disciplinary sense (or to imply dominance of this discipline in our collaboration)—but to evoke the claim that anthropology, as Ingold (2008) argues, does not make studies “of” but “with” people (also 2013, p. 8). This sentiment was neatly expressed by SC within an early planning document she shared with JM when she wrote, “I believe we have to be generous and open and human [. . .] in order to really engage” (pers. correspondence, 2017). Her words express “the importance of situated, embodied and lived accounts, rather than those of a detached observer” (Akama et al., 2018, p. 6)—a perspective recognized more widely to characterize anthropological and artistic working. In the context of this article’s focus on collaboration, an emphasis on “being with” directs attention to the interrelations between skilled practitioners to encourage consideration of the *specific conditions* that facilitated our thinking, creating, or “becoming together” (Akama, 2015).

One key element of “being with” each other was the need to find ways of working when predominantly doing so remotely (JM working for a university in the North of England and SC with an arts organization in the South of

England). Unsurprisingly, digital and electronic infrastructures (email, telephone, online video meetings, digital documents, file sharing services) underpinned our collaborative process; so too various co-produced discursive objects, including our research ethics submission and shared research questions responding to the project brief. Guided by SC's existing connections to people and place, which we hoped would practically facilitate our activities and enable these to hold deeper meaning, we decided to conduct research visits with householders and to stage the final *Human Bower* (outlined above) in the Torbay area on the English south coast. Yet, beyond this rather descriptive account, a key element of "being with" each other was to co-create arts–research environments that would "feel right" in terms of our overarching shared aims.

This is illustrated through our selection of a venue for *The Human Bower*. During a trip to visit possibilities identified by SC through her connections (including a dis-used shop, a church hall, and a museum garden), our discussion indicated a shared concern with the *feeling* of the chosen venue. Selecting an appropriate site was an affective and embodied experience not simply guided by practicalities of budget, accessibility, and spatial layout but how the sensory and affective impression of the venue (experienced through light, sound, movement, and emotional response) would align with our wider goals for "being with" each other and our event participants in particular ways. More specifically, how the "feeling" of the venue would create a welcoming, relaxed, and even hopeful environment. To return to SC's words above, our goal was to create moments characterized by a dynamic of being "generous and open and human"; words that resonate with what anthropologist Martínez (2021, p. 56) calls "ambiences of care and epistemic generosity." In the context of our collaboration, this meant co-designing an environment for *The Human Bower* that would encourage us and our participants (as we put it through our planning conversations) to slow down into a more speculative and contemplative mood conducive to meaningful "being with" others. Selecting a venue that would "feel right" for facilitating this ambience was key.

What these brief reflections indicate is that the site of our collaboration for "being with" each other (or where we thought, created, and worked together) was not something we set out to simply enter and document, nor could it be reduced to one geographic or temporal locality (given it continues through the co-authoring of this article). It necessitated co-creating a site for our collaboration by producing and assembling guiding frameworks, objects, people, materials, space, and less tangible sensorial, embodied, and affective elements. While this act of assembling a site (or making a place in which to hold the collaboration) was arguably pronounced due to our remote working, we contend this creative act of place-making underpins collaborative work more widely (Pink et al., 2022, pp. 10–11).

## *Interventional*

A second characteristic which underpinned how we collaborated was to create encounters that would prompt new thinking, or possibly even new ways of acting, for our participants. SC expressed this in a planning email to JM explaining how she had "become quite attached to creating very positive spaces, almost celebratory, where people feel they CAN change things" (pers. correspondence, 2018). Building on SC's existing experience, our collaboration was underpinned by this ethos which, drawing on futures-orientated anthropology, emphasizes the possibilities for change-making through research (Akama et al., 2018). We used our arts–research activities not simply to create observational or representational records, but as an opportunity to prompt participants to engage explicitly, in ways typically not done in everyday lives, with questions around future-keeping. Elsewhere, we have accounted more fully for how the varied activities of our arts-based methods encouraged participants to reflect on individual future-making agency (Morgan, 2020). Without repeating, the novel point we are making in the context of this article is that creating images (photographs, video recordings, sketches) and material assemblages (*Object in the Story*, *The Human Bower*) with each other and our participants became "a mode of participation rather than a mode of registering what has happened" (Akama et al., 2018, p. 8).

