

EDITED BY RICCARDA FLEMMER, BANI GILL,
AND JACKY KOSGEI

PROXIMITY AS METHOD

Concepts for Coexistence in the
Global Past and Present

Transdisciplinary Souths



Proximity as Method

This book examines proximity as a benchmarked concept that can be deployed across a range of humanities disciplines to rethink the ways in which existences in the world are always already coexistences – and to parse the heuristic, ethical, epistemological, praxeological consequences of this recognition.

The volume:

- Brings together diverse theoretical approaches and utilizes a range of methodological instruments – conceptual, textual-analytic (whether in the realm of literary or religious studies, or theology or law), archival, digital, sociological or politological;
- Includes empirical case-studies that allow calibrated and scaled exemplifications;
- Launches forays onto unexplored conceptual terrain or calls into question hallowed truths of scholarly procedure.

The volume will be essential reading for students and early researchers in the social sciences and the humanities.

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How might we theorize, think, articulate and critically/creatively inhabit the multiple and overlapping Souths of today's world? How do we enable these Souths to speak to each other, question each other, in ways that complement and expand the work upon which they are already embarked with each other? It is becoming increasingly clear that in order to better understand and contribute to the multiple processes and ways of becoming-Souths, a radically transdisciplinary approach to the study and analysis of, critical interventions in, and dialogues within and between Souths needs to be implemented. Intersectional thinking at the crossroads of race and ethnicity, class and labour, gender and corporeality, not to mention climate change and ecological destruction, demands a combination of perspectives and methodologies to deal adequately with complex planetary dilemmas. This series offers a hospitable forum for innovative intellectual inquiry that seeks to break out of extant disciplinary frameworks so as to address new questions emerging from contemporary Souths. Facilitating cross-border exchanges and polyglot negotiations between the most disparate fields of intellectual and scientific inquiry, thereby resisting the disciplining effect of enclave-thinking, the series aims to contribute to the transformation of knowledge production and associated practices across multiple Souths.

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Proximity as Method

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Concepts for Coexistence in the Global Past
and Present

Edited by Riccarda Flemmer, Bani Gill, and
Jacky Kosgei

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Introduction: Proximity as Method

Concepts for Coexistence in the Global Past and Present

Riccarda Flemmer, Bani Gill, Dorothee Kimmich, Jacky Kosgei, and Russell West-Pavlov

As we write, three horrific armed conflicts dominate the global news tickers: a civil war in Sudan between rival military factions with enormous civilian loss of life and livelihood; a brutal conflict between Hamas and the Israel Defence Forces, in which at least 20,000 civilians, almost half of them children, died within the first two months; and an almost two-year war following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, whose toll of military deaths may well have reached half a million. In these conflicts, all of which have the potential to spill over into regional conflagrations, erstwhile neighbours of decades standing, in some cases of centuries, have turned against each other. These are conflicts in which people (and peoples, or their representatives) who have lived alongside each other, amicably at times, with animosity at others, more often than not with pragmatic indifference, are caught up in armed engagements that may in turn engulf other hitherto uninvolved neighbours. Underpinning all of these conflicts, notwithstanding the nature of the confrontation, or the various historical trajectories that have led to the current slaughter (and which might possibly, given more auspicious circumstances, have averted then), is something that the contributors in this volume refer to as ‘proximity’. Because proximity infuses, underpins, precedes and persists in all these complex and often violent negotiations, it may possibly offer a mode of analysis, reflection, even rethinking, that opens up new perspectives for improving the prospects for coexistence among communities, peoples, indeed, with the planet itself – in a time when such avenues for hope are desperately needed.

Proximity is a critical factor in living together, and by working with proximity, this volume wishes to propose a new conceptual approach for the study of relationality across diversity. Placing ‘proximities’ at the centre of the volume’s reflections constitutes a shift from the long-standing focus in the humanities and the social sciences on the paradigm of difference, which risks producing static dichotomies of identity and alterity that today seem increasingly problematic. By contrast, in our conceptualisation, proximity is dynamic, transformative, even disruptive: this framing thus has the potential to include the whole range of outcomes from symbiosis and collaboration to conflict and opposition and, crucially, includes the scalability of connection,

especially in our digital age. Proximity relates to a scholarly interest in the concrete, the social, the political, and the historical, to constructs of ethnic groups, gender roles, discrete languages or scriptures, landscapes and soundscapes. It also prompts us to interrogate modes of affective participation and connection to these concrete realities. Resentment and hostility on the one hand and feelings of belonging and tolerance on the other constitute world-views and feelings that form everyday practices and modes of living together. Proximity constitutes a non-teleological frame, fabric and foundation for coexistences which allows us, while taking cognisance of the myriad of possible trajectories coexistences can follow, to track and analyse their folding and unfolding, without having to abandon normative assumptions, or even aspirations and hope for a 'good' life.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume examine the notion of proximity as a conceptual tool that eludes the old stand-offs between difference and identity, between the specific and the universal – exploring instead the pragmatic meeting points of coexistence that furnish projects for the 'ongoingness' of human and nonhuman existence. It is in this context that the volume highlights the life-enabling exchanges, fertilisations, symbioses and mutualisms that constitute the essence of coexistence (including the diversity that necessarily accompanies it) and then explores the critical and even provocative dynamics of cultural, social and environmental discourses, practices and structures that emerge from them.

