INTERVIEW: AN INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE ON THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION WITHIN ACADEMIA AND BEYOND

Serjara Aleman, Federica Moretti, and Sara Wiederkehr

The following is the edited excerpt[1] of a dialogue recorded in the summer of 2023 between the three editors of this special feature and three experienced researchers: Prof. Susan Ossman, Dr. Eda Elif Tibet, and Dr. Nadine Wanono, who participated in a two-part CUSO module of the Swiss Graduate Program in Anthropology on Migration, Representation, and Reflexivity that the editors organized in 2020 and 2021. This interview is a follow-up of the conversations we initiated during the workshops, which constituted a florid ground to discuss past and present challenges in anthropology, as well as future developments of our anthropological practices.

Federica: We are very pleased to welcome you today. We continue an exchange that started three years ago. We want to talk about how research priorities and practices have changed throughout the last decades. How have experienced researchers been managing challenges throughout their careers and how they envision the future, drawing from the specific experience of each invited researcher: digital and audio-visual media, affective multimodalities and filmmaking, performance and the visual arts.

Sara: Thank you very much for being here. Susan, based on your work, could you discuss the methodological and epistemological implications of the concepts of representation and reflexivity on the issues of migration and diversity?

Susan: Thank you. I am really pleased to be here with you today. The *Moving Matter Travelling Workshop* (MMTW)[2] is a group of artists and scholars who are also serial migrants: they have all lived in several countries for fairly long periods—three or more years. The idea for this came from a previous ethnographic work that I had done over ten years, which was a much more, you would call it, traditional ethnographic study, very conceptual. I'm trying to get at questions of migration, not just from the idea that the migrant goes from one place to another or perhaps returns home, but to ask what happens when the migrant moves on, not to create an imaginary third space, kind of a Homi-Bhabha-esque sort of discussion of the late 20th century, but instead thinking about the notion of mobility diversity. In other words, how does movement shape our subjectivity and how would one study it? That previous work took so long because finding people required listening to many stories before you could see who a serial migrant was, as it's a narrative you're looking for. But out of that work

[1] The conversation lasted 90 minutes and is available here in the form of a podcast.

[2] https://movingmattersworkshops.ucr.edu, accessed January 26, 2025.

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came the concept of the serial migrant and mobility diversity and the desire to extend this project in a collective way. The MMTW grew out of the concept and the background in fieldwork. I asked writers, artists, scholars, and a very select group of people who are all serial migrants to comment on the book as one might at a standard book talk: "You read it, what did you think?" And from that, rather than asking them to speak about it, I said, "Well, please open up and perform something from your own experience". From this, I had the idea of forming the workshop with this core group, which grew as it moved along. In this sense, there is a representation that takes place in the book itself, a representation of these questions, of the dialogues that we've had that have been transcribed. But here again, we're talking about a different kind of re-presentation through performance, through the creation of visual artworks, and through participatory events that we then organized based on the collective serial migration that was put into the process with the MMTW. The workshop would be formed by all these people, who themselves brought a certain story to the workshop. The idea was to go from one place to another, create a site-specific project, and then each time move on again, perhaps including new people, new places, and react to them, only settling into the site for a week or two. This work including the months of preceding research, lead to creating this kind of experiment of collaborative collective action in the context of a *Collective Serial Migration*. Our work in the MMTW wasn't strictly aimed at responding to anthropological questions. It created a place where we could do intense auto-reflexive ethnography, but at the same time, it also aimed at presenting to different publics these ideas of multiple migrations and getting people to think about migration in terms of the places that we worked in, whether it was in the Mediterranean Museum in Amsterdam, at the Elder Piercer Museum, in Berlin at the Chapel of Reconciliation. Each of these places had its own articulation of themes of migration, but several kinds of references were coming out of each work, some of which were anthropological, and we could come back to them. It was slightly different in each case because the public conceived differently according to the places we went to. That was part of our migration experience together. In a sense, there's an applied anthropological project within that because, in each place, we had to understand where we were and conceptualize it and remake our field. But then, there's the second-order field, which is our movement, and those two things are going on simultaneously.

