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Drawing a Home for Anthropology

Maxime Le Calvé

This essay focuses on the use of drawing in an educational experience with doctoral students: an immersive ‘residence’ format invented to reconsider the importance of everyday routines and how they relate to the pluralisation of modes of knowledge production. During the residency, we also built an ‘epistemic home’ together. I reflect here, retrospectively, on this specific teaching situation. In this text, home comes up as a backdrop or a stage for the action: an actual house, an old mill set on a small river, which we rented to organise a writing retreat for aspiring anthropologists. Home also comes up as a temporary unit constituted by its inhabitants and their generosity. I focus on one event which is especially revealing, in my view, of the whole initiative: a drawing workshop. I believe this experience has taught me something about both the residence format as an anthropological device and ethnographic drawing in general.

This is the story of a week-long immersive transmission experiment, which modestly attempted to break with the traditional way anthropology is taught, by attending to needs that are mostly overlooked in academic contexts. Too often, the humanities are conveyed as formal and pure knowledge, devoid of practical know-how and embodied routines, as well as of any form of collegial community work. Quite the contrary, the programme of our residence included many worldly activities, including cooking, walking, but also stretching and breathing. There was an emphasis on sharing and caring as key elements of achieving a good level of academic output, thereby suggesting what a good academic life could feel like. To some of the participants, these insights came out as an electroshock. “I didn’t think that love was a component of academic work—and I don’t think I have had any of that sort of love around me”, said one of the residents as he was sharing with us, mid-way through a session during which we were discussing writing (and reading) collaborations, illustrating his resentment against a highly competitive and individualistic learning environment.

Coming toward the closing of that busy week spent together, the drawing workshop was part of these self-reflecting activities: as a bodily pursuit and a “mind-walking” (Ingold, 2010, p. 16); as a way to observe and convey sensory dimensions of our communal life; as an outlet for ethnographic theoretical and epistemic knowledge; as a way to let go of perfectionism and to apply the “begin before feeling ready” motto (Boice, 1996, p. 87); as a sharing and caring too, because the act of drawing exposes certain vulnerabilities; as a way

to feel and experience the power of inspiration that the gesture of one can carry over to a group and set it in motion. While we took the depiction of “residence” itself as an object, the house, our working table and our activities, it became obvious that this workshop was summarising many key aspects of our endeavour while we attempted to bring the liveliness of our daily lives in that house into our drawings. To this extent, this text is also a testimony for drawing as a tool for ethnographic practice and ethnographic education, in close relation to other forms and modes of anthropological writing.

I believe that this “residence”, in this specific format, resonates fully with the new role given to imagination and invention within the rise of the paradigm of multimodality in anthropology¹. It is, in itself, an experiment to collect insights and act upon the reality of anthropological transmission – as an echo chamber and an amplifier. It is also a nexus from which various techniques relative to literary and graphic anthropologies can spread, as these forms relate not only to conceptual framework, but also to various concrete know-hows, skills and shared experiences.



Figure 1- Watercolor painting from a "resident" during the writing retreat at Maise © Arihana Villamil (used with permission)

Making homemates

¹ For a long time now, fieldwork has ceased to be restricted to observation —but what participation means and what degree of freedom it grants, remain unclear. These methods, partly derived from art and design, are gaining ground (Gunn, Otto and Smith, 2013; Estalella and Criado, 2018; Cantarella, Hegel and Marcus, 2019). As the enthusiastic reception of the journal *entanglement* demonstrates, a new generation of researchers perceive their action in the field as a rightful intervention in the fabric of the world, a way of resolutely embracing its entanglements. They are willing to make their anthropological practice a contribution that goes beyond conventional academic production to incorporate a plurality of mediums, a posture inclined towards collaboration and invention, and a renewed attention to sensory dimensions of fieldwork and its outcomes (Collins, Durlington and Gill, 2017; Nolas and Varvantakis, 2018; Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón, 2019).