This book is a collaborative effort amongst researchers who are interested in thinking with the notion of proximity from different disciplinary standpoints. The idea of proximity prompts us to rethink the ways in which existences in the world are always already coexistences – and to parse the heuristic, ethical, epistemological, praxeological consequences of this recognition. This programmatic undertaking seeks to establish proximity as a benchmarked concept which can be deployed across a range of humanities and social science disciplines. To this end, the volume brings together contributions by scholars from numerous disciplines (literary, media and performance studies, religious studies, sociology, political science, law, anthropology, area studies), working with diverse theoretical approaches and utilising a range of methodological instruments – conceptual, textual-analytic, archival, digital, sociological or political.

Accordingly, the chapters in this volume explore what a focus on proximity may achieve in theory and practice, thereby contributing to our inquiry as to why some relations and coexistences turn into cooperation, compromise and conviviality, and others into conflict and violence. By including conceptual, empirical as well as artistic research, the volume seeks to contribute to transdisciplinary research by highlighting non-Western and Western epistemologies as well as the situatedness of humans and non-humans in ecosystems, centred on cultural coexistence and environmental repair.

This volume is explicitly programmatic, seeking to mint a concept that is not entirely unfamiliar to scholars across a range of disciplines (for the arts,

see Enwezor 2017; for business studies, see Lis & Lis 2023; in education, see Long 2023; and in urban studies, see Manzini 2022 – to name only a few examples), but which has yet to be taken up in a comprehensive and systematic fashion. Proximity promises enormous potential to reframe perennial questions in the human and social sciences in radically new ways, and it is this task that the volume wishes to inaugurate.

Proximity as Method

The volume's brief is to elaborate 'proximity as method' – as a comprehensive programme of theoretical exploration and innovation; of empirical testing of the concepts forged across a range of case studies from diverse disciplines; of inauguration of cross-disciplinary dialogues operating in proximity to one another; and finally, as a mode of reflection that does not shy away of declaring its own proximity to practices, especially activist practices, outside the academy.¹

The notion of 'proximity as method' consciously echoes two predecessor volumes: Chen's *Asia as Method* (2010) and Menon, Zaidi, Malhotra and Jappie's collaborative study *Ocean as Method* (2022). By evoking these two volumes, we are aligning ourselves with the two significant strategic gestures that underpin the respective works.

Chen's *Asia as Method* draws together a body of theoretical work from an array of cultural critiques based in Asia whose collective frame of reference is less a confrontation with the legacy of Western colonialism and the ongoing hegemony of the Euro-American bloc than with each other's 'lateral' South-South articulation of local realities on the basis of autochthon traditions. Similarly, our contributors, following a paradigm of intellectual proximity that does not feel compulsively obliged to reference the European canon when discussing non-European realities (see Chakrabarty 2000), frequently write from an intellectual and (often explicitly activist) location in the Global South. The volume thus mobilises a 'critical proximity' (Weizman & Manfredi 2013, p.172) that arises out of the alliances of theoreticians and local, place-specific struggles for autonomy and self-determination.

If Chen's *Asia as Method* positions itself within a largely post-colonial or decolonial paradigm of resistant knowledge production (see also Menon, ed. 2022), however, *Ocean as Method* would appear to belong to a conceptual framing of these issues that sees the problematic of colonialism and its aftermaths in a much larger, even planetary context. *Ocean as Method* seeks to rearticulate the most elemental frameworks for the genealogical work of cultural history, abandoning the land-based template of the nation state for more fluid dynamics of the currents, the winds, and the largely unmapped geographies of the ocean floors. Rather than the culturalist materialist (if no longer explicitly cultural national) frameworks of much post- and decolonial thought, *Ocean as Method* appeals to a geophysical continuum with the continents that eludes the anthropocentric segmentations and demarcations

