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## Ariadne's Thread

Interweaving Creative Expressions in Ethnographers' Practices

*Le fil d'Ariane. Entrelacer les formes créatives dans les pratiques des ethnographes*

Alice Sophie Sarcinelli, Monika Weissensteiner, Cristiana Giordano,  
Roberta Ragona and Greg Pierotti

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# Ariadne's Thread

## Interweaving Creative Expressions in Ethnographers' Practices

### Introduction: What Is Writing All About?

All anthropologists have come across the famous sentence by Clifford Geertz: "What does the ethnographer do?—He writes" (1973: 19), and indeed, ethnographers spend a great deal of their time drafting research projects, writing notes during seminars, fieldnotes and analytical memos, power-point presentations and, of course, theses, books and articles. But can we really summarise our job as an act of writing only? We also consult materials such as photographs, novels, and documentaries, we take pictures, record, draw; we interact with people, we cook, we walk, we stink, we might sing, dance, play, feel an enormous range of emotions, get confronted by a multitude of smells, we experience our fieldwork with all our senses and

we even dream about it. So why is writing considered to be the core activity of our profession? And most importantly, what do we refer to when we use the word "writing"?

Writing, and more specifically, in Western science, the particularly codified type of writing that for a long time, and to a certain degree still today, excludes expressive modes such as fiction and subjectivity in the name of "truth" and "objectivity" (e.g., Clifford 1986: 5), is both an expression of ethnocentrism and a powerful device that activates the exercise of power (Franceschi 2008). Since the ontological turn, ethnographic writing has conducted some serious self-criticism: Clifford has described it as situated, partial and serious fiction (1986: 7). However, such approaches were also met with criticism, including from phenomenologists who accused postmodernists of failing to offer

a real alternative to the primacy of textual representation. And while anthropologists of the body have come to include bodily and sensorial experiences in ethnographical representations (see Sarcinelli 2017), more than 30 years since this process began the coded style of academic writing is still considered a *conditio sine qua non* within our disciplinary-institutional conventions, despite occasional experiments that slightly loosen the shackles of academic publishing practice (Weissensteiner 2011). Forms of non-verbal recording of fieldwork—such as mapping or drawing and, increasingly, photography, audio-recordings, filming or even performing ethnographies—are not new and have been in use for a long time. However, these creative forms and modes continue to be seen as less scientific ways of presenting cultural and social worlds.

Anthropologists' ambivalent position towards the necessity to demonstrate a "positive" form of knowledge has gained renewed salience in the context of a certain neoliberal and neo-positivist turn in the social sciences, which has also tended to lead to a uniformization of academic writing (i.e. predetermined structures of the articles and other specific rules given by editors, with little space for innovation produced by the system of anonymous peer reviews, etc.). There seems to still be an "either-or" approach: either art or science, either literature or academic writing. Nevertheless, major epistemological shifts have occurred over the last 30 years. Feminist, postcolonial, and participative research, as well as constructivism have questioned the conditions of scientific knowledge production and the role of the researcher (Giorgi *et al.* 2021). Wider developments have followed the ontological and interpretative turn, such as a growing interest in graphic narratives, the senses and performance, and the body.

Such epistemological shifts have enabled scholars to overcome the "either art or science" approach, combining the two both in methodology and in dissemination. Indeed, a methodological turn has led to creative (Gauntlett 2007, Mannay 2016, Hjorth *et al.* 2020), inventive (Lury, Wakeford 2012), live (Back, Puwar 2013), material (Woodward 2019), walking (O'Neill, Roberts 2020) or mundane (Holmes, Hall 2020) methodologies, including experimentation, creativity, imagination, and multidimensionality (Koro-Ljungberg, Knight 2020). Creative methods challenge and extend "traditional" epistemologies, overcoming multiple boundaries including those between disciplines, between the various phases of research, and between participant and researcher. Moreover, they question implicit traditional assumptions about reliability in social research (Giorgi *et al.* 2021: 9). A "different kind of ethnography" (Elliott, Culhane 2016) integrates and fuses creative arts, digital media, and sensory

ethnography in practice, in theory and, finally, in teaching.

On the other hand, a desire for innovation combined with a more engaged public anthropology is leading to a diversification in the representation of research and in the means of restitution of research findings to a larger audience (e.g., creative writing, ethnographic fiction, graphic novels, performative texts, or ethnographic poetry). Today ethnographies are beginning to be published as graphic novels, theatre is used in teaching and in the analysis of fieldwork materials, and museum expositions, animated movies and graphic illustrations are created. Scholars have talked of ethnographies, defined as a bridge between the universe of research and the one of creation (Fassin 2020: 4). Others refer to "non textual media" (Aït-Touati 2021) or, in French academia, to "écritures alternatives en sciences sociales"<sup>1</sup> (alternative writings in social sciences). Of course, innovation and experimentation are often the privilege of anthropologists who occupy dominant positions, in a context of growing precariousness in academia, and it still seems challenging and risky<sup>2</sup> to be creative and innovative while writing a PhD thesis.

In a historical moment characterized at the same time by an attempt of weaving creativity into ethnographic practice, and by a neopositivist turn, we felt the need to question, on the one hand, "writing" as the main ethnographer's activity and, on the other hand, we wanted to consider the heuristic potential of embedding creative methodologies and alternative writings. The article is the fruit of a collective reflection which was initiated and carried out in collaboration with a small group of anthropologists and artists who use different forms of creative methodologies and alternative writings in their professional practices: drawing, affect theatre and graphic recording. Given the positivistic bias of the very word "writing," we talk of *creative ethnographic practices* to refer to the use of creative and alternative means of expressions. To give voice to this collective reflection

based on our different practices, the article was written and drawn by multiple hands<sup>3</sup> and shifts between first person plural in the introduction and the conclusion and first person singular in the middle part where each of us "re-presented" her/their own experience, both through images and written developments.

From our exchanges emerged a crucial insight. Even though we practice different creative means, these alternative practices share an important feature: they come into play and play into the different stages of ethnographic practices, for example as a method during fieldwork for "collecting data", as representation, and as analytical tool. We therefore analyze the work of an ethnographer as a continuum which is not made up only of the chronological phases of a research project, but as an ongoing process across different aspects of our ethnographic practice: fieldwork (relations, sensorial experiences, observations, interviews, conversations, etc.), the perception and interpretation of that experience, and its translation through communication to third parties (academics and non-academics).