Key to this, as is common to other arts-based research, is what has been called "thinking-making practices" (Romano, 2023), or what SC often described during our collaboration as engaging peoples' hearts, minds, and hands. One example was our use of, what we called, "guided conversations" with participants to blend activities of showing, discussing, and making objects (as in the construction of *The Human Bower*) to reveal their hopes and concerns for the future, while activating a recognition of agency to shape futures through their decisions and actions in the present, as one participant pithily expressed in an event comment card. The activity of making, via the tactile transformation of materials was key to eliciting a depth of thought and conversation, as SC has witnessed through her wider practice of making in many forms (from cooking to weaving to drawing) allowing, what she has come to call, a "sideways glance" approach. Here, activities of using one's hands to transform materials allows makers a chance to slow down and to focus while releasing thoughtful spoken, written, and/or visual narratives of experiences, perspectives, and feelings.

While sharing a goal of participatory intervention, our collaboration also reflected disciplinary differences. Through one email discussion, SC explained how she was curious to see if *The Human Bower* could result in participants considering "how to de-clutter in a deep way—a sort of 'inner transition' or unseen outcome" (pers. correspondence, 2018). She suggested that participants might be contacted 6 months after

taking part in events to reflect on this question. However, JM was reluctant to follow this suggestion being “wary about framing the event in terms of encouraging people to go off and declutter [. . .] or trying to dig into inner psychological transformations” (pers. correspondence, 2018). This partly reveals the limits of the blending of our respective disciplinary practices around a shared goal of intervention. JM retreated toward an anthropological observation of the status quo, with SC more open to the possibility of activities prompting change to peoples’ attitudes and actions, driven by her wider blending of arts and activism, especially on climate change and environment. The question of how far to push “disruptions” (Martínez, 2021, p. 52; Ravetz et al., 2013, p. 6) indicates how collaboration also intervened beyond our participants’ thoughts and actions into our own individual practice by pushing us to step beyond routine, established ways of working. Although articulating limits of disruptions, JM became more open to considering the future of heritage through a change lens, or how things “could be” rather than how things “are (imagined) to be.” SC’s concern with transforming action helped JM to navigate the methodological challenge of researching futures through ethnographic practice, which typically focuses on the here and now of understanding peoples’ everyday worlds and realities, to instead introduce more explicit investigation of possibilities for change (e.g., by engaging participants around questions of what they perceived they needed to keep hold or let go of to make desired futures happen). This brief example demonstrates that while arts-based research methods might be characterized by activism, or “a sense of possibility to fuel motivation for change” (Ward & Shortt, 2020, p. 10), the degree and format of change is negotiated within specific contexts of collaboration.

### Reflexive

The final “ingredient” we briefly identify as underpinning our collaboration was shared reflexivity. While in hindsight we realize this was not explicitly discussed nor planned, the desire to reflect on learning from our collaboration, *as it unfolded*, characterized how we worked together. We used reflexivity to inform the development of our collaborative process as we went along. On the one hand, for various methodological approaches within the social sciences and humanities, not least ethnographic fieldwork, this is not a surprising admission. Yet, taken into the interdisciplinary field of arts–research methods, it indicates how small details of collaboration shape outputs (whether these be understandings or creative objects) in crucial, yet not often revealed, ways.

For example, after visiting householders during our Phase 1 fieldwork, we took time in the evenings to collaboratively reflect on the visits. First, by individually writing three “takeaway” points of what we had learnt from each household visit, and next by using these as discussion prompts to identify and direct our emerging themes and

tailor subsequent activities accordingly. Throughout the collaboration we also shared written electronic notes, each adding to these as an emergent research diary, and we experimented with audio-recording our conversations (e.g., held in car journeys traveling to and from activities). These acts of shared note taking to both document and shape what SC called “the journey of our collaboration” (pers. correspondence, 2017) was an important way of “being with” each other and coming to know the research context in which we were operating. It shaped follow-on interactions, emergent themes, and lines of questioning.