upon which most intellectual work is posited (see also Mawani 2018). The underlying conflicts and destructive heritages of the *longue durée* of colonialism are not dismissed or forgotten; rather, they are gathered up in the much longer (and broader) *longue durée* of ecological, planetary destruction. Menon and his colleagues' *Ocean as Method* takes the notion of Southern locatedness a step further, because while the brunt of the burden of the climate catastrophe is borne by populations in the South, the imperative remains to focalise these phenomena at a planetary scale. It is for this reason that, while *Asia as Method* seeks to co-opt one of the basic units of currency of Cold War area studies – the region-as-bloc – for a decolonial project of epistemological subversion, *Ocean as Method* shifts to a post-Cold War and, more significantly, post-human framing of its concerns. In this way, *Ocean as Method* inscribes itself within the preeminent issues of our own times, that of climate change: Menon and his colleagues' work does so by virtue of the fact that the oceans, the largest sink for CO₂ the earth possesses, are fast becoming a negative actor in the climate crisis in the form of rising sea levels. The scale of the planetary may seem, at first glance, to have little to do with the seeming intimacies of proximity. But the looming climate change has taught us that, contrary to the logic of Enlightenment separatism, everything on the planet is more or less connected to everything else and that every action has consequences that impact of the surrounding ecosystem and thence other neighbouring ecosystems. We are thus irrevocably and inextricably caught up in a gigantic network of interlinked proximities. This is the planetary frame that furnishes the baseline for many of the contributions in this volume.

Both templates for *Proximity as Method* are anchored in successive intellectual junctures, but both are no less firmly rooted in the Global South. From these respective local contexts, both deliver a programme for activist enquiry and collaborative knowledge production, irrevocably lodged within the planetary frame of reference, which imbues the respective chapters of the present volume.

Proximities: Beyond Dichotomies

What is the fabric out of which coexistence is woven if, as Berlant (2022, p. 2) says, 'we are inescapably in relation with other beings and the world and are continually adjusting to them'? Proximity, understood as the closeness of groups, persons, things or ideas to one another, is integral to all forms of life on earth. But proximity does not preprogramme the nature of coexistence – which can bifurcate towards cooperation or conflict, or a variable, ambiguous and even fluid, fluctuating mixture of the two. The precise dynamics emerging out of proximity are thus critical for the shape of society. Following this insight, proximity-as-method brings together contributions that explore forms of coexistence – whether social, epistemological, normative, affective or environmental – while both resituating and relativising, but not jettisoning, the category of difference that has been so decisive a paradigm in the humanities and social

sciences for at least half a century. It is in this sense that proximity must always be critically conceptualised, evaluated and deployed, because at the core of the concept is the necessary acknowledgement that there is no proximity without difference (and perhaps no difference without proximity).

Polarised binaries are deeply embedded in our histories, especially our colonial pasts. But even current efforts to combat Eurocentrism or to validate the experiences of subaltern and marginalised genders and oppressed social groups often perpetuate this binary thinking and thereby reinforce extant dichotomies. Such paradoxes raise the perennial question of how to live together as a global community and, no less importantly, in concert with the non-human world. These questions are endemic in our times (especially in the shadow of ‘pandemicity’): how can we remodel planetary coexistences in a sustainable manner that includes intercultural, interspecies, interknowledge, intergenerational and redistributive dimensions? This undertaking proposes the concept of ‘proximity’ as a tool for rethinking these questions, all of them central to the humanities and social sciences, in a time when such debates are of immense societal relevance.

The concept of ‘proximity’ has both a descriptive aspect, as a way of giving an account of basal material and social realities, *and* a hermeneutic aspect, as a perspective that reveals those realities. Where those realities of coexistence are obscured and distorted by political discourses that deliberately polarise and fragment, the concept of proximity provides an opportunity for enhancing and perhaps even restoring models of cohabitation by intervening in the contemporary discursive and praxeological field. For instance, neighbourhood is a basic fact of social life calibrated at varying scales, yet polarising ethnic discourses (as in Yugoslavia or Rwanda in the 1990s, for example) all too often succeed in making bitter enemies out of long-standing neighbours. Proximity, affect and discourse are tightly intertwined with one another. These overlapping dimensions explain to what extent a renewed focus on proximity as, in the first instance, a ‘neutral’, non-teleological phenomenon may help us to understand how, when and why it can be inflected towards cooperative or conflictual outcomes, thereby offering variously scaled roadmaps for alternative scenarios. Thus, although the notion of proximity is not teleological, because it does not preset outcomes, it nonetheless has a critical *ethical* dimension, determined by the urgency of contemporary issues and the imperative of relevance for the humanities today.