In our contribution, we will argue that creative forms are like Ariadne's thread, which symbolizes the means through which we can get out of a difficult situation or place. In the Greek myth, the thread leads her out of the labyrinth. Ethnographic fieldwork is indeed a sort of labyrinth, and undoubtedly a difficult place to come back from, which leads some people to say that we "never come back" from fieldwork, an idea that does not refer merely to the possibility of physically being able to return. Indeed, once we finish our ethnography, how can we find the thread of our experience and translate it? Of course, we were all taught methods on how to classify materials, and nowadays we even have software capable of classifying and identifying patterns, but these are simply different expressions of the same positivist approach. Software programs can analyze words, but they do not classify smells, emotions, or images that are present

in our memories, in our journals, in our clothes. Our hypothesis is that creative forms are not merely and not only a way to disseminate research outside the ivory tower of academia, but represent a new, heuristic way to produce academic knowledge. As Ait-Touati (2021) puts it, “the question is not simply to disseminate research, which is the most classic way of articulating research and art, but to see when forms of alternative writings intervene within the research process.” To assess our hypothesis, we will take as an example three creative means of expressions used in our own practices: drawing, affect theatre, and graphic recording. Are these less “scientific” methods than the usual academic writing? Or do they provide a different form, and therefore also a different way of thinking? What is the heuristic value of creative ethnographic practices? In each section, these research questions allow us to question the epistemological, analytical and representational dimensions of creative means of expression, and to reflect upon the limits and the potential of creative ethno-graphic practices in the conclusions.

## Creative ethno-graphic practices

### #1: Drawing

Since completing her MA in anthropology, Monika Weissensteiner (anthropologist by training, with a subsequent PhD in Cultural and Global Criminology) has progressively integrated drawing practices into her academic work.

Drawing has a long history as a method in ethnographic fieldwork (Kuschnir 2016, Causey 2016). It has recently been rediscovered as a technique and as a process of seeing and documenting ethnographically during fieldwork. It has also been considered as a tool to make sense of the field and the researcher’s position therein. In his groundbreaking book *I swear I saw this: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, namely my own*, Taussig (2011: 49) draws attention to how the notebook

“with at least one foot in the art of the sensuous immediacy, is so valuable as an alternative form of knowledge to what eventually gets into print”. Recently, other anthropologists have dared to publish their ethnographic fieldwork drawings. Reflecting upon this practice, they highlight how drawing during fieldwork requires us to “slow down.” In *Drawn to see*, Causey speaks of “drawing enhanced seeing” (2016: 13), underpinning the epistemological value of drawing as a method, especially but not exclusively when documenting and translating visual observations in a visual and not verbal code. In addition, drawing is less intrusive than photography. It frequently triggers responses and interactions in the field, and enables working through and translating the emotions, frustrations, and contradictions of fieldwork (*ibid.*, Kuschnir 2016, Bonanno 2018). Moreover, today we find anthropologists who in collaboration with illustrators or more rarely through their own drawings have published comics<sup>4</sup>. Ethnographic storytelling is emerging through a graphic turn in social science (Atalay *et al.* 2019, Ingold 2011) and earlier works in graphic social medicine. It builds on and goes beyond visual anthropology’s focus on film and photography in research, at times redefining itself as graphic or multimodal anthropologies.

I (Monika Weissensteiner) started to explore drawing in anthropology initially as a means for representing and communicating anthropological engagement with contemporary issues<sup>5</sup>. However, I have always tended to visualize or make mind-maps, or, during fieldwork, to jot down quick sketches. During my PhD research, I explored ways to draw these elements together. Subsequently I engaged further with the transverse dimension of drawing, moving beyond the “representational dimension,” which had been my initial knotting together of visual and anthropological practice.

Drawing, as in comic or illustration, is a medium of line-drawing: a synthesis between visuals and text in space. The question is, though, “where does drawing end and writing begin?” (Ingold

2016: 123). Following Ingold’s inquiry into the history of lines, here I will only give a reminder that handwriting itself is a craft requiring skillful hand movement, just like drawing. Both practices produce lines, leaving graphic traces on the paper surface. Nevertheless, the institutionalized contrast between the graphic artist and the writer—particularly the scientist who writes—runs deep. I argue here that drawing is an epistemological, analytical as well as representational tool: a means of expression for visual knowledge production in ethnographic practice and anthropological research. I exemplify this through two illustrations from my research and dissertation<sup>6</sup>, in which I studied police-cooperation across Schengen border-regions (the “border-strip”). Each part of the thesis and each of its chapters opens with full-panel illustrations. In the world of comic books this opening is called a “splash page”: it introduces the narrative and sets the “climate” or what follows (Eisner 2008: 64). The images reproduced here (image 1, image 2) include an additional explanatory layer regarding the image composition (units) and colour codes for visualization (blue: fieldwork; red: conceptual elaboration; yellow: words/text).

Image 1 (thesis cover & chapter 1) introduces the reader to the research topic, methodological aspects, and conceptual elements. It is a condensed narrative of the research project: five units relate to each other and compose the page, integrating drawn words and images. The scene (unit 1) depicts a fieldwork-encounter between myself and one of my informants, a police officer, as I carried out research through interviews and (participant) observation. The speech-balloon (unit 2) contains a quote from the fieldwork and provides a verbally explicit interpretative grid to engage with the panel (and the thesis dissertation): the speaker tells us “Where we are”—in the (EU) Schengen area— and draws attention towards the spatial(-legal) reality of the borderline. In the right bottom corner, I visualize a memo in my notebook (unit 3): the border-strip

(the spaces adjacent to the borderline) and several cross-border policing instruments. The background (unit 4) is a conceptual elaboration. The “border-line”, represented through the line of the word “border”, moves through, and occupies space. The lines from (country) A to C are traces of movement: some pass across the border-space, others do not. A reader familiar with critical border-studies will read this visualization through the lens of theoretical debates. In the top of the drawing (unit 5), I engage with the etymology of ‘border(land)’: accordingly, a border is a limit that is shared; it separates, but likewise connects.

