I swear I hated it, therefore I drew it:

A semi-serious, but definitely (autobio-, bio- and ethno-) graphic leap into the practice of drawing

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Abstract

Having acknowledged the ‘visual silence’ that has since long fallen over drawing as an ethnographic method, this paper sets off to vouch for a return to drawing in the field as a practice which, it suggests, is both generative of alternative ethnographic insights and productive of new modes of (self)reflexivity. Through references to existing literature on methods and theories of visual anthropology as well as evocative flashbacks to personal fieldwork experiences, this paper enters in dialogue, and responds to Ingold’s call for graphic anthropology, and aims at further opening up, and expanding upon today’s debate on visual methods.
In recent times, drawing as an ethnographic method has been celebrated in its capacity to push and challenge the limits of ethnographic representations, while also contributing to the reformulation of how anthropological knowledge is produced (Ingold 2011). However, its potentials as a heuristic device remains largely under-analysed (van Walputte 2017b). Iconoclastic qualms seem in fact to persist: since Aristotle, the Western academic tradition has mainly developed through an enduring text-centrism. However, by definition and by its very epistemological nature, anthropology has long wrestled with and against stereotypes and conventional forms of representation; yet the tendency to relegate visuals to the rank of para-textual accessories to text-based ethnographic works proves hard to shift. Indeed, visual representations, including drawings, have generally been devalued in relation to writing (Taussig 2009) and have often been considered as just a supplementary technique of documentation (MacDougall 2006). Since Malinowski’s Argonauts, anthropology has established itself as a discipline of words and found its canon in the ethnographic monograph (Grimshaw 2015; MacDougall 2006; Stoller 1997). Consistent with what Susan Sontag has identified with the West logocentric tradition since Plato and Aristotle (Sontag 2009), writing has stood for the utmost theoretical, interpretative and stylistic sophistication, while drawing still figures as a graphic simplification, or a visual cue to theoretical elaboration of more complex kinship diagrams, maps and the like.

Micheal Taussig aptly describes the academic attitude towards non-textual forms of representations as ‘a discrete visual silence’ (2009: 266). However, as MacDougall (2006) suggests, anthropologists have never actually lost interest in visual anthropology, rather they have become increasingly unable to keep up with the challenges that visual anthropology prompts them to embrace, especially with the potential of images to challenge and disarrange categorisation and description. While ‘words speak out and delimit their own terrains’, MacDougall (2006: 213) notices that images, on the contrary, disquietly open up to potentially unlimited interpretations. Interestingly, Sontag (2009) suggests that contemporary preoccupations with interpretation derive from Platonic and Aristotelian ideas of art as mimesis, and argues that interpretation is a strategy to resolve a discrepancy between form and content. As an exercise of western intellectualism, interpretation has the effect of taming the spontaneous, sensuous and subjective responses to any piece of art.

Especially interested in the potentials of visual anthropology, Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz voice the necessity to overcome the long-standing separation between ‘anthropology’s visual and textual wings’ (2015: 256): this would foster a productive exchange within anthropology and between inquiries developed through writing and those pursued through films and other non-printed forms. Departing from Tim Ingold’s (2011) understanding of drawing as an act which reconciles ‘doing, observing and describing’, Grimshaw and Ravetz propose to look at drawing as bridging across the discipline divide (2015: 256) in virtue of its potential to generate new forms of anthropological knowledge. Indeed, Ingold’s argument on drawing as an embodied practice of knowledge production represents a powerful attempt to restore drawing to the rank of anthropological practice. Timely, his call for a graphic anthropology where ‘we learn to follow movements and draw lines’ (Ingold, 2011:2) aligns with a renewed
scholarly interest in the body (Grimshaw 2015; MacDougall 2006, for instance) and in the senses (Stoller 1997; 1989) as alternative ways of knowing.