Decolonial Methodologies and Environmental Criticism

Decolonial thought and the environmental humanities have been instrumental in shifting the focus of discussion from differences to relations and have themselves engaged in a significant dialogue in recent years (Chakrabarty 2021; Hage 2017; Yusoff 2018). Continuing that emergent dialogue, the notion of proximity can provide a new and radically pragmatic framework

for reflecting upon and re-envisioning the many challenges of our times. One of the aims of this project is to map the connection between decolonial research methodologies and environmental criticism in the purview of proximity. We are interested in examining phenomena spanning the tangible proximity of the built and natural environments and the abstraction of affinities of thought or belief as documented in texts transmitted and circulated over centuries and around the globe. This approach foregrounds and embraces ‘situated knowledges’, and challenges dominant Western perspective by prioritising the investigation of ‘critical proximity’ over ‘critical distance’. Proximity-as-method recognises that forms, systems and processes of knowledge formation are enabled through distinctly emplaced and embodied ways of seeing, being and making sense of the world. In doing so, it questions pervasive standards of ‘objectivity’ and ‘detachment’ by attending to the processes by which the very notion of universalisms attains hegemonic hold, often through the violent erasure of knowledges that disrupt or resist domestication. Decolonial thinking has been seminal to raising questions that unsettle normative assumptions and knowledges, by highlighting the uncomfortable proximity between colonialism and modernity (Mignolo 2008). Further, such epistemological rerouting has powerfully traced the systematic disenfranchisement of locally embedded knowledge systems through idioms of ‘tradition’ or ‘belief’ (Shepherd 2023). In taking inspiration from such decolonial thinking, the conceptual framework of proximity aspires to build upon situated knowledges and contextual perspectives that emerge from and, in turn, shape exchanges, interchanges, theories and practices informed, not least, through the work of affect, emotion and bodily engagement. Moving beyond static oppositions, proximity as method attempts a road map to think in terms of coordinating conjunctions: pluralities, commonalities and divergences that sit alongside, shape and bleed into one another.

Ideas about proximity have come to a large extent, though not exclusively, from theoreticians in and of the Global South. Global South literary scholars and cultural historians (Menon, ed. 2022; Nuttall 2009) as well as writers (Ghosh 2016, pp. 2–6; Soyinka 1990) have often stressed connectivity rather than the separation or distance they frequently see as broadly characteristic of Western thought. Applying these notions to the proximity of human and natural coactants, ethnographers and other scholars working with Indigenous narrations and knowledges have produced systemic-connective work that is substantiated by the ‘earth system sciences’ perspective emerging from the natural sciences as a response to global climate change (de la Cadena 2015; Viveiros de Castro 2014; Cruikshank 2015; Ihaka 2018; Krenak 2019; Rose 2022; Lenton 2016). As a cognate to these cosmologies of connection, ‘proximity’ also functions in much Global South thought as a specific moniker for social dynamics of conviviality (Nyamnjoh 2017, pp. 253–70; Sarr 2016), a salutary ‘indifference towards difference’ (Amin 2012; Menon 2015; Zahra 2010, pp. 93–119) – a pragmatic acceptance which produces cultural practices of proximity, both in the South and in the North (Orkin 2005; Russo

2010; West-Pavlov 2018). Within the same Global South tradition of concepts of ‘sociability’, one can evoke ‘Buen vivir’ in Latin America, ‘ubuntu’ in South Africa, ‘enveloppement’ in Senegal, ‘aşabiyya’ in the Maghreb, ‘Guanxi’ in China or ‘Country’ in Indigenous Australia (Acosta 2015; Escobar 2016; Ke-Schutte 2022; Kothari, Demaria & Acosta 2014; Ogude 2019; Rose 1996; Sarr 2016, pp. 21–8; Shihade 2022, pp. 169–80). Along the same lines, recent theoretical work on ‘similarity’, a notion that cannot be collapsed into sameness but is conducive to the identification of approximate quasi-identities, also resonates with these projects (Bhatti & Kimmich 2017; Kimmich 2017; Winkler 2021). These social practices can be scaled up to larger socio-spatial units. They can also be scaled up and extended in time, as evinced by a marked shift in historiographical practices from discrete national historiographies towards ‘entangled’ or ‘connected’ histories, driven frequently by historians from the Global South (Subrahmanyam 2014; West-Pavlov 2012, pp. 75–84). Many parallel phenomena within Euro-American thought can be found within popular traditions (e.g. Frazer 1996 [1922]) or in work ranging from Benjamin to Haraway or Latour. Such theories from various traditions and continents constitute rich veins of creative innovation and provide templates for the main theoretical agenda underpinning our engagement with proximity-as-method.

Principles and Processes of Proximity

How do we live together in and across social and cultural contexts? How do we exchange, transfer and communicate between worldviews? How do we regulate and govern coexistences? In what ways do feelings, affects, emotions and bodily registers mediate coexistence? How do we sustain planetary coexistence(s)? These are some of the broad questions that inform the impulse of each of the contributions of this volume, which exemplify what we term the *principles* and *processes* of proximity.