Sara: Nadine, you told us that you weren't at ease with the limits between the distinctions we were making between fields and between visual and digital forms. I invite you to discuss this with us here in the light of these implications in your work.

Nadine: Thank you for inviting me. Thank you for your confidence. I will try to give you a quick answer about the epistemological and methodological dimensions of my work. In 2000, when I was in the [United] States, I started to deconstruct the ethnographic film and introduce the idea of process: not producing a film but having the right to present the process of research. That was quite complicated because it was a way of criticizing my own discipline, and it was self-reflexive and not very welcome. As a researcher, you are supposed to be specialized and fight for the rules, but, in fact, for me, the rules were obviously not good, and I thought that we must change them. Following that idea, I started to set up an event called *singular narrativity* and decided to do it outside of the academy. At that time, I chose the Cube, the first digital arts center specialized in the digital in France. It was the best place

for me because at that time, I thought that the digital could be a way to freely express myself. During my stay at the University of Santa Barbara, I worked quite a lot in the art department and with the programming department with Marcos Novak and George Legrady. It was a way of changing the support, changing the view. But, in fact, capitalism is capitalism, and we have been absorbed at some point, and the digital, as you see now, is part of the system. And we had to find a new way of creating something. Since this experience, even if it's time-consuming, as it's a slow process, we started to quit the Cube and set up an event manifestation in *le point éphémère* in Paris. We introduced performance as a way of interacting with people. In 2018, we selected a film made by a US film-maker. Instead of selecting her to present her film, we invited the subject of her film, Abdul, a migrant who came from Afghanistan to Greece, where he attended dance workshops. After a few days with him, we asked if he could perform during our event. During the performance, he went out of the frame, told his story, and interacted with people. Now, we are more and more focusing on the process, on what Deleuze and Guattari called *unarchive,* with Erin Manning, and it's how to produce minor gestures and how to give value or provide a space of expression for these minor gestures, which are quite meaningful, especially in terms of subjectivity and migration. In 2018, we invited a psychologist who introduced dance to migrant women and presented during our event. After that, I followed her workshop in Paris to share the life of these migrant women. The simplicity of it was very moving because she just danced, and she went round and touched the hands of the people from time to time. And just by this very small gesture, you connected with the group and with an individual. With this experience, we started to say, "OK, we will definitely forget film and the digital, and we will focus more on performance and participation". For a year, we have been working with ten people for the next manifestation or collaboration, which will be organized in Strasbourg. It's like breaking more and more, not the constraint, but the frame—and especially the political frame, directly interacting with the people and out of control, except that we are still looking for funding. We are still part of the big system but far away from the academic and art centers. We are working in the forest or we are working on an island close to nature to be able to be part of the whole system. It may be utopic; it's probably not a political statement, but it's more of a research lab or a life lab, and we are working and researching at the same time and producing new ways of expression.

Federica: We would like to invite the three of you to elaborate on the politics of representation involved in your work as fieldworker, writer or research designer. And for Eda, who just joined us, also to discuss the methodological and epistemological implications in the light of affective multimodalities and film-making.

Nadine: I think that perceiving yourself as a professional is something that I can already contest. I am more of a practitioner, and I am a researcher trying to find a solution. The way we ask questions allows us to have good answers. It is how we represent, and maybe now also how we try not to represent. We are on the way to perform together—I say "we" because it's a collective dimension. We try to erase or break the position between spectators and the producers of the spectacle. We are now on the same level and trying to interact together. This interaction is already some kind of improvisation, which is not at ease with the system, because the system asks you to have the answers before asking the question and to validate it. It's all about this position of questioning the system, how we are supposed to produce at

the beginning, how we can refuse to produce that way, and the way we are challenging the production, that is already a political dimension.