Image 2 introduces a chapter that zooms in on the meanings police officers attribute to certain policing instruments and places them within the broader historical and political context, taking an analytical interest in the production of space. The chapter opens with a visual focus on Police and Custom Cooperation Centers,

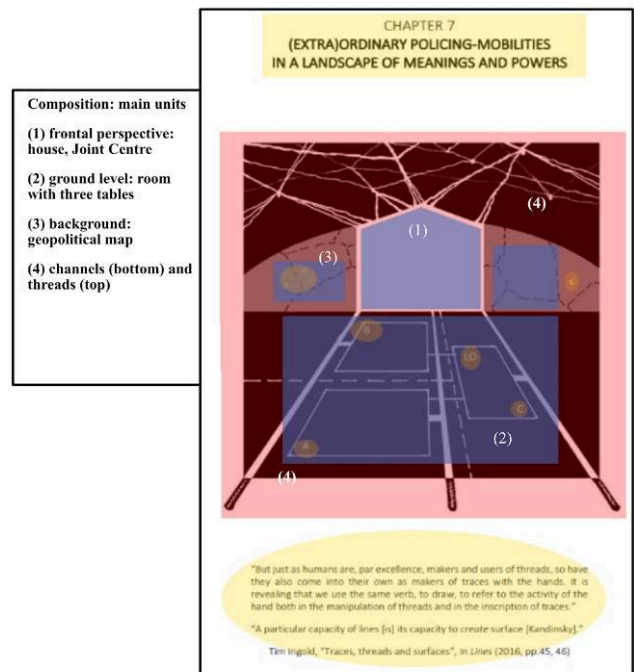
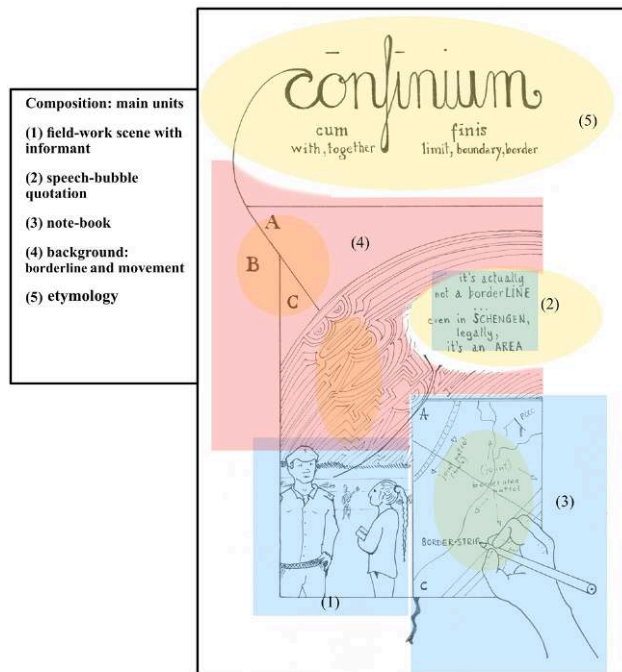
often also called “Joint Centres”. The heart of such a centre and house (unit 1) is the so-called “information exchange room” (unit 2): here officers from neighbouring countries share a single office and are in charge of responding to requests for direct police information exchange across border-region territories. This panel is primarily, but not only, a conceptual elaboration (see further below).

Unpacking the composition of the images and their creation process allows me to illustrate here, in writing, how the creative means of drawing feeds into ethnographic practice as a method during fieldwork, as a constitutive element of the analytical process of “thinking through”, and as a visual means for knowledge communication.

First, drawing appears as a method in fieldwork. The fieldwork scene and my notebook (image 1, bottom), as well as the ground-level perspective (image 2, room), originated from drawings in the field (blue). While

I did not use drawing systematically during this research, I reverted to it occasionally to jot down sketches either on site or from memory, or to complement interview notes with additional nonverbal information (gestures, facial expressions, site details etc.). Especially in research settings that might be sensible or involve delicate access, drawing constitutes a non-intrusive mode. Notably, it guarantees full anonymity, both during documentation and in publication. It does so, despite and through visualization.

Secondly, drawing is a tool for thinking through. Drawing, such as in the notebook (image 1), was also a constant part of exploring and explaining both to myself and to others my research topic: an important element for “thinking through”. Image 2 embodies this very well. Through the research process I became increasingly interested in the plurality of legal orders that enable and constrain cross-border policing and



■ fieldwork visualization ■ conceptual visualization ■ written words/letters

Image 1: "Policing-mobilities in the border-strip" (M. Weissensteiner)

■ fieldwork visualization ■ conceptual visualization ■ written words/letters

Image 2: "Lines: threads, traces and surfaces—territory and network" (M. Weissensteiner)

in the role that situated practices play in negotiating these orders, thereby contributing to the production of a particularly (re)configured Schengen-space. Moving through the field, I felt puzzled by an apparent contradiction: how these practices were both geographically and legally peripheral, and contemporaneously at the core of ongoing reconfigurations (of borders, sovereignty, policing, Schengen, etc.). As I visited the room in the illustration, an officer exclaimed that while their countries weren't all sharing a border, here the officers had eye contact and talked across the room. In the image, the countries are identified with letters A, B, C. In Joint Centres, neighbouring police-forces work "under the same roof". However, centres may also host so-called Liaison Officers (abbreviated in the image with "LO"). Practices such as LO-hosting or network-exchanges between Joint Centres, for example, contribute to extending the work of the centres beyond its territorially grounded primary border-region purpose. I came across my fieldwork drawing: the ground-level perspective was jotted down near the written transcription of the officers' exclamation (drawing in fieldwork). It was the drawing—a form of "drawing enhanced seeing" (Causey 2016: 13) even after the fieldwork—which led me to think further about the space and practices of this room (micro-space) and their production of a "map" that differs from the geopolitical one. A geopolitical map was indeed also appended in that room: in the image the map is incorporated into the background, partitioning the space of the globe (blue). The drawing triggered memories and thinking. This analytical process was initially not done in writing but *in* and *through* drawing. My "thinking through" conceptual sketch, abstracting the room of the Joint Centre and exploring visually multiple relations, comes very close to the graphically finalized drawing. It interrogates the production of space through practices of place-, channel- and thread-making, which in the academic debate resonates with reflections upon the role of territory and networks (image 2).

This, then, shows the continuum between the various aspects of ethnographic practice (fieldwork, analysis, representation) which became quite literally interwoven and drawn together in a single illustration. They are represented as such, simultaneously, in the published image, which leads me to the third point.