A few years ago, at the University Paris Nanterre,² I participated in the foundation of a working group on the ethnography of creativity practices. It was always a joy to get together, but above all, we were happy to sit around with the ethnographer Sophie Houdart. We shared readings and discussions with her on what artistic practices can bring to our practices as anthropologists. We experimented with literary forms and sampled various exercises that we borrowed from people we met along the way. One day, we decided to borrow a commonplace instrument in artistic institutions that made us a little jealous: the residency. There is a thriving literature on academic writing retreats inspired by feminist philosophy, especially for PhD students (Grant, 2008; Aitchison, 2020). Most of us were women, all of us were inspired by writers such as Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway, or Vinciane Despret. We were developing a framework for an idiosyncratic form of art anthropology, and we had the feeling that our working sessions never were enough to go to the depth of the matter. We needed a place to brood and try things out remotely. We convinced our institute that we needed a small funding for a writing workshop for young researchers, and to seek a home in which we could spend a week together. We finally got together on the outskirts of Paris, in a rural town, renting a big family house that we had found online, not too far away from the spectacular mineral formations of the forest of Fontainebleau. I have beautiful memories of this first “residence” with my colleagues of the Crealab – the experience of living together and sharing our insights and our anxieties certainly brought our collective project further. At a certain level, it gave us all, as young researchers, a place to start from and in which to dwell, and to return to as we kept on meeting in regular seminars for a few years after the residence. However, after this moment of grace, the frustration of the dissertation writing process had not really dissipated after all. Quite soon it felt like we had been taking refuge around a mentor, and the effects of her benevolent influence started to fade away.

In Buddhist teachings, finding a home within someone else can only be a transient solution, as a pathway toward one's own metamorphosis. Roughly at the same time, and undeniably relating to the support of that group, I had a transformative fieldwork experience during which I started relying heavily on drawing in my ethnographic practice (see Le Calvé, *forthcoming*). Immersed in fieldnotes, I also surrendered to an ethnographic voice closer to a literary storytelling, a move that was facilitated by the book *Alive in the Writing*, which encourages anthropologists to borrow techniques and props from creative writing (Narayan, 2012). Another equally decisive and transformative experience came with the discovery of a body of literature on academic writing practice from an American tradition of social psychologists. Fostering the cultivation of moderation and regularity in writing (Boice, 1996, 2000; Silvia, 2007; Single, 2009), these authors insist on the importance of fragmenting working sessions and scheduling them in realistic and disciplined manner – aiming at avoiding the very common burnouts which result and further induce bouts of procrastination and blocking. Furthermore, the routines suggested by this research were perfectly in tune with my increasingly robust meditation and yoga routines. (This was not a complete coincidence

² A few months after my graduation and shortly before getting started with the mystical journey of the doctoral dissertation.

as I came to learn later, since Robert Boice the most influential author of this field, is himself a mindfulness practitioner, see Boice 2000, pp. 106-108).

Adopting this more diligent and accepting attitude toward the production of written work radically changed the way I approached my dissertation. Gratefully (I am lacking any other term here, I'm afraid), I turned to an openness toward the writing process: my confidence sprouted from the fact that by giving time and space to a project, the text would eventually become good enough. I started seeing in my own academic practice a field of investigation for an anthropology of "making", in which the technical process unfolds into a "growing" of academic outputs (Hallam and Ingold, 2016). The soil for that would be my daily practices, my routines, and all the inspirations I could get on the way. I could see that the close knit of my visual and textual notes did in fact yield abundant fruit.³

When I set out to share this mindset and that newly acquired faith to younger researchers starting (or more plainly, struggling as I have been) with their own dissertations, I brought together a few colleagues⁴ to set up a student initiative: a retreat that focussed on actual ethnographic writing practices and research routines. We circulated a call for application among the students in our school and received about as many as we had spots to offer. We looked for a house to make our own writing residency—and we found ourselves in that same welcoming ancient mill on the riverbank of Essonne. The sound of the gushing water was already familiar. The programme was quite different however: this time it was modelled more on a disciplined meditation retreat than on an artistic residency. The participants had to consent prior to their enrolment to follow the schedule, which was again fine-tuned on the first day and agreed upon by all.

From six o'clock in the morning until five in the afternoon, a dense daily collective routine unfolded, tightly timed. A bell was used to invite everyone to join again around the table for meals, for the writing workshops, and for the physical exercising sessions. We cooked for ourselves and for each other. My colleague Claire Clouet and I took turns in teaching the morning class, Pilates with her and yoga with me. If it wasn't too rainy, we went for a walk after each lunch. The first writing sessions of the morning are still very vivid in my memory: the dim light of the soon-to-be-rising sun behind the lush bamboos framed by a big window; the smell of the wood fire that had brought us together the night before still hanging in the

³ In a way, and that's a rather traditional way in the Buddhist tradition that I started embracing, I started looking away from the idea of taking shelter of a master, and began building a retreat for myself within my own practice.