Eda: Speaking about transition and mobility, representation matters a lot and needs be done justly. Unfortunately, the one with access to funding and institutional support often decides how a story is to be told and how the so-called other is to be represented. I find that very troubling, and I think that's exactly where it needs a lot of transformation, a lot of revolution even today in this 21st century. Specifically talking about mobile people, there's a lot of injustice in terms of representation. I realized that when I started anthropology as a Master's student at the University of Kent in 2009, I was reading and seeing all these examples of how the anthropologists really had the sole power in the way they wanted to tell the story, even if there was a bit of an attempt to call it participatory—but it wasn't really. Participation or co-creation means there should be a lot of say, it should mean sharing power. Sharing and distributing power means that one needs to be recognized as an equal shareholder of whatever the product is about, be it a paper, a book, a film, an intervention, a multimodal or audio-visual intervention or a podcast. It should be done in collaboration with the people being represented; it cannot be done on their behalf, or it can't be done to them. Unfortunately, these are still common practices in the field, not only in anthropology. I also see it in migration and refugee studies, which is why I never wanted to position myself in migration studies. I found the act of working on, working about, and not working with the people being represented very dehumanizing. My revelation was to say from the beginning that we share equal narrative powers, and the anthropologist is there as a mediator, not as an authority, as "I know better than you because I read more theory than you". Theory must represent the field; theory must come from the field. When theory comes from the top down, that's epistemological violence, and one must be very honest about it. One should also be able to choose the theoreticians and the authors they feel closer to. Who are those people? One needs to look into postcolonial literature, at people who actually have a first-hand account of discrimination, racial injustice, and segregation; one needs to read the people who are going through the crisis, going through the injustices themselves. One cannot read a white author thinking they know best what participatory anthropology is. I think in Western scholarship, we're often told to play the game, that this and that author is the best, and we should follow them. No, we should not do that. People who inspired me most are rather revolutionary and transformative authors like bell hooks, Gayatri Spivak, Homi J. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Paulo Freire. There are also people who are speaking just as wisely in the field but who have probably never published a book or a paper. Does this make them less worthy? No, because they have *the* life story. Affective multimodalities come as fighting what was not OK for a Turkish scholar trying to conduct a PhD in Switzerland with very traditional [academic] mindsets. Affection is very important in the field of representation. To overcome those wrong practices, one needs to equally share and distribute power, which comes with the recognition of co-authorship. That's all been the stance of my work; every film I did was always co-directed with the people being represented, and I think that gave them agency and the ability to transform their lives. My life has also changed.[3]

[3] To know more about the film, affection, and transformation, see https://www.karmamotion.com/ballad-for-syria (accessed February 22, 2025).

Federica: Nadine and Eda talked about representation not only in relation to the people with whom we work but also to us as anthropologists or human beings vis-à-vis institutions, our colleagues, and funding bodies. I think this is very interesting because the politics of representation is not only about how we talk or work with people but also how we represent ourselves and how we change the representation of our discipline.

Eda: Humanities is a system of thought, but it's up to the individuals to make their contributions. However, if it's about hierarchical positioning, then yes, often, a lot goes unsaid because these institutions are heavily power-charged. There are always those with the highest access to the grants. Usually, the professors have the last say in setting the agenda or the discourse. This should not be happening itself. Representation to me means that one needs to do this inner work within these institutions. That inner work should start from the top, but it never does because on the way to getting to the top something goes wrong. How am I just, regardless of the fierce competition in these institutions? Often, funding bodies find competition necessary for innovation and ground-breaking work. I don't agree with that. Some level of healthy competition can motivate one another, but if there's too much competition in a place, there's no innovation: there's just oppression. It's a vicious cycle; it's a capitalist economy, it's a neoliberal mindset. So, what can the institutions do to free themselves from these oppressive structures?

Serjara: Eda, you just talked about the necessity of sharing power. Could you give us an example of how this might be possible? How can you align the various interests and aims of people we encounter during fieldwork?