Finally, in anthropological research drawing can be a medium for knowledge visualization and for visual representation. This means that words and images do not merely illustrate or explain one another, they are intricately entangled. As representational practice, drawing enables us to explore, explain and communicate complex relations, to draw together fieldwork data, evidence, and theory. Complex global and spatial entanglements are represented in more immediate ways than textual order can achieve. The viewer engages with all the units on the page simultaneously. Meanwhile, the author-artist does control the story and the reading, for example by choosing particular frames and closures in the picture (especially in the sequential art of comics). As visualized in the graphic recording dedicated to my work by Roberta Ragona (image 6, p. 151), a drawing selects what we wish the viewer to focus on most, in other words, on what story to tell. This can be done by abstracting, leaving out/zooming in, or modifying details of a particular spatial-temporal instance that are not the focus of the argument or story. The style I have used is simplified and iconic, and non-realistic (see McCloud 1993), unless in instances where I depicted historical or public figures, or publicly known events. Some of the figures are "composite characters" (see also Hamdy *et al.* 2017, appendix) which is, indeed, not too different from thick descriptions of ethnographic encounters. In the picture, however, meanings as well as analyses are subtly intertwined. We create what I like to think of as a multi-layered surface of interpretation and meaning. The act of reading comics not only allows but requires the "interpretative and visual engagement

of the reader" (McCloud 1993, Eisner 2008). Images require interpretation and are open to associations from the viewer. Thereby readers draw on their own knowledge and imagination. This can be perceived as a limitation in scientific communication, and at times runs along a tricky thin line between drawings that enhance recognition, and drawings that stereotype. In the combination of illustration and academic writing, as in my own dissertation, some of the analytical thoughts embedded in the images will be more or less visible to the reader, depending upon his or her familiarity with the subject. Responding to the limitations highlighted above, I would also like to draw attention to the fact that, when working at the crossroads between social sciences and law, using drawing had the advantage of creating an interdisciplinary academic space that is not burdened by conceptual disciplinary terminologies. However, this does not imply that drawings are less academically sound.

Research-based "ethno-graphic-novels" for a diversified target group (academic and non-academic) have shown that a visual thick description in comic-book form does work. They challenge what is deemed a rigid dichotomy between text and image. Words and images are intricately entangled and "can have synchronous affective intensities" (Dix, Kaur 2019: 90). The researcher, the story-boarder and the illustrator are not necessarily the same person. While this might limit social scientists in their engagement with this research output medium, it is also an opportunity to produce creative ethnographies that can open a collaborative space between social scientists and illustrators. Additionally, these publications have adopted different ways of including written text beyond the words in the comic itself. Some examples are the inclusion of a detailed appendix—regarding the subject, as well as the medium, (see Hamdy *et al.* 2017) or written introductions to chapters (Makaremi, Parciboula 2019). Others have indeed incorporated a prominent narrating voice into the comic itself (Fassin *et al.* 2020) or have suggested it

be read in combination with an already published traditional monograph. Combining full-page illustrations as splash-page and classical writing, as I did in my thesis, is yet another possibility. Still, we must bear in mind that these are examples and there are many explorations yet to come as to how text and visuals can relate in the space of a traditional page or print publication, or also in the digital space and beyond.

Drawing, as in comics or illustrations, is a medium of line-drawing: a synthesis between visuals and text in space. The etymological meaning of “graphy” clearly roots ethnographic practice as a process that reaches beyond writing *strictu sensu*. It refers to processes or styles of writing, drawing, or graphic representation (Causey 2016: 29). Handwriting itself can be seen as a specific form of line drawing (Ingold 2011, 2016). This, as well as the use of drawings in early anthropology and fieldwork, in the process of technologization of recording and depicting, and through the transformation of writing into typing, often seems forgotten. Drawing is an “inscriptive practice in its own right” (Ingold 2011: 2). This, however, requires that drawings should not be relegated to being perceived as a creative illustrative decoration at best.

## #2: Affect Theater

Since 2015, Greg Pierotti (theater maker) and Cristiana Giordano (anthropologist) have been designing methodologies to work with and render empirical materials around questions of movement and violence into performances that not only inform but also elicit affects. Affect has often been invoked and engaged with (as an experience and an analytical tool) as an alternative to representation and a mode of presence and of experiencing the worlds around us that challenges the distinction between subjects and objects (Deleuze 1988; Gregg, Seigworth 2010). Our practice, Affect Theater, blends theatrical techniques, anthropological fieldwork methods, and affect theory. For both ethnographers and theater makers

working with the “real”, this writing and research methodology allows an engagement with empirical material collected in the field (interviews, archival documents, medical and legal reports, etc.), and the elements of the stage (light, sound, props, architecture, costumes, spatial relationship, as well as text) to both construct and deconstruct narrative for the stage or for the page. Ours is not an experiment in performing ethnographies, nor is it an exploration of the anthropology of theater, but rather a lab where we use theatrical techniques and performance creation to engage with and trouble the truth claims and privileged theoretical positions that often challenge social scientists and other writers working with the empirical. It allows for the rendering of felt experience from the field that is often obscured by the rush to represent compelling narratives. Affect Theater firstly emerged as a process to analyze empirical materials and render them in alternative forms to the monograph and the academic article, but it soon started to impact our ways of doing fieldwork, as we explain later.

While we work with Affect Theater to create performance events, we have also shared our process with social scientists and humanities scholars who are not specifically interested in theater but are curious to learn a more playful approach to research and gain a more performative understanding of narrative that can translate into new forms of writing (essays, plays, short stories). Similarly, theater makers and performers can learn to apply an understanding of political and cultural contexts gleaned from the social sciences.