In recent years, proximity has emerged as a scholarly category in two ways. On the one hand, it has become visible as an empirical object of study in, for example, physical geography, trade, management, logistics and transport studies, and urban infrastructure studies, as noted above (e.g. Varricchio 2020; White & Goldie eds 2020). On the other hand, it has begun to crystallise as a *perspective* or *optic* useful for framing such empirical studies; this is particularly evident in the binomial term ‘critical proximity’ and its clear inversion of ‘critical distance’ (Herbrechter 2017, pp. 323–36; Latour 2005; Simon 2010, pp. 4–23).

Accordingly, this volume seeks to elaborate a versatile toolbox of ‘principles of proximity’ drawing on expertise in theory, intellectual history and the analysis of literary, legal and religious texts to excavate conceptualisations – but no less importantly, critiques – of proximity, often grounded in everyday practices. For instance, vibrant traditions of thought such as ancient Australian Indigenous ideas of ‘Country’ posit the proximity of all being as a

pragmatic ecology and as a philosophical principle right into present-day literary, artistic and political texts, as is richly documented in the ongoing theoretical work of contemporary Indigenous scholars. Such theoretical work informs, and at the same time is buttressed by, a range of empirical investigations studying manifold ‘processes of proximity’ with historical depth as well as contemporary textual, sociological and ethnographic methods. Only via the case studies of multiple processes of proximity, both historically and in contemporary societies, and at various scales from the local to the regional, does it become possible to see how actors communicate, manipulate, conceptualise or transform the multifarious proximities that underly all societal interaction.

Proximity is a social and environmental reality of coexistence. In delineating principles and practices, we encourage a critical engagement with proximity, such that defies proximity as a normative concept that is either negative or positive. Proximity can be ‘overwhelming’, sometimes generative of solidarity or intimacy and at other times of strife and loneliness (Obadia 2020). In apartheid South Africa, for example, masters and servants, bosses and labourers worked and lived in close proximity, sometimes for years on end – yet social life was dictated by discourses of racial segregation with material consequences. In other instances, the condition of ‘living-with’ generates ethical orders (Levinas & Nemo 1985), with nearness producing possibilities of hope and aspirational citizenship (Raheja 2022). Such examples and studies make it clear that from the outset proximity must be mediated, communicated, represented and conceptualised, as manifold interactions unfold within its sphere. The question of *how* remains ever pertinent and is fraught with thorny axiological questions: how do ‘we’ practise solidarity when distance itself becomes institutionalised and even weaponised, for instance in the widespread censoring of experiential accounts of sexual harassment, within and outside of academic contexts? What do we do when simplified narratives of proximity, for instance liberal discourses of ‘universal’ human rights, themselves erase histories of enforced difference, colonialism and imperialism in all its contemporary manifestations? In this light, the call for proximity as method does not idealise proximity as a sentimental panacea for contemporary ills. It necessarily espouses a critical disposition across long-standing disciplinary and institutional boundaries precisely with a view to facilitating the crafting of conceptual proximities that seek out, critique and reimagine old and new narratives of coexistence.

Structure of the volume

Moving beyond the dualism of homogenisation and multiculturalism, social proximities consider the coexistence of multiple worlds in one geographic space – local, regional, global, planetary – to rethink what ‘living together’ might mean as a principle and as a process. Societies have always contained a plurality of cosmologies, ontologies, belief systems, and ways of knowing

that inform such living together. The focus on epistemological proximities considers how these have circulated across space and time, leading to cross-pollinations or marginalisations. At the same time, such knowledges and belief systems are often the basis for or even coeval with legal, ethical and other normative orders. Legal proximities thus include an examination of historical and present-day legal arrangements, everyday normativities and practices of policing and adjudicating that make and unmake citizenship, and ratify and deny forms of belonging. An examination of such dimensions necessarily entails engagement with the affective, sensorial and aesthetic dimensions of proximities, be they anxiety, aversion or attraction. Forms of intimacy, companionship, everyday morality as well as emotional practices which organise politics and constitute the basis for social mobilisations and claims for recognition are engaged with in the realm of aesthetic proximities. Finally, through intensive deliberations on cultural and political practices, knowledge and belief systems, we hope to further an understanding of our current moment of environmental crisis. The focus on environmental proximities thus aims to explore which new narratives, historical and imaginative, and what new forms of expression may be capable of generating urgently needed reparative practices.

The contributions thus explore forms of proximity ranging from the day-to-day interactions and cohabitations, to proximities facilitated by digital media, from translations and transfers between forms of knowledge to the conceptual or textual proximities between diverse religions of legal systems. In so doing, the volume seeks to further explore proximities between the past and the present, and to probe the ways in which socio-spatial and temporal proximities may shape ethical possibilities of coexistence between human, non-human and non-sentient beings in the future.

In its pursuit of the elaboration of ‘proximity-as-method’, this volume offers readers a number of approaches to the protean notion of proximity.