From a more methodological perspective instead, Michael Taussing’s work ‘I swear I saw it’ (2011) and Andrew Causey’s (2016) ‘Drawn to see’ represent two important contributions to the conversation on the potential of drawing in anthropology. However, Taussig’s book seems to proceed more in the direction of a personal triumph towards an innovative epistemology, rather than the elaboration of a coherent argument to fill the ‘no man’s land between picture and text in the anthropological tradition’ (2009: 268). At the other end of the methodological spectrum, Causey’s book surfaces some controversies as much as it vocally vouches for a certain methodological creativity which often feels like either a creative luxury or a methodological risk that early career-scholars cannot always afford (also, Nolas and Varvantakis 2019). Indeed, producing knowledge through visual practices such as drawing seems to grant no scientific legitimacy to the ethnography work as far as an excess of (auto) biographical interferences might further impair the already fragile epistemological foundation of ethnography. In this sense, drawing seems to be an acceptable ethnographic method insofar the empiricism of being there does not spill over into an excessive presence of the author: the peculiar ‘game of writing’ (Ramos 2015) implies that ‘the anthropologist imaginarily dissolves themselves in the voice of orality in the very process of affirming their authorship of the text’ (Ramos 2015: 5).

In the light of these premises, this paper sets off to explore the potentials of drawing as an epistemological tool. It looks at the capacity that drawing retains in making visible those processes by which anthropological knowledge is generated during fieldwork. Drawing, I suggest, has the capacity to recapture the intersubjective dimensions of the ethnographic encounter in a way which breaches the conventions of more traditional text-based ethnographies, and it does so by reckoning the body as a primary site of exploration of ‘ragged emotions, and complicated, personal, sensuous and embodied experiences of fieldwork’ (Grimshaw 2015: 217), which in fact rarely fit with the neat categories and abstract language of academic anthropology (Grimshaw 2015: 157; also Stoller 2015). With a special focus on conflicts and frictions as powerful moments generative of ethnographic insights, I show how drawing allows to explore and dwell in those zones of discomfort, awkwardness, ironies and misunderstandings which are crucial to thorough ethnographic works but that are often erased in text-based ethnographies.
I swear I hated it

The shoes on the chair, or the awkward ethnographer

On the 29th of June 2016, I was sitting outside a cafe in Pangrati, the Athenian neighbourhood I resided during my fieldwork. It was terribly hot, although it was only 9.30 am. The traffic was frenetic; the noise of motorbikes and cars and the voice of market sellers filled the street. My Italian friend Micaela and I were sipping our freddo espresso, silently chain-smoking and reading. I was so engrossed in my book that I did not immediately realise that two men and a woman had just gathered in front of me. With an agitated tone, they were talking to each other. Actually, they were talking about me. Actually, they were talking to me, but as if I was not really there. Actually, they were yelling at me. Their words, at first, arrived fragmented, like an indistinct noise. I just picked up some of them and I could not immediately understand what they were saying. However, I sensed that there must have been something wrong with me and, in Greek, I mumbled a preventive ‘I am sorry. I don’t really understand.’ Signomi, den katalaveno kala.

One of the two men looked particularly disgusted: he had a disapproving frown on his face. He seemed to repeat to himself, yet loud enough so that I could hear him, that I must have been a foreigner: only a foreigner can in fact be that rude. He pointed his finger at me. The woman nodded, and added with scorn ‘She is a foreigner. She is so rude.’ She also suggested that my mother must have felt very ashamed of having a daughter like me as she had evidently failed to impart a good education on me. The other man amended his friend’s comment: my mother might not have been ashamed of me at all, because children are just the result of family upbringing, and apparently mine was not any good. The man turned to me again, and slowly repeated ‘ta papoutsia sou pano stin karekla’ ‘your shoes on the chair’ and, speaking to the woman, continued ‘einai xeni i kopela alla katalavenei Ellenika ligo’ ‘the girl is a foreigner, but she understands Greek a bit.’

The intervention the three locals had improvised for me became so loud that also the owner of the cafe came out. The three Greeks promptly informed him about my inappropriate way of sitting: my shoes were on the chair. One of the two men spelled it out clear: ‘She is a foreigner.’ The woman nodded, the owner of the cafe nodded too. I was rude, I was a foreigner and I was told off. The owner of the cafe asked my friend and me to leave. I was already gathering my stuff from the table when Micaela unexpectedly stood up and took my defence. With her broken Greek, she asked them if they were finally done with such an inopportune Greek drama and suggested that they possibly had to apologise to me. I blanketed, I blushed, I sweated: I just wanted to leave, and put the word end to such a humiliating scene. I swear I hated it. More people had meanwhile gathered around us, wondering what happened, ‘ti egine?’ While Micaela was all into arguing with the men, the woman was busy explaining to the little crowd how unacceptable my behaviour was: ‘Ta papoutsia tis pano stin karekla.’ Her explanation was met with the by-then obvious question ‘Is she a foreigner?’ ‘Einai xeni i kopela? Yes, she is. Nai. Ax. Ah.
Therefore, I drew it...