In Affect Theater workshops, we create discrete performance events, called *episodes*, where elements of the stage and empirical materials co-exist and resonate with each other, leading to new and more associative analyses. We devise a kind of theater that weaves the textual together with the tactile, sonic, and visual elements of experience. The process of Affect Theater is composed of three parts: research, episodes composition, and dramaturgy. We will discuss

them here in linear fashion, but they are in fact fluid and interwoven in practice.<sup>7</sup> Episodes can be as short as a few seconds or as long as several minutes and are framed by the words “We begin” and “We end.” This simple framing device allows us to think structurally about the units of theatrical time that eventually make up an entire performance progression. But, first, we explore each theatrical element by creating episodes that investigate their sensorial qualities; we find out what they can tell us rather than make them function in the way we have decided they must. Text and narrative are de-centered and made to interact with other elements of the stage in fresh ways. Not all episodes end up in a final performance. Making them is a way of creating an experience with the materials that does not necessarily lead to knowledge or understanding. It is a form of analysis that allows experimentation with the empirical and the conceptual. This analytical work may or may not make it into a play, but it is essential in any process of rendering ethnographic material in a shareable form. Letting go of the urge toward signification can be challenging. These explorations can free us of the burden of story-making and create an affective space to play with phenomena and spectacle for their own sakes. As the work becomes more complex, these episodes are put into relationship with collected texts, which may lead to the discovery of forms that can hold textual content. This collaborative compositional process results in a performance and a more affective dramaturgy (Giordano, Pierotti 2018).

The experiment of weaving theater and anthropology has allowed us to “get caught again” in the affective experience of research and sites, something which Jeanne Favret-Saada (1990) theorized as a research method (*to get caught*) and writing (*to get caught again*) where the aim is not to understand but to create a kind of knowledge that emerges from associations, unconscious positionings, and affective engagements. Like in a dream, a lot of what happens during our research processes can only be



grasped through the affects that are produced in us and the oblique associations we make while immersed in our field sites. In our workshops, things are brought together following a logic that is intuitive/non-literal, through a movement from one object to a text to a shade of light. Chains of free associations and overlays are formed creating more evocative responses to our research.

Affect Theater is simultaneously what we use in our research sites to “get caught,” and in our workshops to “get caught *again*,” making it both a fieldwork method and a tool to translate empirical material into a representation. For instance, in the rehearsal studio, when developing a piece for public performance and when writing scripts for publication, we have used Affect Theater to compose chains of free associations. This associative rather than narrative approach draws out evocative and often unexpected responses from our empirical materials. New experiences of the empirical often call for a return to the field to gather fresh research from certain interlocutors, rendered necessary by surprising turns in the development of a script or performance. When we do return to the field, we tune in as much to the “elements of the stage” found in our research sites (lights, costume, props, architecture, etc.), as we do to the verbal content of an interview. This leads us to different lines of engagement with interlocutors and places.

Back in the workshop space, we also discover theatrical forms that can disrupt narratives and produce affect. For instance, in many episodes of *b more*, Greg’s play on police violence in Baltimore<sup>8</sup>, painter’s tape is laid down to mark a map of the city on the stage. This performs the ways city planning inscribes/prescribes the spaces in which a black body may or may not move. By having a white actor create these boundaries, the mapping in the play enacts what the planners produce in the city: on the one hand, forms of discontinuity, division, and interruption, and on the other, forms of communication, community, and

flow. During the performance, each time the narrative threatens to take over as the principal structuring device of the play (or dramaturgy), a painter’s tape episode disrupts that



Image 3: more workshop (Directed by Greg Pierotti. UC Davis Department of Theatre and Dance. March 11-13, 2015. Wright Hall Arena Stage. Davis, CA. Photo by Cristiana Giordano)

drive (image 3).

As mentioned earlier, Affect Theater shapes not only the “writing” phase of our practice, but also the initial empirical research and our various returns to field sites. Along with interviews, fieldnotes, and archival materials, we tune in to the specific visual, aural, tactile and textual source material of different sites. For example, during the creation of *Unstories*, Cristiana introduced paintings and drawings that were shared with her during her fieldwork by Homiex, a young Nigerian artist she met in Siracusa, Italy. In the workshop, we used this material, along with projections of WhatsApp chats between them, to create a character who emerged through images rather than through embodied acting. We also attend to seemingly unrelated design elements pulled directly from transcribed interviews because they strike us. During one interview for *b more*, Greg was struck when community activist Mama Ama described a cabaret show she was

doing with her band following Freddie Gray’s funeral. Later the song *I Like it* by the DeBarge, which she referenced in the interview, served to create atmosphere, and point to differences in cultural contexts between black and white characters as well as in audiences. We are always mining our sites and empirical material for any design element that might add to the theatrical world we create.

The performance event entitled *Unstories* was created with ethnographic material around the Mediterranean “refugee crisis” during a series of workshops that we led between 2016-2018 with anthropology and performance studies colleagues and students at the University of California Davis. Participants worked with empirical material from Cristiana’s fieldwork in Italy and elements of the stage to investigate the narratives, spaces, and experiences that discussions of the “crisis” marginalize, such as the stories of those who don’t qualify as refugees and are either deported or pushed to the margins of European nation-states. One student in the audience of *Unstories* at UC Davis described the value of this work: “Taking the stories off the page and bringing them into a visual and aural dimension made them much more impactful. It increased my knowledge of the human behind the ethnographies.”

In 2018, we started working on a book manuscript about our shared experiment. We wanted to include the script of *Unstories*, the performance, but we ran into some challenges in trying to convey on the page what occurred on the stage. We needed to find ways in which the text and design could create dissonances and resonances that might engage readers into their own acts of analysis and interpretation, just like the *Unstories* spectators were drawn into the performance event. Feeling our way into what the piece did in the performance space and then attempting to convey that, required a reconsideration of how the text lived on the page in relationship to its layout, color, image, blank spaces, and formatting, and of its life in a digital

media. We wanted the interaction of text and design to add up to a larger affective experience for the reader.

For instance, we worked with one of the episodes which appears towards the end of the text, entitled "Episode—The Legal Doctor" (image 4). Most of the episode's text is drawn from an interview with a legal doctor responsible for fingerprinting and bone scanning immigrants to determine their age. This medical exam allows him to either categorize them as "minors," and move them into the system, or to categorize them as "adults", which allows the Italian state to deport them. In the performance, the episode conveyed a rather complex and unsolvable set of contradictions. Without landing on a prescriptive analysis about what was acceptable and problematic for all the participants in the act of identification and classification, the performed episode addressed the complexities and paradoxes of these bureaucratic processes. Some of the conundrums that the episode highlighted were the difficulty of locating an empirical truth about people through scientific procedures, the problems and contradictions of the care and control of the state, and the ambivalence of biometric practices. However, when we put the words on the page, they failed to convey the central affective quality of the episode. It read as if the actor performing the legal doctor was conveying information about a complex and problematic identification process, and four other actors were somehow pretending to represent in a playful way on stage what was being described. How could we convey the actual felt sense of the episode for the page, as we had on the stage?