An example of one crucial shift over our collaboration to emerge from shared reflexivity was a move from an emphasis on personal and individual domestic scales of keeping, which JM had been preoccupied with in wider project fieldwork, to “scaling up” to explore collective motivations and values evidenced in neighborhoods, communities, and even ecological systems (blending humans and nature). Our reflective notes demonstrate how dialogue encouraged JM to move away from her initial focus on material, tangible objects to interrogating natural and intangible “things” (nature, animals, relationships, emotions, behaviors). As SC wrote in a document of her thoughts shared with JM after their visits to householders,

it might be nice to see the ‘journey’ of our collaboration as moving from highly personal [. . .] to other people in their homes, to seeing ‘HOME’ as community and then seeing home as the environment/the world. Moving from micro to macro. (Pers. correspondence, 2017)

The point we are making is that a joint reflexive process offered a route into understanding collaboration as a specific way of “being with” each other and coming to know the research context. It indicates how our lines of questioning were not preformed but emerged from a generative process of working together. Here, using a reflexive approach to understand, as we went along, our arts–research interactions offered a route into shared meaning-making. Crucially, shared reflexivity enabled us to interrogate the topic under study in ways we might not have recognized or done alone (i.e., JM was very unlikely to have discussed with participants future-keeping of nature or specific emotions, like hope or love, were it not for shared reflection on the process). In this sense, our approach resonates with what JM has discussed elsewhere as being “collaborative auto-ethnography” (Morgan & Pink, 2017) or using joint self-reflection to take forward understanding from reflecting on learning and experience to shape future action.

### Discussion: Blending Practice and Conceptualizing Collaboration

We began this article with the goal of taking collaboration between creative practitioners and researchers seriously as

an object of critical inquiry. To date, this remains a lacuna. Wider scholarly examination of collaboration within qualitative inquiry has directed attention toward collaboration *between academic researchers* co-writing (Alexander & Wyatt, 2018), working in teams (Bassett, 2012; Paulus et al., 2010; Spiller et al., 2015), and networking (Shaw, 2019), often with a focus on conflict (Creamer, 2004). A smaller number of reflections are focused on the process of collaboration, typically within inter-, cross-, or multidisciplinary teams of academic researchers (e.g., Bertolini et al., 2019). Differing from such accounts, our focus in this article has been on the more specific context of collaboration between a creative practitioner and an anthropologically trained heritage researcher which—surprisingly given the growth of scholarship on creative and arts-based methods—remains under-examined. Analytical attention on arts-based research collaboration typically focuses on partnerships with research participants rather than between researchers and creative practitioners, as Patricia Leavy (2020, p. 310)—a founding voice of arts-based research—acknowledges.

One field that comes somewhat closer are scholars advocating for collaboration between anthropology and art practice (Grimshaw & Ravetz, 2015; Martínez, 2021; Ravetz et al., 2013; Schneider & Wright, 2013). Yet, this subfield again does not quite align with our concerns expressed in this article. This divergence is indicated in landmark texts, such as Schneider and Wright's (2013) edited *Anthropology and Art Practice*, which tends toward examining the affinities between the work of contemporary artists and anthropologists *as disciplines*—for example, artistic work addressing anthropological themes or artists using ethnographic methods like participant observation—rather than on-the-ground collaboration between individuals. In cases where *actual collaborations* between artists and anthropologists are recounted, these typically foreground examples where artists or creative practitioners are positioned *as* research subjects (i.e., anthropologists making studies “of” the contemporary art world or exhibition-making), or anthropologists taking on more artistic roles in ethnographic fieldwork. Descriptions of collaboration between anthropologists and “those formerly described as informants” (Criado & Estalella, 2018, p. 10) or their fieldwork “counterparts” (Martínez, 2021, p. 50) capture these approaches.

Such accounts differ from the collaboration we have discussed in this article. SC was not a research participant but a co-researcher, and JM's use of creative practice not a serendipitous fieldwork development but an intentional strategy for generating research insights via collaboration understood as method. Here, we are closer to Martínez's (2021) monograph recounting his work with designers, museum curators, and artists which foregrounds what he calls “collaboratology” via the co-curating and co-making of an exhibition. However, his analysis remains primarily on the anthropological study of designers and artists as “ethnographic objects themselves” (p. 54) rather than a

more specific understanding of arts–research collaboration as method. One exception is an edited volume (Ravetz et al., 2013) on collaboration through craft which, collectively, draws attention to “personal experiences of collaboration” between makers and anthropologists (p. 10) with a focus on “the material, sensual and tacit experiences of craft collaborations” (p. 11). While our preceding discussion is more closely aligned to this volume's aim of providing insight into “what joint working feels, looks and sounds like” (p. 11), we differ in our step beyond an experiential focus to begin to unpack broader “ingredients” or qualities of our collaboration. Such reflection is sorely needed given Schneider and Wright's (2013, p. 8) claim that “what exactly is intended and assumed through the use of this term [collaboration] covers a vast range of actual practices and kinds of interactions with others.”