Back home, I sat at the kitchen table and started drawing. While drawing, I re-enacted the scene in my head, and vividly visualised all the details: one of the men was sticking his finger up his nose while yelling at me, few pigeons were flying inside the cafe but no one seemed to mind, the woman wore heavy golden earrings that caught my attention as much as her bright red lipstick did. These details made me laugh. I found it ironic how concerned they were about my shoes on the chair, yet the man did not refrain from scratching his nose and no one minded about the pigeons. Although I was aware that my way of sitting was not exactly appropriate, I could not really understand why those people took it as a personal offence and they felt entitled to scold me publicly. While I was not quite able to rationalise that experience and put it into words, I could definitely draw that scene, capture its awkwardness and charge it with meanings, feelings, emotions and ironies, those that Stoller describes as ‘memories of existential contents’ (1997: 47). Although this encounter was not immediately ethnographically entangled: I swear I hated it

Figure 1: Visual fieldnotes

![Figure 1: Visual fieldnotes](image-url)
relevant to my research on the pharmaceuticalisation of care, it proved nevertheless powerful insomuch that it confronted me with the brutality and awkwardness of certain encounters. *Ta papoutsia mou pano stin karekla* (‘my shoes on the chair’) urged me to sit down and tell this story, an embarrassing story with no anthropological value perhaps, yet it represented a quite memorable moment of the overall experience of my fieldwork in Athens.

Besides the successful, serious and amusing fieldwork stories upon which most of academic articles and papers are built, I wondered what happens to those lateral stories that are edited out (often, out of our concerns about how we represent), yet they constitute a crucial aspect of how we know. In my own experience, drawing proved an especially congenial way to engage with those lateral stories which in fact are very often edited out of our texts. Nevertheless, they have the potential to push further not just the ethnographic canon of representation, but also our understanding of how anthropological knowledge is generated. In commenting on Arthur Bernard Deacon’s sketches made in Vanuatu in 1926-27, Haidy Geismar (2014) suggests that, when made available, sketches help recuperate stories of personal experience and alternative stories of ideas (2014: 97). In this sense, drawing itself can become a generative practice of anthropological knowledge: what remains concealed in writing can be revealed through drawing which, John Berger (2005) reckons, does not only contain the experience of looking, but it also prompts us to question the appearance of any given event. While Berger develops his argument in favour of drawing in relation to his reflection on memory, I am especially intrigued by his point on the distinct way in which each drawing becomes an evidence of many glances which can be seen together (Berger 2005: 44). This latter consideration allows me to push further the argument on drawing as a particularly apt tool to restore the dialogical and intersubjective nature of any ethnographic where its temporality comes to be encapsulated in ‘the simultaneity of a multitude of moments’ which drawing encompasses (Berger 2005:44).