Eda: I think sharing first a common vision with the people in the field. Why are you there together, forming an alliance, building a coalition, being part of a meaningful cause? I speak as an activist anthropologist, so this is only one way of seeing life. As activists we unite for a cause to overcome the situation. This comes with genuine interest, integrity, affect to the cause, to the people, and asking "What can I do for you? How is this relationship not just about my career, but how can I distribute the privilege I have? How can I support you in accessing points of privilege and power?" And this is possible through true friendships establishing mutual understandings. People in the field understand if the person has exploitative intentions. Then they do not contribute to studies, which is why you lack a lot of spirit in so many studies because you see they're very transactional.

Susan: I guess at this point, I should pick up on some of the strands in the conversation. One thing to bring into this is the notion of practice. Nadine brought that up, and Eda also touches on that in her question of collaboration. I have an individual practice of making things. I make actual objects, and some of these objects are things that I could not make with anyone else. There are certain things that I make by myself in a solitary place and certain aspects of ethnography benefit from this self-reflexivity. Although I do collaborative work, in the MMTW, we also punctuate this collaborative work with individual or smaller group work. The notion of the collective is always there, these shared questions, but at the same time, there's a kind of "moment work" as they speak about in, for instance, tectonic theatre, where some of it benefits from not always having the same aims. The values of the art world and the academic world are quite different, but by confronting those or working simultaneously with those, either in our individual work or collectively, we do find some of those points

that we're seeking in some kind of wiggle room among disciplines and institutions. Within the MMTW group, there are people with different economic and institutional resources, and the places where we work are very different. So, we collectivize our resources. That's one aspect of it. And in terms of representation, several different kinds of representation are going on, and I think it's from that multiplicity that some of the possibilities arise.

Serjara: Thank you Eda, Susan, and Nadine for these very inspiring reflections. What do you think are current challenges of our discipline in different contexts, like Switzerland, Turkey, the French-speaking and the Anglo-Saxon worlds, specifically as a woman anthropologist? How do you see the future?

Eda: In my situation, someone who's always been educated in the West but has ties to the Middle East and the transforming country that is Turkey, our biggest challenge as a young female academic has always been patriarchy and authoritarianism. So, how do you conduct science under such circumstances? Which is the reason why people might be migrating toward the West. However, when you arrive in the West as a scholar, people may see this as a weakness and try to use it against you. But not everybody. There's also a decolonial mindset, people who want to work with you because they see your potential or talent. But then there are also those who want to abuse that and want to kind of enslave you. I've seen both extremes. I've seen incredible support in my life also coming from spaces of white privilege. But I've also seen incredible oppression in Switzerland, even sometimes more than back home in Turkey. I learned to dwell in the unknown and the precarity of never knowing whom you'll get to meet. I'm very passionate about these practices of building coalitions and alliances. I've started a new advanced post-doc position at a leading science institute called Wyss Academy with a very decolonial systems-change approach. It's promising to me that somehow my background is needed today, this critical voice that doesn't shy away from not being honest in the name of the power game. It was a risk-ful journey. I was always at the edge, but I think challenges and hardships also push us to be more creative, more innovative, and one should never give up. It's a long journey, regardless of your background. But I am still here because the more Erdoğan strikes back home, the more Elif must strike. That's been my motivation, but it's been very challenging. I've found my creative ways and a lot of solidarity on the way. So, yes, challenges, hardships, I see them, I feel them, I experience them, but I somehow also find them inspiring.

Serjara: There is this discourse about the PhD as a journey of normalized suffering and hardship. Many people shy away from this because we don't want to suffer. How can we get more joy into the everyday of academic work?

Eda: I think there needs to be some serious political regulation around the ecosystem of the university. One can do that, but one will have to take risks. I think that's why people are suffering because they are mostly risk averse. Paulo Freire always said that liberating the oppressed starts by liberating the oppressor. If one day a PhD student comes and says, "Well, professor, I don't need you to supervise me anymore, I don't need to do the PhD with you", no oppressed, no oppressor, but the PhD remains. That's a very interesting question for me, to fight back. I wish it didn't have to be this way, but unfortunately, it is normalized that the PhD must suffer, go through serious mental disorders, and survive. It should be unacceptable. This is not science; this is brutality, because you use people's weaknesses, and this

comes from the "excellence culture", the 1% deciding over the 99%. We need more of a systemic intervention, and we need to work through this in very intelligent ways. We need to come up with ideas and solutions so that this is no longer normalized.