Certainly, one area where practices and interactions can differ, especially between ideals and reality, is the extent to which collaboration involves a merging of expertise, skills, and conventions. While synergies between art and anthropology are recognized, “the fusion of both practices has not been common” (Martínez, 2021, p. 52). Arguments are made for collaboration that is a “blended practice” or “ways of working that surpass the disciplinary conventions of practice and theory” (Pink, 2018, p. 202). Here dominant concern is for collaborative practice that builds “shared process” intended “to reshape each other” (Pink, 2018, pp. 202–203). This resonates with wider ideals of using creative or arts-based methods to help multidisciplinary research teams “vault out of silos and leap over boundaries” (Kara, 2020, p. 6). In what has preceded, we attempted to identify shared process by discussing the starting points and “ingredients” of our collaboration. The question remains, what (if anything) did our working together change? Did collaborating alter how we “engage with the core conventions, practices and discourses” of our disciplines (Pink, 2018, p. 205)?

We do not have a definitive answer to this question. Time is needed to ascertain the reach of any change. However, for JM (as hinted at earlier), working with SC challenged her to move beyond the conventional model of ethnographic practice in which she was trained (i.e., the lone, long-term fieldworker who generates knowledge based on immersion and observation) by adapting her practice toward shorter-term interventions focused on making, rather than simply documenting, by assembling memories and stories, emotions, materials, spaces, and speculative imaginings. The collaboration also encouraged JM toward accepting a loosening of ethnographic interpretive control, especially with the onward journey of *The Human Bower* into a new public exhibition space and team of professionals (for inclusion in a project exhibition at Manchester Museum and use by outreach staff). This helped her to appreciate, in deeper ways, how ethnographic fieldwork is always an ongoingly emergent activity of making relations,

sites, things, and understandings. In short, collaboration started to push JM toward what, elsewhere in a discussion on collaboration, Holmes and Marcus (2012) call a “re-functioning of ethnography” where ethnography steps beyond “a descriptive-analytic function” to incorporate alternate modes of knowing (p. 127).

For SC, working with JM exposed her to more analytical elements, in particular, the reflective sessions became vital in enabling her to understand more clearly the progress of the narrative arc, the edges where rich gatherings could be gleaned, and provided more clarity on her own working practice and methods. The collaboration also allowed SC a sense of security via the rigor that an academic approach brought, which balanced her more instinctive and curiosity-driven approach. Subsequently, she has since included reflective elements in many of her community and collaborative projects. The lasting value of the collaboration was summed up in a recent email conversation when SC commented it served to “highlight not only different ways of learning, exploring and understanding” but also gave “insights into the role of interdisciplinary approaches in a heritage context and the benefits of [. . .] [a] creative approach” especially by creating an “ecosystem that was diverse and so it was rich and meaningful” (pers. correspondence, 2023).

These brief reflections indicate potential impact of collaboration on our respective practice. Yet, there is a need to consider what theories of collaboration our experiences point toward to help us understand more deeply this methodological process (Pink, 2018, p. 206). This holds value for wider discussion by agitating, as anthropologist Sarah Pink (2018; also Ravetz et al., 2013) encourages, to step beyond dominant usage of “collaboration” as a descriptive term to critically interrogate collaboration “as a concept that can stand for a set of principles” for research practice (Pink, 2018, p. 205). Such an endeavor differs from existing accounts within qualitative inquiry of how multidisciplinary collaborative research arrives at shared conceptualizations of the subject under study (e.g., Spiller et al., 2015, pp. 556–558). Instead, Pink’s (2018, p. 205) provocation demands we understand collaboration *itself* to be the conceptual framing by offering a co-developed, principled way of being in and coming to know the world. This nuanced shift is important. Not only does it push beyond description but it also focuses analytical attention—as we have started to do in this article—on identifying the principles and processes underpinning collaborative practice and expertise as they emerge *through* the practice of working together. How then might we further understand collaboration as a concept, particularly with recourse to the specific context of an arts–research collaboration found to be anthropological, interventional, and reflexive?