By no means advocating for the superiority of the visuals over traditional text based-ethnography, I am nevertheless interested in exploring how drawing can make us do ethnography in a way writing does not. In this sense, I suggest that drawing offers an alternative modality to writing and, in my experience, it has proven better suited to capture experiences that are affectively and emotionally charged and, sometimes, resistant to any rationalising efforts. As a matter of fact, Berger (1972) reminds us that there are areas where words are just inadequate: the plenitude of a vision, the sensorial and embodied load of certain encounters can hardly be rendered in words, unless we wilfully commit to break the conventions of ethnographic writing (Stoller 1997) where the ‘impersonal flat voice’ still represents the canon of the ethnographic authority (Beihar 1995: 18). Working on principle of implications (for instance, synaesthesia and metaphors) rather than causation (the logic and the structure of academic argumentation), visual media, drawing included, are better apt to vividly render contradictions and complexities of certain encounters. At the same time, visual representations enable capturing both the coexistence of multiple perspectives, bodies and subjectivities, and the simultaneity of events, relations and interactions: those lie at the very core of any ethnographic encounter and define its intersubjective nature.
When I circulated on Facebook the drawing of my awkward encounters with the Greek locals, my Greek teacher commented on it saying she was ashamed she had been my teacher. In fact, the sentences were not grammatically correct. In fact, I was more interested in recreating the messiness of the communicative situation rather than providing a linguistically correct and coherent representation of the dialogue as it actually happened. I mainly wanted to give a sense of what struggling with a foreign language might look like. At the same time, the making of the drawing elicited some hermeneutic efforts which ultimately proved quite disastrous: first, the spectre of Mary Douglas (2003) haunted my conjectures about my shoes as matter out of place. Speculations on how cultural norms relative to showing the soles of shoes might have travelled from the Middle East to Greece also informed my initial interpretative efforts to understand why those Greeks got so mad at me. That encounter somehow rendered Renee Hirshon’s (2014) take on the Ottoman heritage in Greece reasonable. In the end, my friend Anna’s wise and simple interpretation seemed the most reasonable of all: ‘In Greece, if there can be drama, there will be drama.’ However, her words buried me further into wild considerations on Aristotle’s theories about the birth of tragedy and the role of tragic chorus whose main function was to voice the common morality. In any case, Aristotelian reflections followed even more fantastic speculations on how what just happened to me was nothing but a manifestation of a social drama, à la Victor Turner (1980), of course. Was I or was I not from Manchester? It would be groundbreaking to go back to Victor Turner, I repeated to myself until the ultimate interpretative illumination stroke me: what I had missed so far was the patriarchal component of that intervention. The conservatism of the Greek society became all of sudden evident: it was not the object of their reprimands (my shoes on the chair), rather the tone, the mode and the male authority with which these people cornered me and called for a popular jury to deliberate on me.

As much as it might look like a mannerist exercise, such a playful exploration of different analytical possibilities was ultimately prompted by the very making of this drawing, and resonates with Geismar’s understanding of drawing as an ‘embodied dialogue with multiple knowledge and aesthetic systems’ (2014: 97). However, out of such unsatisfactory interpretive possibilities, I ultimately suspended my hermeneutic efforts, and opted for a visual account of the encounter as it felt to me. In fact, I stopped worrying about the potentially unlimited interpretations, possible misrepresentations, and unfair generalisations about Greeks that the drawing could possibly prompt. Following on from this consideration, I suggest that drawing can provide counter-narratives for fieldwork and dominant paradigms of ethnographic representation. In the specific case I have described above, the very making of the drawing also signalled, and alerted me to my ambiguous position as a stranger/ethnographer in the Greek context, as the customers of the café perceived me: she/I as a foreigner (einaí xeni), therefore an outsider to the Greek society, yet she/I could understand the Greek language a little (alla katalabénei ligo). This latter point possibly calls attention to a strife of mine to gain
ground and legitimacy as an insider, a strife which was somehow reckoned by those I was told off by. On a different level, the making of this drawing and making fun of my public humiliation functioned as a mechanism to regulate and release tensions in the first instance, and as a device to un-reveal and unravel certain power relations as they are played out in the field.

And I also posted my drawings on Facebook (and Instagram too, and I know Daniel Miller would have something to say about it)

*Drawn close (to drawing)*

Six months into my fieldwork, I started making drawings about being in the field. It happened on a late cold afternoon, and I was myself quite surprised by my ability to draw. I remember I returned home after a quite useless interview which I had striven so much to arrange and yet it left me deeply perplexed. In fact it felt like another heartless rant on solidarity of a middle-class male professional who, aware of his privileges, decided to go helping the poor. To me, his solidarity felt just like a politically-correct version of charity. Solidarity was very trendy topic at that time, but I could hardly understand what it was actually about. In the midst of my frustrations, I sat at the table and I drew my first illustrated field-note where, and through which, all the contradictions, flaws and banalities of any discourses, emic or etic regardless, on solidarity visually emerged for the first time (also, Theodossopolous 2016, on solidarity, charity and comics). As I have already mentioned, January 2016 marked a rather critical moment in my fieldwork; I was no longer sure of what I was doing and it felt like my research was becoming more and more meaningless. Nothing new apparently: anyone approaching a long-term fieldwork for the first time is likely to go through such phases of despair and uncertainty. Since then, on a weekly basis I posted a drawings which could best represent a salient scene of my fieldwork or better capture how I felt. Although I strongly felt like sharing snapshots of fieldwork (I guess I needed some weekly check in with the reality!), I was also aware that I had to do that in meaningful ways while also being compliant with the ethics of protecting our informants’ anonymity and confidentiality. Resorting to drawings proved to be a wise choice: drawings can also be a form of fiction which grants greater margins of freedom to experimenting with different forms and modes of representation (van Wolputte 2017b).