Rendering the performance script for the page required yet another type of devising. The fingerprints, for example, were images that appeared as an illustration of the identification processes enacted by legal doctors on foreign minors. We had projected slides of fingerprints against the back wall of the playing space. In that context, the fingerprint was not a form in the same way the fishbowls were, but more a design element used to

embellish the visual storytelling in the episode. As we started revising the script for publication, we discovered that these same images could become performative in a different way than they had been in the stage event. We gave them a central position on the page. The thumbprint emerged as a form that required the text itself to follow its curving lines. As text collided with image, it slowly became less and less legible. Therefore, the visual forms do not decorate the script but interact with text to perform the process and method themselves. This is a performative text where words start to bend and follow the shape

and lines of the fingerprint. The form begins to impact the material, shaping, coloring, and ordering the language drawn from the transcripts. In other words, design can guide content as easily as content usually guides design.

This formal discovery also re-engaged us with our research material in two important ways. First, we realized that we now needed more material about the function of fingerprints for the state. We conducted more interviews, including one with a shelter coordinator, which turned out to be enlightening. We also reexamined the legal doctor's transcripts to find the specific parts

**SHELTER COORDINATOR:** As far as that wrist exam is concerned - the auxological exam - it is not a doctor that orders it but the magistrate from the tribunal of minors because it is the magistrate that authorizes the procedures to verify the person's exact age. Of course, there is always a 6 months range of error, more or less. In any event, if a boy has just turned 18 or he is almost 18, there is always the presumption that they are a minor.

**LEGAL DOCTOR:** Obviously there is no complete... The results are sent to the police headquarters, or the prefecture. The magistrate knows this is the as long as it's established that they're a minor.

Again the group freezes. FOREIGN MINOR slides out, returns to unrolled paper, and continues drawing.

**SHELTER COORDINATOR:** (Simultaneous with the LEGAL DOCTOR's following line) By the way, the exam attesting the real age also includes an exam of the hip. In case the person tested is an adult, they enter the age range of 25-27 or 20-22, and they have to leave the shelter for minors and enter one for adults.

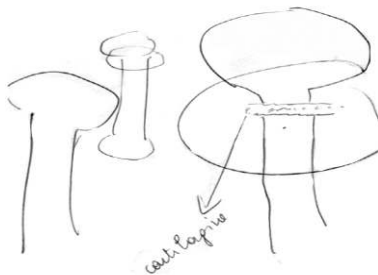


Image 4: The legal doctor (excerpt from *Unstories*, written and directed by Cristiana Giordano and Greg Pierotti, forthcoming)



most suited for this formal leap. This clarified the important event in the doctor's text: he is also struggling with a border, the one between what can be empirically proven about the body of the migrant, and what can only exist in an opaque range of probabilities.

This illegibility mirrors the paradox produced by the relation between a biometric form that tries to represent the transparency of identity and biography, and the text that is inscribed in it. The dissonances between text and form/design also perform how, lacking legal identification, bodies in movement were able to obscure their realities to the state in ways that benefited them. For other readers, this text may perform different associations. This is what we hoped to convey with forms on the page, but each reader will create their own associations, which is precisely the point of our writing and research experiment, *Affect Theater*. We do not aim to create a shared understanding in the audience of specific meanings or linear narrative arcs, but to create a space of associative thinking and feeling.

### #3: Graphic recording

Graphic recording—the translation in real-time of discourse and presentations into a single visual object made of both text and images—goes by many names: scribing, visual thinking, sketch noting, graphic harvesting. Every name defines a slightly different use of the same set of visual thinking tools depending on the context, the stage in of the work for which it's used, the different dynamics between the speakers, the role of the person performing it, and the frame of the conversation.

I (Roberta Ragona) am an illustrator with a background of studies in anthropology. I came across graphic recording while working in advertising, and I was immediately struck by how much what I had learned about fieldwork and about engaging with ethnographic material was useful when taking up the role of graphic recorder: the active listening, the data gathering, the pattern recognition.

Graphic recording could be compared to participant observation: a graphic recorder is not a silent witness of the events, and the use of a visual format to present the information can prompt new insights on the topics and help the speakers see their own contribution from a new perspective. It's an act of active listening that helps put in focus the framework of the conversation, helping everyone to reflect on what was collectively shared.

The roots of graphic recording as a field can be traced to the Seventies, when it was used in San Francisco, California as a device for visual documentation to guide meetings and document ideas. David Sibbet (1980)—information designer and pioneer of visual facilitation—codified most of its foundational principles. The fact that it was primarily a tool for facilitation strongly affected its visual language, favouring a synthetic style of drawing that privileged simplicity, intelligibility, and speed over aesthetic. Facilitators were not necessarily people with a background in drawing and fine arts, and the democratization of the tools for visual representation gave birth to a visual alphabet that anyone with a bit of practice can learn and use to represent complex ideas.

Graphic recording became independent from facilitation as the medium evolved from a niche tool for small groups to big events with many participants and complex topics. Initially born out of the necessities of the business environment, over time and thanks to the seminal work of artists, scribes, and theorists of the field—such as Kelvy Bird (2018)—graphic recording was developed into a distinct social art form. It was used to facilitate systems-learning in addressing important cultural and societal dilemmas such as climate change, gender issues and collective responses to global events, such as pandemics. This evolution was accelerated by the multidisciplinary approach of professionals outside the entrepreneurial world, and through the influence of disciplines such as graphic journalism and information design. Today graphic recording is a common tool in cultural mediation,

community driven projects and collaborative practices, where it is not used in lieu of, but as an intensifier of the written work.

Graphic recording has indeed, several uses and, as a graphic recorder, I have used it both in business context and in more research related projects, including in several initiatives that sought to develop tools to communicate and act on the topic of climate change and climate adaptation. An element in the research was gathering data and first-hand accounts, inquiring how different parts of the population (age-groups, professions, or rural and urban environments) perceive the theme in relation to their daily life and work. My role inside the team was to collect and visualize the data and the stories gathered by the facilitators, and to make sure that the communities involved in the process felt seen and heard.