Susan: I've never really believed in *the* discipline, and I wonder if I'm the best representative of Anglo-anything. I will pick up on some of the other things that were brought up. I've worked across many disciplines and I've taught many different disciplines in different languages in different places; that's part of the whole serial migrant story in my case. This question of risk is important. If you have a taste for risk, you don't suffer as much. And I think that you have to, given the difficult institutional situation in universities, as Nadine brought up at the very beginning, unless you find great joy and pleasure—and I do not mean that in an uneasy way. You know that the difficulties of that pleasure and joy are real; those challenges of getting through the work, whatever it is, are real. But why go through all that institutional hassle if you are not already finding great joy in your work? This question of suffering, I don't know where it's coming from. I don't know that all students suffer. I didn't. I enjoyed doing my PhD. It may be that certain conditions are making it more difficult to enjoy that process, and enjoying it is something that I think is fundamental to being able to do this kind of work. One thing that can be set very early on in our graduate school education is how you relate to your own self, the disciplines, the routines, the relationships, with others, both in terms of others who may be collaborating on a project and those you're interacting with either as references—those you'll never meet—or the people who we're having conversations with in different disciplinary realms. Those are things that can be encouraged by professors or colleagues or the people we meet in our collaborations with fieldwork. Thinking about those things early on can be really helpful. Just by the chance of my own story, which I tell a bit about in the book that I recently published, it meant that I was forced by conditions of employment of finding a job to take this sort of pleasure I had in ethnography and render it in both institutional and collaborative ways very early on and across disciplines. Seeking out those kinds of opportunities is something that is not typically part of what we professors tell you in graduate school. They're always talking about the discipline, how are you going to be a better anthropologist, how are you going to be a better artist, how are you going to be a better film-maker, how are you going to compete in that world? But I suggest seeking out all possibilities of thinking of either pluralities of disciplines or things like that.

Serjara: Another challenge might be the idea of anthropology as a vocational calling. This image of the ideal fieldworker and academic doesn't leave room for anything else if you want to excel. This idea of excellence is still expected from the institution or us, even if it's unsaid.

Susan: You're talking about the expectations, and then the reality is you get your PhD—if it's a good piece judged according to those criteria. The other thing is sometimes fieldwork impacts how you imagine your life outside of work. There's this mixture of work and life, sometimes requiring more. To have chosen to do fieldwork rather than some other kinds of research, for instance, will impact your relationships, whether you have children, your relationships with your partner or your family, whatever those things are. Each configuration

will be different. It might be a non-normative configuration that results, but that might not necessarily be a sacrifice; it might be a good thing in certain situations. There's no black-and-white answer to that. Life is risky, and there are all kinds of things that happen, even if you never do fieldwork. In certain senses, there are choices in creating a field that you have a role in creating.

Nadine: It's very interesting to be able to share these testimonies with Eda and Susan. Maybe the challenge on my side is the transmission of values and way of life, and of trying to change the system. It's not easy, but it's a real "shift challenge". What Eda said: that facing challenges inspires you, it's very true for me. Challenges push you to find another solution. That's important. Also, for the young generation, when I am in the position of being a supervisor for a Master's, for example, it's to give the students the possibility to open new fields and to have interdisciplinary research, to challenge writing proposals, etc. It's to question the boundaries of the system and to open the space, and I think that each of us could do that and to be an activist by integrating more art as a means of expression in a PhD, for example. The fight started in 1975, and we are still fighting for having the right. Some students who have a PhD based on research art are not allowed to present the film. You must fight and defend the students and give them the arguments to do so. That's how I perceive what I am supposed to do now: transmitting values and being strong. When I became a mother for the first time, I was the first woman in my laboratory at the CNRS (Centre National de la, Recherche Scientifique); they didn't even look at me. They didn't recognize it—the belly did not exist. Physically and emotionally, it was a challenge. You have to take the freedom of being a mother, if you like, and not separate between your professional life and your family life. It's important to integrate the whole body and be a researcher, woman, and mother. It completely changes the relationship you have with the people. You are not a white woman without anybody with you, and I think it changed a lot for the people with whom I work, even in France, because you become a human being. We must have the right, and we must have the strength to stand for this position, even if the system is not really welcoming you. That's a challenge. Regarding the suffering during a PhD, I think it was not easy when I did mine, but I was not suffering. I think I perceived it as a ritual. The ritual of power. It was a way for me to understand the power and to see how, with a word used by Rouch, to *détourner.* There is no translation in English: it's to use the system to create something else on the side. For me, it was to use the system to get my freedom. And I always used the academy to pursue my work in the way I would like to do it. You are not working for recognition, but you are working for the transmission of values and the strength to fight for *le détournement.* That's part of my mantra.