Since the day of my unfortunate interview, drawings became a substantial and crucial part of my field-notes; while drawing, I allowed myself to have a more playful and ironic approach and, to say it with Paul Stoller (2014), to evoke rather than to denote the reality. Interestingly, Stephen Tyler describes evocation as neither a presentation nor a representation, rather a juxtaposition of fragments which, as such, enables to overcome ‘the separation of the sensible and the conceivable, of form and content, of self and other, of language and the worlds’ (Tyler 1986: 123). Those fragments,
Tyler continues, are intended to evoke ‘in the mind of both the reader and the writer fantasies and imaginations of possible worlds which cannot be known discursively or performed perfectly’. Eerie evocations of Athens, my drawings became my most powerful tool to communicate with friends, relatives and acquaintances that were far away from Athens. I started posting on social media weekly visual updates about me being out and about in Athens: drawings definitely helped me maintain a sense of proximity, and engage with my people around the world. Somehow they also helped me fight the loneliness of the ethnographer. My Greek friends and acquaintances gave me amused responses to my drawings where I very often played and exaggerated stereotypes, and forced upturn cultural intimacies. Some of them particularly appreciated the cynical way in which I represented my Athenian adventures and my encounters with the locals.

If drawings can bear and spread information beyond the conventions of verbal language and the rules of written text, it actually took a few months before I fully figured out their ethnographic potential beyond my personal stuff. Actually, drawing (about) myself implied positioning myself within different social situations, in relation to others and their different political and social positions; those were in turn determined, for instance, by class, gender and age. While I cannot make any bold claim about any class stratification in Athens, I can definitely make a case (and few drawings too) for how age and gender strongly determine social interactions and communication dynamics. Making drawings enabled me to unmask and visualise these dynamics. As a woman and a feminist ethnographer (as I like to consider myself), I have always wanted my work, drawings included, to also function as a political critique of the patriarchy or, to say it in terms of Lila Abu Lughod (1990), to offer ethnographic representations produced in a non-dominant way, wherein ‘the fieldworker does not deny that she is a woman and is attentive to gender in her own treatment, her own actions and in interactions of people in the community she is writing about’ (1990:26).

On a different level, drawings helped me sharpen my intellectual position about doing fieldwork in Athens in a moment where either grand theory of the crisis or news about daily riots occupied both the academic debate and national and international newspapers alike. Kostantinos Kalantzis (2016) offers very relatable insights on how the economic crisis has been represented since its 2008 onset and, in a somewhat critical tone, contends that the use of particular kinds of visual evidence contributed to render the crisis visible and tangible. In particular, he refers to production of those photographs meant to capture dissent and destitution, of which homeless people dwelling in the streets or flames and broken glass during the riots were in fact powerful metonyms. Indeed, these visuals shaped the imaginary of Greece in a moment where the maghia of the crisis, as Heath Cabot (2015) polemically posits it, rendered the country a weirdly attractive place for throngs of researchers committed to give voice to the embattled and of anarcho-tourists who were instead more committed to shattering capitalism by setting Athens on flames. Besides my political leaning and my (uncertain) status of researcher aside, I felt that those same critiques of how Greece in crisis was represented actually reinforced those representations that they were meant to criticise. Indeed, the academic attention has mainly been captured by solidarity and grassroots initiatives (for instance, Cabot 2016, Rakopoulos 2016) and this contributed to obscure other configurations of moralities and systems of provisioning (for instance, Douzina Bakalaki...
In the messy abundance of academic literature on contemporary Greece, making drawings allowed me to enter in dialogue with the existing one (and eventually distance myself from that), and to explore different angles to look at today’s Athens. At the same time, I could draw and blur the personal and the academic in ways which allow to recuperate the complexities of fieldwork with its contingencies and uncertainties. Given the specificity of the ethnographic context where I carried out my fieldwork and the socio-political as well as academic attention that Greece was gaining, the freedom of representation and critique that drawing allowed me to achieve relates, I suggest, to the capacity of drawing to encompass temporality (Berger 2001) and to condense meanings and perspectives as for Mikhail Bakhtin’s formulation of dialogism and heteroglossia.