In 2021, I had the opportunity to experiment graphic recording within an anthropological and academic setting. I was invited to carry out a graphic recording of a workshop titled “New forms of ethno-graphies: alternative forms of restitutions and polysemic languages”, organized by Alice Sophie Sarcinelli and Monika Weissensteiner within the conference of the *Italian Society for Applied Anthropology (SIAA)*. The laboratory was a space for exchanging ideas on creative practices anthropologists are experimenting with today: animated movies, theatre, collages, drawing and more. This workshop-situation constitutes a good example both to describe the possible use of graphic recording as a methodological tool, and to show how this tool has allowed the authors of this article to identify the common themes and hidden threads of creative ethno-graphic practices, which are the topic of this article.

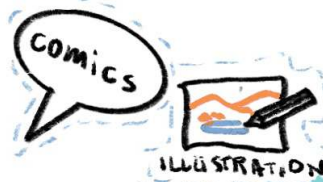
Not unlike an ethnographer who first enters the field, the scribe immerses himself or herself in a setting “other” than one's own. I may have a background in ethnography, but I'm by no means a scholar or expert of the field. This can be daunting, but it is not an unusual position for a scribe, rather it's the norm. Just like



Image 5: Graphic recording of Affect Theatre as creative ethnographic practice, SIAA workshop 2021 (R. Ragona)

ethnographers, scribes need to familiarize themselves as much as possible and with as much rigour as possible with the topic at hand before a recording session. However, the idea that they are there because they have some distance from the subject is ingrained in the role. It gives them the space to pick up key themes, recurring questions, and underground currents. It is a constant displacement, but it's the kind of displacement that makes the graphic recording useful in supporting the emergence of a group intelligence, and in visualizing the rhizomatic thought that can emerge from such sessions. The hand-drawn illustrations carried out during the workshop help make common threads and differences emerge. They serve not simply aesthetic purposes. Translating concepts to visual metaphors shows the different perspectives on a subject and allows them to be pinned down and to be agreed or disagreed on. Through the graphic recording of the workshop two main "hidden threads" became visible, leading across the creative means of expression and connecting the presentations.

Firstly, the creative means comes into play at different stages of ethno-



graphic practice, and it does not only serve the researchers as output. As recorded for example with regards to Affect Theatre (image 5), in some instances it is used as output that fosters a public anthropology, in other instances it allows "getting caught"— and getting caught a gain — through associative and intuitive thinking (see also #2). Importantly, researchers describe a constant movement between data collection, analysis, and representation through their examples.

Secondly, the languages shared during the meeting make use of iconic, simplified images such as collages, animation, and comics, to tap into the empathy of the audience. Drawing, as re-presented in #1 and in the graphic recording



Image 6: Graphic recording of drawing as creative ethnographic practice, SIAA workshop 2021 (R. Ragona)



groups or individual conversations and interviews. However, it is worth investigating whether it can also be used by research teams in collective work analysis. A first attempt to systematically examine this possibility was made by Hautopp in *Drawing Connections—An Exploration of Graphic and Visual Facilitation in Organisational and Higher Educational Contexts* (2022). Still it has to be pointed out that graphic facilitation is “an area with a significant number of experiences from practice, though with sparse research. [...]” (Hautopp, Ørngreen 2018: 59). Indeed, there is uncertainty as to how the dynamics between recorder and participants, as well as the choice of techniques used, impact on the process of shared or critical thinking.

In our case, the visual notetaking of the workshop supported the development of the themes that are the fabric of this article. As a tool for “data analysis”, graphic recording helped to identify “hidden threads”, which emerged more clearly through graphic notes and through our exchanges, and were thus helpful in thinking the argument through and in disseminating it.

## Conclusion: What's Science All About? Weaving Creative Ethno-graphies into the Ivory Tower

The collective “writing” of this contribution has been a creative process in itself. Patch-working and weaving together thoughts and expressions by multiple hands went hand in hand with the visualizations. This trajectory brings us to re-engage with our initial questions: what is writing all about? Is anthropological research all about writing? The examples we have presented and the article as it appears—written, drawn, published on paper or online—empirically show that our work is a great deal about writing, but it is not all about writing. We did not get rid of the written word and did not abandon

writing; indeed, we are writing just now, here. Rather, our attempt is to go “beyond writing” or, rather, to “weave together” verbalization, visualization and other means of expressions.

The three creative ethno-graphic practices we have presented are part of wider movements within the field that weave creative and alternative means of expressions into research. We are living in an opportune historical moment for creative endeavours, engendered by academic desires for a publicly engaged anthropology and calls for more innovation. But we are also experiencing a moment of struggle regarding the creation as well as the reception of these works. Vignettes or illustrations integrate visuals and words, which create their own synergy, allowing a simultaneous engagement by the reader/viewer (#1: drawing). In performative texts, page design guides content in the translation from the “stage” to the “page” (#2: affect theater). In turn, the “reader” actively interacts in different degrees with creative ethnographies, engendering his/her own associations, analyses and interpretations: not unlike the graphic recorder (#3: graphic recording), whose restitution, additionally, enabled a further development of the emerging shared reflections.

These are just the first steps on a long path: there is enormous potential in practically exploring the interaction between page, space, text, colour, and design. However, this path will be possible only under given conditions. First, it requires that both the editorial format and the readership depart from the epistemological standpoint that only the written word contains the truth and anything else is illustrative. Consequently, there is also an urge to rethink the publishing structure, in which the visual layout still privileges text continuity. An identifiable risk is also that creative ethnographic practices are being appreciated as—but hence reduced to—output only, and more importantly, as output for non-academics. This leads towards a broader question regarding the place of creative ethno-graphic practices within the “ivory tower”. In fact, there is still a symbolic and concrete

boundary between science and art: creative ethno-graphic practices risk to be placed or rather relegated to an “in-between” no man's land. It is therefore necessary to move beyond this dichotomous divide between arts and science, and to recognize the added value of interdisciplinary work and intersectoral explorations and collaborations of creative practices.