⁴ I am grateful to Claire Clouet, Frédéric Trottier & Aube Richebourg to have shared this adventure with them, as well as to all our residents which have shown such goodwill and support – and to my wife Ignacia Escobar for joining us on the two latest residences, first pregnant and then with our child, who took also turn to teach yoga. To get to share these moments with my family certainly also made a strong impression on the residents, although it was not officially part of the program. We are also indebted to Rainer Maria Kiesow, which I would like to thank for his support as head of the Centre Georg-Simmel at EHESS Paris.

air; the slow, silent, and careful moves of the residents sitting at a huge wooden table type away a few paragraphs. “I don’t know about you, but I’m progressing like crazy on my project here”, said a post-doctoral student that joined our program twice. The ultimate goal of this experiment was to create and funnel space-time for tearing open and dramatically advancing what felt like difficult construction sites, always keeping in mind the idea that changing habits takes extra energy and frustration too.

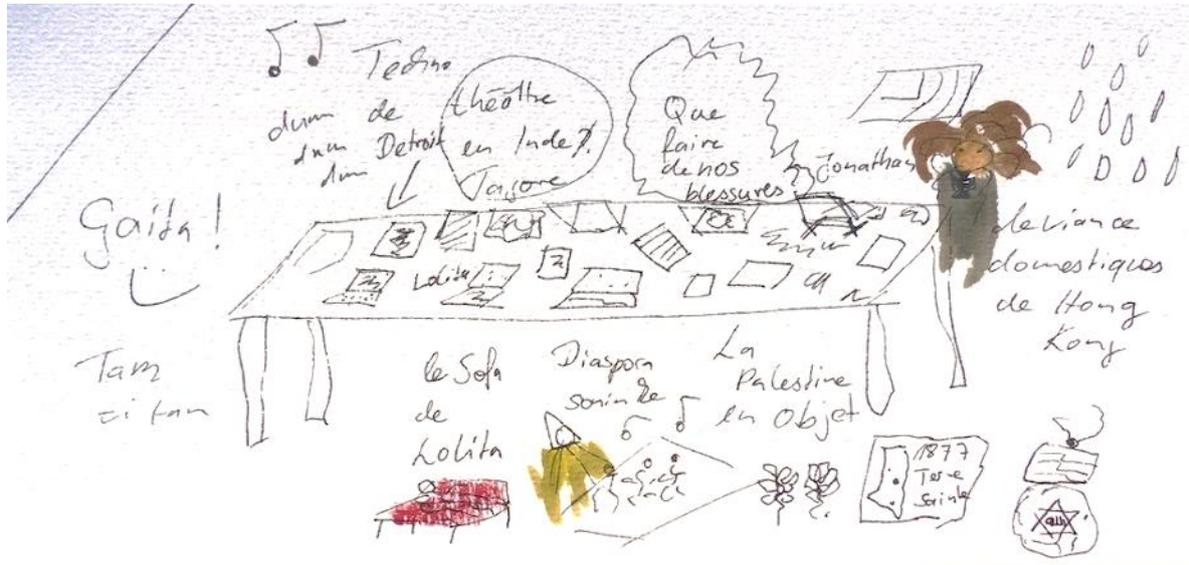


Figure 2 - Drawing from a "resident" during the writing retreat at Maisee © (used with permission)

Teaching drawing, teaching writing

At each of these residencies, the session I conducted on ethnographic drawing was a highlight among participants. The more I reflect on it, and the more I recollect the palpable enthusiasm before and after the session, the more clearly I see it as an overarching element to the whole experiment. When I get back to these images, I am struck by what they show and what they are: a testimonial of a moment shared together, where the atmosphere within which we had been growing over a number of days suddenly blossomed into unexpected shapes and colours. I always began these sessions by sharing my work in progress: at the time, my graphic notes were mainly related to the narrative of an opera production (Le Calvé, 2018). Each time I told my story, my experience of fieldwork, without hiding the fact that I was still caught off guard on the theoretical level as I tried to justify some parts of this approach to my anthropology colleagues. Then I invited the dozen residents and colleagues to follow my lead and to use colours and paper to depict our group at work in the house.