**Drawn close (to Athenians)**

Amongst the many things drawings made for me while in the field, they also worked as field-note (as a visual cue, a form of annotation and a form of place-making). I made drawings with no concerns for the rules governing the balance of the compositions or the harmony of human figures. Rather, I made drawings whose content could be immediately comprehensible to whoever saw it. However, I also dispersed ethnographic cues and anthropological hints throughout them. These cues and hints are interlocked in the lines of the drawings themselves, yet they unlock deeper meanings of the depicted ethnographic scene when and whether they are individuated and ‘activated.’ In order to make drawings meaningful beyond the humorous, the ironic or the cynical, I distributed ‘visual’ references to the literature and to the ethnographic encounter I was sketching. Retrospectively, I can say that the code I used was a sort of carnivalesque inversion à la Bakhtin. Indeed, I often exaggerated, twisted and bent some ethnographic elements or features. As particularly apt to bring ‘semantic relief’ (Causey 2016: 8), drawing ultimately allowed me to subvert and liberate myself from the assumptions of the dominant academic writing style. Captions, balloons and notes written in the margins represented another space where I could deposit more information while also playing with it by distorting languages. I used the Italian language (slightly inflected with the slang from Rome, which I love for its evocative and visionary power), English and Greek. Italian as my mother tongue linked to my own identity, while English related to the language of my belonging to the world of anthropology, and therefore it represented the medium with which I could confront and engage with the academic literature. Last but not least, Greek stood for the language of my doing ethnography, and therefore the language with which I tried to establish myself in Athens and develop interactions and proximity with informants and casual acquaintances. If such linguist confusion described my first months in Athens, it also enhanced my visually thinking, and enable to work in a different way, precisely ‘with my body, senses, thoughts, emotions and imaginations’ (Grimshaw 2015: 161). At the same time, the possibility of using three languages felt like a luxury that I could actually afford only in the drawings though. While the coexistence of three languages did not interfere with the story which the
drawing alone could convey, those linguistic layers had to be polished in the very moment of writing up (also Ramos 2015). In fact, I wrote my PhD thesis in English where references to the Greek language mainly functioned as reinforcing my ethnographic authority, rather than actually evoking how code-switching was frequent, common and context-dependent of different forms of socialities and communicative situations.

**Drawn to experience**

In ‘The Taste of Ethnographic Things’ Paul Stoller (1989) offers a very evocative retrospective on his early experience as an anthropologist in Niger, and acknowledges how his juvenile academic concerns led him to over-intellectualise his fieldwork: as a result, ‘the world of ethnographic things had lost his taste’ (1989: 4). Almost 20 years later, Stoller reflexively reckons how crucial the senses have ultimately proven for his understanding of Songhay society and sorcery, and advocates for an anthropology where the experiential dimension of being in the field, rather than the pragmatics of doing fieldwork, could fully be restored (Stoller 2015). While evocatively recounting his initiation to Shongay sorcery, Stoller asks whether certain encounters can be more than personal narratives, and questions whether it is appropriate ‘to include in anthropological discourses such personal bizarre, and sensuous accounts (Stoller 1989: 47). These questions, Stoller is aware, imply a more serious epistemological reflection on how we know and what we represent in anthropology. We don’t usually write what we want, Stoller wittingly answers, because the author should be non-intrusive of the ethnographic text and abide by the conventions of ethnographic realism. However, if anthropologists take on a sensual turn, Stoller implies, they can open up to what has long been obscured by centuries of cultural empiricism (1989:38).