Serjara: Do you think that in your position and with an established career, you now have the space to do this transmission of values and change the system?

Nadine: In fact, I created the space. By having challenges, you find inspiration. For me, it was to create a space. It's what I did collectively with what we call *digital anthropology.* It's been ten years and now we are creating this space to give young researchers the freedom to express themselves. Like two or three years ago in Berlin where Erin Manning worked a lot on "neurodiversity". That's a way of opening the doors and the possibility for the people to

be part of the academic system, express themselves, and hold a PhD. It's about welcoming the subjectivity of others. And when I say "others", it's me also. We are part of the others, we are part of the people, of what Deleuze called *le peuple qui manque,* "the one who is missing".

Serjara: Thank you so much. That was a lot of inspiration and food for thought. We invite you each to say a few concluding words.

Eda: I suppose I can say we all have limited time in this world, and I think we should serve for something bigger than our own life course and that I believe to be humanity. Humanities should really do justice to that vision. How does humanity come to its best self and reach its best potential? I think there's always hope, but one needs to be very honest about how we treat others, how we treat our colleagues and peers and how we form such structures and institutions. If we can have this mindfulness and awareness constantly, if everybody meditates a bit more than usual or if those who never did start doing it, I suppose that is already a way forward to a healthier academia.

Susan: This idea of creating space is something that certain trends in anthropology particularly help us to think about. Thinking about how to configure the field site, and how our desires in that space lead us to that otherness within ourselves that Nadine described as being part of a collective enterprise. That's something really promising within anthropological fieldwork design, which can seem very abstract and perhaps theoretical. And yet, if it's informed by research, attention, and experiential work in particular configurations, I think it can be very powerful and lead to things that are not necessarily only results for anthropology. When we think about those broader implications, whether it's for all humanity—or a bit more modest in certain circumstances, it has other kinds of good than just "Oh well, I've advanced the discipline" or "I have made my career". That's one area I think is particularly interesting to continue pursuing.

Nadine: It's very inspiring to be with you today because we are not alone and that's a very important feeling of saying that there are people working with the same spirit, the same strengths, and the same wish of changing the institution from the inside or from the outside. Even if Zoom is a typical new way of creating a space, we create small spaces of freedom like this, where we can express ourselves and share our project, share our work. Susan and Eda, it was meaningful for me to listen and see how you elaborate your work and what you have done. I think this comes from all of us, thank you. It's very important that you create this space, take the time to do it, even during a PhD. It means that you are not suffering too much, and you have the energy to open a space for us, so thank you.

Serjara: Yes, and thank you. That's a mutual feeling, because we wanted to create this space as our own and to feel that we are not alone, that we can seek out some support and confirmation for what we are doing.

Sara: This process over the last three years has been very inspiring for me, and I know for Serjara and Federica as well. You said it so beautifully Nadine—whatever we are doing, just do it with the whole body. And this is something that we can think about further because as young researchers we are creating ourselves at the same time as we are creating the space. Through the practices, theories, and conceptualizations we use for our analysis, we also position ourselves in the world, not just in the discipline. It's been beautiful and strengthening to have you here. Thank you for listening as well.