Teaching people to draw can be done in many different ways, and I don’t have any other background for it than my own practice. Andrew Causey, for example, offers fairly elaborate

methods, imported from fine art education, to facilitate the outline of scenes, among other the search for geometrical shapes in the motif to be depicted, “drawing basic lines with directional markers” (Causey, 2016, p. 64) or drawing skeletons of the human figures (ibid. p. 96). This method allows the hand to be loosened up and allows for more realistic drawings to be made. Tim Ingold has a development about realism in the introduction of *Redrawing Anthropology*: for him, only the movement is important, he says, an argument he derives from the work of Paul Klee. The drawing of the salmon looks dead if you draw a naturalist view of it instead of sketching the trace of its jumping upstream (Ingold, 2011, p. 18). For my part, I didn’t follow any particular method: I suggested to the group to emulate the naivety and looseness of my lines and of my watercolours. The prompt was actually even simpler: just draw! This injunction, through the framing offered by the whole dispositive of the residency, is at the same time an invitation to open one’s lines to oneself, to accept the result of what will appear on the blank sheet of paper –some were eager to demonstrate their talent, others simply willing to try something new in this climate of confidence.



Figure 3 - Drawing from a "resident" during the writing retreat at Maisee © (used with permission)

This exercise would not have been possible, or not the same, without the specific atmosphere that my colleagues and I had infused in the group, and that the group had fed back to us, each time with a special tone. Teaching people how to draw cannot be done in contexts where they feel that they cannot risk looking a bit silly. More than teaching drawing, conveying the efficacy of a posture of trying out and letting go, which is essential to drafting and sharing text or any other medium, was more significant than any set of skills.

Entering the contemplative mode of observation and description, their action not only becomes more obvious to the people being observed, but the graphic process of their descriptive thinking is made visible to the research partners in the course of brushwork. Other residents come to look over their shoulders, they want to recognise themselves, to see this different version of the same situation in which they took part.⁵ Ethnographic artists can amplify an atmosphere of benevolence and attention, providing respondents with the means to convey it to their loved ones through shared images. These images are the living trace of the experience, a trace that can be presented directly to the reader and which carries its certain qualities of attention and presence stemming from the situation itself: they are a correspondence in the most pristine Ingoldian definition (2020).

Lineages and influences

Writing about writing, Isabelle Stengers comes back to the concept of “reflexive assemblage” to explain the “animation” at work within the creative process and the composition that we partake as we produce things together, and how they make us in return (Stengers, 2012). What I try to do during these sessions is to demonstrate and give a taste of what it means to let the ethnographic happen to the students. This means to allow a number of elements to play together and animate us: the materials, the scenes observed, the skills acquired, the living masters, and those who have long since died, the words and sentences anchored in body and mind.

Figure 4 - Drawing “the residents” during the writing retreat at Maise © Maxime Le Calvé



⁵ The Brazilian visual ethnologist Karina Kuschnir has described this well, first with her work on ‘urban sketchers’, these cartoonists on the sly in urban contexts (2011), and more recently in an article which summarises eleven positive effects of ethnographic drawing in the field in the context of education (Kuschnir, 2016).

In an article on technical mediation, Bruno Latour discusses the way in which writing occurs in his notebooks (Latour, 2000, pp. 200–201). He draws a parallel between the famous redistribution of agency, which has made the actor-network theory so famous: moving from the scientists to their technical objects and to their research objects/subjects. One is making the other: we are always quasi-subjects in front of our quasi-objects, he says in his *Inquiry on the Modes of Existence* (Latour, 2013a). In a speech he gave on the occasion of the reception of a prestigious philosophy prize, he depicts himself as “target of the thoughts that had traversed his desk since he was sixteen” (Latour, 2013b, p. 1). The environmental conditions to get a space to flourish, such as Latour’s desk, are maintained by (and inculcated through) mundane activity: putting children to work, telling them when to start and when to stop, for example, so that they also, or at least a few of them, experience as teenager and as young adults the joy (and healthy despair) of animation. In particular, inspiring the trust in them that short yet steady and diligent sessions will be enough to get the work done – and that the work will almost always be good enough, especially if constructive feedback is sought at the right moment. In numerous interviews, Latour speaks of the role of his wife in his thinking and his writing, as that of his “masters”, Stengers, among others (Van Reeth, 2019). It is thus a precise atmosphere maintained around the person at work, around the author in action, body and mind: an embodied ecology of knowledge.

The mangle of styles, borrowings, and trajectories that play out in mutual influences is brought to light here. There is nothing trivial about manners and styles: they are ways of knowing and of making known that are intrinsically part of the ‘contents’ that could be assigned to them (Macé, 2016). They are lines of transmission that make us persons, always connected to others: these forms of kinship systems are described by Maurice Bloch with the conceptual tools of cognitivism as another equally legitimate way of getting “in and out of each other” (2013, p. 6). Bloch writes further:

“Knowledge of interpenetration and of the lack of clear boundaries, as well as the emotions that are an integral element of the way these phenomena are experienced, is what is meant by that most Durkheimian of words: *solidarity*.” (his emphasis) (Bloch, 2013, p. 15)

When I share creative atmospheres and gestures that I picked up during fieldwork, I attend to a form of anthropology that prides itself on transmitting and elaborating practical knowledge learned elsewhere in other worlds, an anthropology that takes education as one of its prime concerns (Ingold, 2017).