Here we find it useful in these final thoughts to turn toward anthropologist Tim Ingold’s (2013, p. 7) critique of scholarly consideration of the relations between art and

anthropology (introduced above) for failing to address “the creativity of the productive processes that bring the artefacts themselves into being.” When taken into the specific context of a discussion of arts–research collaboration, Ingold’s perspectives challenge views of the creativity of skilled practice located in tangible outputs (exhibitions, objects), and these outputs arising from preconceived ideas or designs laid down at the outset. Instead, he relocates creativity into the productive processes of engaging with materials and the world in improvisatory and adaptive ways (also Ingold & Hallam, 2007). This directs attention, we argue, to collaborative dimensions of creative activity, including skilled practices and processes of working together. Such views are further bolstered by Ingold’s most recent book (Ingold, 2022) through his step from “creativity” to “creation,” supported by the concept of “undergoing” (p. 23, also Ingold, 2014) which draws attention to the social dimensions, contexts, and relationships involved in the “growth” or “becoming” of persons, ideas, and things (p. 22). As Ingold writes (2022, p. 24), “to understand creativity [. . .] is to read it forwards, in the unfolding of the relations and processes that actually give rise to wordly beings, rather than back, in the retrospective attribution of final products to initial designs.”

Without entering into further discussion of these complex philosophical claims, for the purposes of our argument, we suggest Ingold’s ideas of creativity/creation point toward understanding collaboration (or the process of shared thinking and making) *itself* to be “materials” worked with that bring into being creative ideas, objects, and even practitioners; if creativity is not something that is “done” but is “undergone” by creating ourselves through what we do (Ingold, 2022, pp. 23–24). Likewise, inspired by his ideas, Pink (2018, p. 206) concludes that to understand collaboration through such processual frameworks is to move beyond using it merely as a descriptive label, or even seeing it as “a thing in itself,” to instead understand collaboration to be an “emergent quality” from the act of assembling people, things, images, space, and feelings into contingent relationships. While other accounts of collaboration may of course offer radically different conceptual starting points, we end with these provocations to bolster wider arguments within the field of qualitative inquiry for greater critical interrogation of collaboration.

## Conclusion

Our reflection in this article has sought to take collaboration seriously as an object of critical inquiry and, more specifically, within the context of partnership between academic researchers and creative practitioners. There is pressing need for such examination given wider and growing demand for collaboration driven by funding and research landscapes, emphasizing nontraditional outputs, measurable impact, and engagement of more diverse

audiences, all of which require new skills, techniques, and methods (Gibbs, 2014, p. 223). With definitions of arts–research methods remaining far from settled (Leavy, 2019, 2020), there is value in making visible elements which are typically little reported on. Grounded in our experiences and realities of collaborating, we have made visible details about collaborative process that all too often slip out of finished research outputs. Synergies as well as limitations of blending creative and research approaches were found, and we considered how the collaboration impacted on our individual practice. Beyond simply delving into the “black box” of arts–research collaboration to consider how a collaboration was established and developed, a significant contribution of our analysis lies in its agitation to push wider discussion of collaboration into new terrain. We agree with the small (yet we suspect from our review of existing scholarship not yet widely acted upon) number of voices urging to go beyond its dominant use as a descriptive term (Pink, 2018; Ravetz et al., 2013), typically in taken-for-granted and unproblematic ways. Informed by our experience, this article provides one example of what thinking and writing about collaboration more theoretically might look like, yet additional work in this area is sorely needed to better understand collaboration as a methodological process. To provoke further thinking, we put forward an argument for understanding arts–research collaboration to be the “materials” out of which creative outputs emerge. This paves the way for a host of further questions, not the focus of this article, including those around power dynamics. Our concluding hope is that our reflections and arguments will act as a launchpad for further fresh dialogue on collaboration within the context of interdisciplinary, qualitative inquiry between skilled practitioners. When collaboration is all too often posed uncritically and unproblematically as an unalloyed good, timing is clearly ripe for investigation into collaboration as method in all its richness and complexity.

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**Shelley Castle**, MA, is an independent creative practitioner whose studio projects have involved a broad array of collaborators, including other artists, her family, horologists, dancers, entomologists, and marine biologists. For the past decade, she has worked with local communities as a “civic” artist, building relationships between people and place, and she was a creative associate at the UK-based Encounters Arts. She is part of an arts collective called Walking Forest, a ten year project exploring links between activism, natural forest networks and community.