Part I, ‘Proximity as Proclivity: New Directions in Emergent Theory’ opens with a group of sustained theoretical meditations that seek to map out the contours of a theory-of-proximity that has yet to be articulated. In elaborating such a theory, we seek to invent the conceptual scaffolding for the experimental proximity-as-method that we assay in this book.

In the first such meditation (Chapter 1), Russell West-Pavlov sets out to sketch a comprehensive theory of proximity-as-method. The chapter outlines an exploratory theory of proximity that operates at three levels of phenomenological description, hermeneutic interpretation and ethical, even political intervention. It builds upon an anecdote of a material object, a box pillaged during a massacre in British-Mandate Palestine in 1948 which speaks of the ‘futures past’ from which it was torn: foreclosed pragmatic utopians of everyday inter-ethnic coexistence of which informal agreements between neighbouring villages are the residual evidence.

Building on this pragmatic archival evidence from a specific historical context, albeit one that resonates loudly in the current moment, the following

chapter (Chapter 2) seeks to mediate between a propositional and a situated theory of proximity. Taking on the challenge of frequent requests for a ‘definition’ of proximity, Russell West-Pavlov ventures onto the domain of propositional, axiomatic approaches to our topic.

In Chapter 3, Elizabeth Elliot, taking an anthropological, ethnopharmacological and public health perspective and using case studies from Laos, offers a perspective on the ways proximity works as a method between academic researchers and community stakeholders. There is much debate about the asymmetrical power structures that characterise cultural and other ethnographic research. One of the arguments that has been made is that this kind of research runs the risk of being extractive in nature. Often, processes of documentation and dissemination of research findings disempower communities that generate the research. Elliot explores the idea of ‘proximity as method’ through two case studies, in which she asks what it might mean to be a researcher beyond the usual institutional boundaries and territories. In the case studies described in the chapter, she elaborates a ‘para-ethnography’ that proposed collaborations between ethnographers and other experts hitherto neglected or ignored by academic ethnography.

One of the critical forms of proximity we envisage in this volume is epistemological proximity, which creates dialogues between different knowledge practices. The composite knowledge that results transcends particularities of space, theory and method. Critical to the formation of this multifocal praxis is the suspension of the often-stark binary between scientific and other forms of knowledge. In Chapter 4, Thomas Potthast elaborates the notion of epistemic-moral hybrids: historically contingent and culturally specific blends of scientific theories, practices, and normative agendas. They comprise a merging of concepts, action, implicit and explicit agendas of protagonists and the epistemological and moral substructure which emerges. Potthast undertakes the task of conceptualising epistemic-moral hybrids by examining proximities in biological sciences and in moral philosophy to show what happens in the process of hybridisation and what is gained and what is lost.

Part II: ‘Proximity as Problematic: Case Studies from Past, Present and Future’ turns its attention to exemplifications of proximity across time and space. These contributions suggest that if we are to view empirical realities of negotiated proximities differently, we also need to revise the terms in which we view them; this revision, however, must constantly be tested against those self-same realities, whence the necessity of historical and contemporary case studies from around the globe to probe, again and again, the concrete purchase of a theory of proximity.

Whereas proximity may seem to be a relatively new term, in Chapter 5, ‘Truths and the Devil’, Renate Dürr shows how early modern writers and translators practised proximity-as-method. Focusing on the way in which early translations of the Bible emerged in the work of Protestant Reformer Martin and Jesuit José de Acosta, this contribution showcases translation as a bridge, as a way of seeking a common ground or a *tertium comparationis*. The chapter

shows, however, that this ground that was not a given, preceding the translational act, but, rather, had to be created by it in a process that endangered the very ‘truth’ being conveyed into and across that space of proximity.

In Chapter 6, ‘Relations of Pandemicity’, Carola Lorea examines the concept of proximity in a time when distance was necessary for the survival of the human race – during the COVID-19 pandemic (or more broadly during that temporal span the author calls the Covidian Age). The forms of proximity that revealed themselves in the interstices of isolation and distancing that punctuated human interactions at the time were of a very particular nature especially in the field of the study of religions. In this case, an increasing proximity between the human and the non-human world was felt, particularly the spiritual world (deities, gods, ancestors). This enhanced proximity is interrogated spatially and temporally in the chapter in the context of a collective – that is, proximate – project entitled *CoronAsur: Asian Religions in the Covidian Age* project, a bottom-up initiative launched by precarious and early-career female scholars based in Singapore.