To some extent, I consider engaging in the practice of drawing a visual response to Stoller’s invitation to pay attention to the experiential dimension of being in the field. I suggest that drawing does so in virtue of the embodied experience that very making of a drawing entails (the act of drawing lines, to say it with Ingold), and the reflexive praxis it enhances. When I draw a scene, an ethnographic encounter or an especially intriguing detail, I am positioning myself in the field. In turn, my positionally defines and describes the net and array of relations in which, as an ethnographer, I am increasingly tangled up. What I concretely do when I draw is to express such relationally in visual forms through the materiality of the line. Vis-a-vis with a blank paper, I can evoke the complex and relational aspects of my fieldwork experience: drawing myself and the others also means to restoring the body, mine and others’, as a primary site of knowledge. In fact, besides and beyond any epistemological considerations on the body, returning to it implies to recover it to its very political and social nature. Since Marcel Mauss (1973), we have grown awareness of how bodies and their techniques are cultural products that, as such, reflect and embed aspects of cultures. Following on it, Nancy Scheper Hughes and Margareth Lock (1987) have problematised western conceptualisations of the body, and distinguished between the individual body as phenomenologically and individually experienced, the social body as a symbol to think the
relationship between nature, society and culture, and the body politic as an artefact of social and political control. As gendered and sexual bodies, we also enact and are enacted by power relations (Butler 1990). However, bodies can be deceptive and trick us to draw conclusions about ourselves and others in ways that are often funny, hilarious or grotesque, but at times can also be offensive, stereotypical and assumptive when not openly racist. In any case, the questions that our body prompts are revelatory of how we perceive and are perceived, we imagine and are imagined. Also, as ethnographers, we tend to question others, in very professional and sensitive ways, but we rarely question what kind of imaginations and assumptions our informants retain about our life and social worlds. Answering or evading such questions can determine how relations develop, encounters unfold and intimacy and familiarity grow in ways that can make our fieldwork proceed smoothly or get more complicated.

In July 2015, I arrived in Athens well-equipped with a luggage of good intentions, many ethnographic questions to ask and the conviction of being a decent human being. As I arrived to Athens, I started being bombarded with questions: about who I was, where I was from, and what I was doing in Athens, just to start. Questions about my age, my family, my conjugal status, and so on and so forth followed relentlessly. Fair enough, I told myself, if I am to make a methodological issue out of such ironic situation where I am asked questions rather than asking questions, I can still learn something from them. However, I soon realised that my informants’ and acquaintances’ questions required more than a simple answer. Suspended between expectations, cliches and imaginations, I realised that my body bespoke me much more than I consciously realised. In fact, never in my life before landing in Athens, I heard so many people telling me ‘You look so Italian.’ If my Italian-ness was somehow obvious to many Greeks, my body appearance tricked others to the point that a foreign anthropologist once proclaimed ‘your phenotype must’ve helped you conducting your research here. You look so Greek.’ Not least, my apparently problematic way of sitting offered ‘visual’ cues to some Greek locals to reinforce their assumptions about foreigners, and to investigate my nationality thus my presence in Athens. It ultimately ignited a very powerful collective display of good citizenship.

Regardless of whether I occasionally found these events funny or annoying when not offensive, I made sense of them not through discursive analyses, rather by considering how they were reflective of certain embodied knowledge that people resort to navigate social worlds and orient themselves through uncertain encounters. In the end, I was a stranger in Athens, as much as people from Athens were strangers to me. In this sense, drawing offers the chance to visually confront situations of estrangement and familiarity, and to explore forms of conflictual relationality. On a more intimate level, drawing also brought me some relief, as it allowed me to rework somewhat problematic fieldwork experiences through the emotions and through my body. In this sense, the act of drawing can be therapeutic as it allows to undo some encounters and recenter the self. In virtue of its capacity to destabilise canonical ethnographic representations of text-based ethnographies (these mainly function on word-sequences undergirding an argumentative structure, Stoller 2015), drawings work on image-sequences that tend to describe rather than to interpret reality. Once we suspend our interpretative anxiety, drawing allows the autobiographic, the biographic and the ethnographic to
merge: the overlapping of these three spheres ultimately enables alternative experiences of certain ethnographic encounters to surface more powerfully.