Finally, and more radically, there is a systemic shift which needs to take place: in an academic world that is submitted to capitalistic rules of production and, in some countries, to a strict disciplinary approach, creative ethno-graphical practices can develop only if we find institutional ways to value creative ethno-graphic methodologies and outputs. This applies especially in the context of an ever-increasing evaluation of researchers' productivity, and of precarization and competition, but it is not less relevant when it comes to the training-portfolio or program we offer to students. While creative ethnographies are possible also thanks to the external demand for scientists to “enhance impact” beyond the ivory tower, a closer look brings to the fore the paradox between the “boost your impact” mantra (of a neoliberal productivity paradigm), preferably in the shortest time possible, and the need for slow thinking and process, which is a *sine qua non* of academic research and lies at the very heart of ethnographies and anthropological knowledge production. To sum up, the very possibility of benefiting from creative ethno-graphic practices is conditioned by the need to consider them as an integral part of scientific production. We should return, then, to the very question that accompanied this “patchwork article”, weaving together texts and images, theatre, and drawing: are creative expressions in ethnography and in anthropological research less “scientific” than usual academic writing?

The conflict therefore centers around the definition of anthropology as a science. Participant observation (the truth of vision) and its translation through and into text (the truth of writing) are powerful culturally,

socially, and historically contingent repertoires, as well as being ingrained in the ethnographic power-relation. So, what happens if we introduce new repertoires, and in particular repertoires in which the body and emotions (Sarcinelli 2017), as well as intuition, associations and affect (Giordano, Pierotti 2020) gain authority? What heuristic value do creative ethnographic practices hold? Contemporary creative ethnographies, without claiming to be a new truth, contribute to critical academic endeavours that interrogate the conditions of scientific knowledge production and academic conventions of dissemination. They provide evidence of the value of observing and translating the ethnographic experience through “other” modalities of expression: “Creative, performative, and sensory practices provide a means to live the ethnographic experience differently. They make us reconsider our position in the field from an attitude that focuses on the sensory and creative engagements of visual practices” (Leon-Quijano 2022). These ethnographies enable us to interlace in the process and in the output production the sensory experience of our fieldwork, such as the tactile, sonic, and visual elements of experience. Creative ethnographies are therefore closer to the ethnographic data than the order established by text. We could say that creative means themselves function as a thread that enables a weaving together of the scattered experiences and often also contradictory data from the field, without the need to pack it into a linear narrative, as indeed required within a “rational” science paradigm. Additionally, creative ethnographic practices incorporate the field when taking shape: the drawing of lines as a medium to trace reconfigurations of the borderline (#1, image 1), the white actor’s painter tape laying down the disruption of space and movement (#2, image 3), or the metaphor of embroidery used in the graphic recording (#3, image 7).

But creative ethnographies do not only affect writing, more importantly, they affect thinking, that

is, by providing a different form of translation and representation, they help to develop a different way of thinking. The creative practices we have presented here provide insights into certain patterns of thinking. They are a form of thought that requires one to “slow down”: the practice of graphic recording enables a to-and-fro between the “field” of the laboratory contributions, their visual representation, further insights, and their visualization. Drawing practices sketch a similar movement of “thinking through” on the page and in time, while affect theatre drives a similar process on and through the stage. The creative forms engender a way of thinking that, each in their own way, moves from rational to associative or intuitive, from linear to circular. The form which the respective practices take incorporates and expresses ethnographic research not as a chronological, linear, and divided process between fieldwork, analysis and representation, but weaves together different dimensions in a constant movement. The ethnographic experience happens *in* and *through* creative forms, initially, and not *only* in writing.

To conclude, while creating spaces for publications in multiple forms is a slow but positive development to be encouraged, the examples in this article also bear evidence to the heuristic value of creative forms of expressions, as they play an important part in the very production of academic knowledge, one that acknowledges the senses, subjectivity, and the body in the research process. These very practices of bringing different dimensions together have brought to the fore a key aspect of ethnographic practice: the weaving together of different elements (datasets, moments, encounters, sources) and dimensions (temporal, spatial, material, sensorial), but also the constant circular movement between research, thinking through, and representation. Creative ethno-graphic practices allow us to incorporate into knowledge aspects and dimensions that often remain buried under a linear written narrative. This is the thread in the

making, which leads Ariadne’s path through the labyrinth, and which enables ethnographers to find a way and not remain stuck or get lost in the fieldwork, while at the same time allowing them to give it form.

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- See, for example, the first attempts of innovation in PhD dissertations (Gentile 2020, Weissensteiner 2021) the book resulting from the master dissertation by Denise Pettinato (2021) or the sound slideshow and exhibition Les Rugbywomen as part of Leon-Quijano's PhD thesis (2017).
  - Sarcinelli wrote the introduction as part of a project that has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101026211; Weissensteiner the section "Creative ethno-graphic practices #1", the conclusions and the images 1, 2, 3; Giordano and Pierotti authored section "Creative ethno-graphic practices #2", Giordano image 3 and Giordano and Pierotti image 4; Ragona authored section "Creative ethno-graphic practices #3" and images 5, 6 and 7.
  - See the ethnoGRAPHIC Series of Toronto University Press (Hamdy et al. 2017; Waterston, Cordon 2020), and, in France, several collaborative publications (Maret, Gourarier 2016, Makaremi, Parciboula 2019, Fassin et al. 2020, Lesourd, Deleau 2020) or, using drawing as well as other creative forms of expressions, for example, <<https://illustratinganthropology.com/>>, <<https://imaginative-ethnography.com>>.
  - In academic settings, see e.g. Weissensteiner 2011; <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/raieducation/4171757602/in/photostream/ff>>; <<https://www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de/en/fachbereich-sowi/professuren/heinemann/research/lie-detection.html>>; <<https://www.sozilogie.rwth-aachen.de/go/id/khecr>>.
  - Image 1 "Policing-mobilities in the border-strip" (Weissensteiner 2021: 1); Image 2 "Lines: threads, traces and surfaces—territory and network" (*ibid.*: 145).
  - For a more detailed description of each part through which Affect Theater is practiced, see Giordano, Pierotti 2020.
  - B more is a play on the death of African American Baltimore resident Freddie Gray while in custody of the police. It deals with questions of race and violence in contemporary American society, with a specific focus on anti-blackness. In 2015, Greg Pierotti wrote, directed, and produced the first act of the play at the University of California, Davis. He is currently working on the second and last act which addresses the trial of the police officers involved in Gray's detention. (b more. Directed by Greg Pierotti. UC Davis Department of Theatre and Dance. March 11-13, 2015. Wright Hall Arena Stage. Davis, CA).

## Notes

- The term was introduced by the Réseau national des écritures alternatives en sciences sociales, a network of around a hundred social scientists who use texts, image and sound in their research practice. See <<https://gdrecritures.hypotheses.org/reas>>.