Two linked contributions in this section engage with what is doubtless one of the salient challenges of our times, and one that, contrary to expectations, may foreground proximity at every turn: migration. In Chapter 7, ‘The Work of Proximity’, Bani Gill employs the conceptual framework of proximity to explore how migrant experiences encompass more than distance or separation and entail precisely the capacity to inhabit, navigate, negotiate, embody and impress upon multiple forms, scales and temporalities of proximity concurrently. In contributing to the ‘reflexive turn’ in migration studies, the chapter examines the work of proximity in its potential to deflect attention away from migration-related differences towards broader processes of boundary-making and the insurgent practices they inevitably entail. Building upon long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted with African migrants in Delhi, the chapter explores the ways in which migrant/non-migrant identities are shaped by various empirics and modes of proximities – post-colonial raced proximities, spatial proximities and mediated proximities. In foregrounding the work of relationalities, migration is thus conceptualised as the capacity to bridge over and across distance.

Subsequently, in Chapter 8, ‘Homo Proximus’, Keyvan Allahyari, Jacky Kosgei, Pavan Malreddy, AbdouMaliq Simone and Russell West-Pavlov experiment with proximate modes of writing about the proximities of migration. The chapter is a polyvocal, multi-micro-essay-based piece on ‘negotiations of proximity’ that meditates on the notion of proximity as a meta-concept for re-envisioning all forms of mobility, from micro-mobility, to internal migration, and beyond – flying in the face of common-sense assumptions that migration consists in geographical distance from the place of origin, and cultural distance from the place of arrival. The key to this exercise is the erosion of barriers between various categories of migration, so that migration begins to appear as a progress through various modalities and scales of proximity. Such a question impacts not merely migrant proximity as an empirical reality – say, multifaith

coexistence or multicultural neighbourhoods – but, more radically, seeks to shift the very frameworks we use for thinking migration away from sharp conceptual contrasts.

To close off this section, in an interview conducted by Esteban Morera Aparicio and Sebastian Thies (Chapter 9), Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar sheds light on the role of design and everyday life from a pluriversal perspective. He highlights the importance of the notion of proximity as a fundamental tool for the formation of communities at a time when the recomunalisation of social life has become essential. Similarly, emphasis is placed on the resurgence of the communal in Latin America, countering increasing individualisation and modern globalisation. Escobar argues that design can be a powerful tool for fostering the communal and the ‘good life’ in opposition to individualistic modernity and analyses the impact of the modern notion of the individual on society and decommunalisation through neoliberal globalisation. The lynchpin of these debates are the divergences between Escobar’s and Enzo Manzini’s notions of community, highlighting Manzini’s European perspective in contrast to Escobar’s focus on the plurality and relationality of rural communities in the Global South, in particular Colombia. Despite these differences, the interview registers a consensus regarding the value of the notion of proximity as a tool for thinking about a pluriversal society in an urban environment, fostering the creation of a ‘city of care’ and designing services that promote proximity and socio-economic equality in popular neighbourhoods.

In **Part III, ‘Proximity as Production: The Arts’**, the volume shifts its focus towards aesthetic modes of proximity, across a diversity of genres.

In Chapter 10, Luis-Fernel Rosero-Amaya and Sebastian Thies read Abderrahmane Sissako’s film *Bamako* (2006) as a highly innovative approach to (un)thinking hegemonic figurations of global justice from a perspective rooted in epistemologies of the South. It provides a series of complementary approaches to work on what we conceive of as proximities as a methodological tool for studies of World Cinema. The film stages an international court set up to denounce the devastating consequences of the World Bank’s structural adjustment policies within the lived reality of West-African peri-urban neighbourhoods. Thies and Rosero-Amayo deploy a fourfold approach to understanding the (inconvenient) proximities of the film’s aesthetic and political set-up: the construction of the macrostructure of filmic narration, the mise en scène of the filmic image, the dimension of montage as a proxy for a public space characterised by the *palabre* and the proximity of death in film as a meta-discursive challenge for any kind of aesthetics of proximity. In this sense, proximity as filmic method is key to understanding how Sissako moves African film beyond the facile binaries of post-colonial thinking towards a post-dialectical thinking of the World from Africa (Mbembe 2013; 2021).

In Chapter 11, ‘Against Proximity Denial’, Astrid Franke explores the ways in which art makes and unmakes proximities, but also arises from the ebb and flow of their affirmation or denials. Taking as her starting point a

scene from a 1959 movie *The Cry of Jazz*, which centres on an early kind of ‘Oppression Olympics’ comparing the suffering of African Americans and Jews, she posits that underlying the struggle over suffering and Jazz is the US-American concept of race as a paradigmatic case of proximity denial. Her contribution reposes upon a discussion of the work of Albert Memmi and Norbert Elias as two relational thinkers whose theorising resist this denial. The chapter returns to the movie to end with recent attempts to relate across difference, associated with the warning against contemporary instantiations of ‘Oppression Olympics’.