Draw(n) to know

In this article I have attempted to develop the case for the value of drawing in the field by relying on existing literature on visual media and combining it with some methodological and epistemological considerations relative to my engagement with drawing. The value have individuated for drawing mainly lies in its capacity to render lateral stories visible, and thus to foster novel modes of (self)reflexivity; both are crucial to the production of thorough ethnographies. As I have explained through frequent references to my fieldwork experience in Athens, drawing, more than writing, has led me to more consciously think and become aware of how, through my body, I get to know and to be known. In this sense, the practice of drawing does not only align with experimental modes of ethnography inquiry, but make us visually aware of the reciprocity of gazes through which the ethnographer and her informants make and unmake themselves, and the ethnographic encounter accordingly. Relational and performative aspects of social life can thus emerge with unexpected strength through drawing, and illuminate on how culture is constantly done and undone through everyday interactions. These are embodied as much as they also ‘encoded in set postures, gestures and movements’ (Stoller 1997: 58) and exceed verbal utterances. Furthermore, given the capacity of images to forebear an abundance of details without compromising the overall sense of an image (MacDougall 2006), I suggest that drawings are best apt to capture complexities and dynamics of certain encounters: focusing on experiences rather than information, through drawing we can describe rather than categorise them.

As I have already mentioned, producing ethnographic drawings has the potential to solicit a process of self-reflexivity, while it also compels us to return to the materiality of everyday life against the risk of getting lost in abstractions, interpretations and speculations which writing field-notes can often push into. Drawing, however, does not imply reductionist or simplistic approaches to relevant matters. Rather, it grants the ethnographer the possibility to express abstract social relations in visual forms and restore them to their bodily and experiential reality. Once bodies, and the relations they generate, are processed visually and imaginatively, we can grow awareness on the affective, emotional and sensorial dimensions that certain ethnographic encounters retain, both individually and collectively. In this sense, focusing on the mundane appearance of bodies means to restore them to its communicative potentials. I reckon that a final case has to be made on the relations between drawing and temporality. Although the issue of temporality bounces back the vexed issue of the differences between textual and visual ethnography (MacDougall 2006), I will make a long story short by appealing to my pragmatic and experiential understanding of what drawing does to and with temporality. So it goes: in the very moment we face the blank page and outline the first trait of any encounter, we have already broken if not subverted its temporality. When drawing, we often tend to follow the temporality of senses and emotions, rather than the progressive and linear unfolding of events.
At the present time, a solid argument for the epistemological value of drawing as an ethnographic practice has yet to be made. In fact, existing literature has mainly borrowed arguments and suggestions from literature on photography and films, and has mainly relied upon autobiographical repertoires of stories relative to make drawings in the field. Indeed, I have done it too. However, in the mood for provocations, I want to follow on from Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon’s (1995) polemic appraisal of how George Marcus and James Clifford (1986) quickly relegated feminist ethnographies to the sub-genres of experimental ‘because they either failed or refused to comply to the male canon of ethnographic writing, that one which Malinowski set back in the 1940s’ (Behar 1995). If Behar and Gordon’s judgement still holds value, academically and politically, then I suggest that the practice of drawing can be considered as a form of textual innovation. Then pejorative labels such sub-genres or ethno-fictions, can be proudly owned and, in so being, can potentially contribute to decolonising anthropology and opening it up to alternative modes of knowing, of representations, and of collaborations. In this regard, I align my understanding of drawings with Abu Lughod’s (1990) criticism to the priority anthropology has long given to how we represent rather than to how we know (1990: 11). Although the myth of ethnographic objectivity has been largely debunked, Abu-Lughod notices that this anthropological cliché still lingers and looms over any ethnographic work. Concerned with the possibilities of a feminist ethnography, she urges scholars to take up textual innovation by embracing different conventions that she individuates, for instance, in focusing on individuals, their statements and their everyday activities as well as on their personal relationships. By locating oneself as participant and by using first person pronoun Abu Lughod claims, one displays a definitely less assertive authority or omniscience, while also directing their work to different and larger audiences than the professional writers of conventional ethnographies. Drawing, I suggest, has the potential to meet and exceed Abu-Lughod’s propositions for both feminist ethnographies and textual innovations.
References


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