Figure 5 - Drawing from a "resident" during the writing retreat at Maisee © (used with permission)

Conclusion

“Bravo, you have reinvented the monastery”, a professor whom we had invited to our small vernissage several months after our residence, cynically commented. That day, we hung our drawings on an office wall in the institute and shared puff pastries with tea from a paper cup, happy to be together again. The professor’s statement felt provoking and a bit unfair, and certainly did not capture the obvious joy that we all had drawn from the undertaking. Yet, it was not entirely misplaced either. As Bourdieu noted (2003), aren’t we researchers heirs of scholastic traditions in one way or another? We had risen up early to practice, we had prepared and eaten meals around the same table, sharing our piles of books and a few long walks on the surrounding hills. Some of us had even practised daily sitting meditation, contemplating in silence the constant noise of the river. We had been well together, and the two subsequent editions of this residence saw the same warm complicity blossom, as well as a few lasting friendships.

That education requires a rigorous framework, and that this encourages the building up of discipline, can come across as retrograde, as Claude Lévi-Strauss reflected as he drew a rather dark picture of his own contemporary pedagogical landscape:

“That, in this world of ease and waste, school remains the only place where it is necessary to take pains, to undergo discipline, to suffer vexations, to progress step by step, to live, as we say, ‘the hard way’, children do not admit it because they can no longer understand it. Hence the demoralisation that overtakes them, suffering all sorts of constraints for which society and the family environment have not prepared them, and the sometimes tragic consequences of this disorientation” (Lévi-Strauss, 1983, p. 369)⁶

Resolutely conservative when it comes to fine arts, the Wagnerian anthropologist goes on to ridicule precisely the type of art pedagogical exercise that we have been undertaking, “retrograding art to the state of game” (ibid. p. 370). I believe that Lévi-Strauss is aiming there, however, not so much at the kind of activity⁷ but at the loss of a foundation for what Dewey termed the community of inquiry, and the “special environment” that education requires:

“An intelligent home differs from an unintelligent one chiefly in that the habits of life and intercourse which prevail are chosen, or at least colored, by the thought of their bearing upon the development of children” (Dewey, 1997, p. 22).

Drawing together made our transitory home feel a little more alive. That chronicle was produced in a mnemonic medium particularly apt at retelling the story of what took place there. However, the picturing process gave us the opportunity to comment and act upon the situation as it happened. As noted by Martínez, Berglund and Estalella, “The trope of home opens up different analytical and empirical perspectives, generating differently articulated versions of what a home is and does” (2020, p. 40). The relationship between the terms home and house, which in French translates with the single term “*maison*”, is stimulating here: the term house brings us to the study of kinship systems and the entanglements of mutual activity (see also Martínez, 2020).

Any seemingly isolated activity is always in touch with many others, it always goes beyond and transcends the framework of our own individual action. This way of occupying one’s time, but also the manner and style with which this is conducted, are as much mimetic chains as they are the fruit of individual enquiries. The “home” and its atmospheric conditions are at the centre of the attention: it requires constant work to stay in order (see also Errázuriz and Greene, 2020; Pine and Stewart, 2020). It is a place to dwell in and come

⁶ « Que, dans ce monde de facilité et de gaspillage, l’école reste le seul lieu où il faille prendre de la peine, subir une discipline, essayer des vexations, progresser pas à pas, vivre, comme on dit, « à la dure », les enfants ne l’admettent pas parce qu’ils ne peuvent plus le comprendre. D’où la démoralisation qui les gagne, à souffrir toutes sortes de contraintes auxquelles la société et le milieu familial ne les ont pas préparés, et les conséquences parfois tragiques de ce dépaysement. »

⁷ The fact that Lévi-Strauss did not agree on the Deweyan concept of “art as experience” would be the topic of a completely different article.

back to. It is also at the centre of the activities of the imagination: it is where we dream at night, where children play together, where generations merge before separating. To do ethnography using drawing is a way to start making a house and a home away from home. Teaching ethnography through drawing thus entails hospitality, so that others can take their bearings before setting off.⁸⁹

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