Blending an interest in proximate talk with a focus on less-proximate writing, in Chapter 12, ‘Temporalities of Proximity’, Tina Steiner scrutinises conversation as a core human interaction and verbal practice of proximity. Conversation forms the basis of the exchanges that humans undertake amongst each other. It takes time to initiate, realise and sustain. In some ways, the intensity of human interaction is determined by how much time elapses in the process. Taking time as a cue, Steiner examines the temporal dimensions of proximity using the concept of ‘African time’, which is posed against in relation to its antithesis, ‘Western concept of time’ (even though she understands this binary as a heuristic device that stands for a much wider range of temporal modalities). Steiner does this by interrogating Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi’s novel *The First Woman* (2020), Leila Aboulela’s novel *The Translator* (1999), before going back to DDT Jabavu’s art of conversation in his daughter in Noni Jabavu’s 1960 travelogue *Drawn in Colour*.

True to its ambition of widening the purview of ‘proximity-as-method’ beyond the walls of the academy, the final section of the volume, **Part IV, ‘Proximity as Project and Promise: Activism’**, focuses on activist practices that depend upon ‘critical proximity’ to the groups with whom they work (Weizman & Manfredi 2013, p. 172).

This part opens with Chapter 13, ‘Brokers of Words and Worlds? Reflections on Skills and Responsibilities of Non-Indigenous Translators in Indigenous Peoples’ Struggles’. In this chapter, Riccarda Flemmer describes experiences of collaborating with Indigenous activists and observing state practices of imposing oil extraction projects in the Peruvian Amazon. She critically approaches the role of activists, lawyers and academics as translators and/or interpreters in Indigenous peoples’ struggles; groups that have often been criticised for speaking *for* Indigenous peoples rather than speaking *with* them – playing proxy rather than mobilising proximity.² By reflecting on the brokerage position of these actors, she develops a systematisation of skills and responsibilities required for responsible translation and interpretation based on their potential impacts on emancipatory struggles.

In Chapter 14, ‘Legal Ethnography, Knowledge Dialogues and Decolonial Research within the Framework of Militant Legal Anthropology’, Orlando Aragón Andrade proposes proximity as a lens for understanding the practices of ‘Militant Legal Anthropology’. He and his colleagues, working as the Colectivo Emancipaciones, a group of academics and militant lawyers, have

developed this programme of research and activism over the last 13 years by supporting and learning from Indigenous communities and their struggle for self-determination in the province of Michoacán, Mexico. Underpinning this account is the principle that when anthropological knowledge is devoted to supporting the struggles and resistance of Indigenous communities in Mexico, it expands the scope of its work, engaging with society and thereby rethinks its methodological assumptions. In this process, ‘Militant Legal Anthropology’ generates novel forms of academic knowledge in what the author characterises as a ‘ripple effect’ driven by ‘kinetic energy’.

Such knowledge is explored in Chapter 15, a dialogical piece by Prudence Black and Stephen Muecke that explores and then dissolves the putative difference between ‘proximity’ and ‘remoteness’ by reflecting on a surfers’ beach shack in South Australia. At the heart of their discussion is a critique of ‘remoteness’ as a fundamentally colonial term that is deeply invested in the marginalisation and indeed eradication of Indigeneity while driving the extraction of resources to be found in ‘remote’ areas. Their conversation concludes with a militant methodological manifesto for proximity.

The volume closes with a description, in Chapter 16, of ‘The Batticaloa Justice Walk’, a regular activist performance demonstration that takes place in the context of post-conflict Sri Lanka and combines non-violent protest with artistic performativity. Ponni Arasu, one of the initiators of the action, offers an engaged participant-observer account of this ongoing multigeneric activist intervention into civil society in the Global South. The chapter is a patchwork of writing or speeches, accompanied by a photographic essay, by those who have participated in the walk since its inauguration, thus mapping the organic, generative dynamism of the activist work as it is theorised by the author. Proximity is the principle underlying the chapter’s composition, just as is the element that connects the walkers, and indeed motivates their activist agenda.

In a coda, Australian poet John Kinsella meditates on proximity as method from the midst of a sustained activist practice, a rigorous intellectual practice and an ongoing work with words. His quizzical, witty poem sums up the tenor of this volume: ‘These are the raw materials we bring | into proximity, hoping to bind a story | neither filmic nor recuperative’. ‘Walking from one discipline | to another’, his speaker hopes to be ‘establishing ground for events | within events’. All the contributors in this volume, we suspect, would subscribe to this programmatic sentiment for proximity as method.

Notes

- 1 We owe an explicit word of thanks to Carola Lorea, whose passing comment in the process of workshoping many of the ideas that inspire this volume gave rise to the notion of ‘Proximity as Method’.
- 2 Thanks to Rory DuPlessis for pointing out this suggestive play on words to us.

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