

Special Theme

Ethno-graphic Collaborations: Crossing Borders with Multimodal Illustration

Introduction

Laura Haapio-Kirk

Department of Anthropology, University College London

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Key Words: graphic ethnography, collaboration, interdisciplinary, illustration, visual anthropology

- 1 This special theme, 'Ethno-graphic Collaborations', presents and discusses four different modes of anthropological collaboration through illustration. There are two artist-researcher collaborations, and two other pieces that expand the meaning and remit of collaboration through graphic ethnography across space and time. In the video discussions that follow the pieces we explore what effects interdisciplinary collaboration through illustration might have on the way anthropology is conceptualised as a discipline, and on its wider impact in the world. The special theme presents examples of what collaborative graphic anthropology can look like, inviting the viewer to think about the kinds of analysis that can emerge from such visual experiments and dialogues, and encouraging them to try their own graphic explorations and to join the conversation.

- 2 I first came to know of the contributors' graphic work when curating the exhibition *Illustrating Anthropology in 2020*¹. In the process of evaluating hundreds of pieces of submitted work, I started to note down which pieces were the product of some form of collaborative work, alongside other ways that researchers were using the affordances of illustration, for example as a mode of paying attention during fieldwork, or for telling difficult stories². While the term 'illustration' might be understood in a narrow capacity as referring to images that accompany text, I argue that in its broadest sense 'illustration' encapsulates the possibilities of showing, illuminating, and revealing hidden worlds – as demonstrated by the pieces in this special theme. All anthropologists are illustrators of sorts, shining light onto the people they study, yet graphic forms offer the possibility of expanding the audience who might access those stories. The image-text-audio hybrids presented here demonstrate just some of the exciting possibilities that illustration offers for research and storytelling. The use of drawing as a fieldwork method and mode of ethnographic expression has received wide ranging and extensive discussion in recent years (Taussig 2009, 2011; Ingold 2011; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015; Causey 2016; Le Calvé and Gaudin 2019; Bonano 2019; Theodossopoulos 2020; Rumsby 2020), demonstrating a growing establishment of graphic anthropology as a subfield of the discipline. In choosing to focus on the implications of graphic collaboration, this special theme asks whether, in addition to methodological and theoretical advancement, collaboration might push for a more egalitarian, subversive anthropology in which co-creation is foregrounded. This is not to deny the tensions that can arise in processes of collaboration, and the limits to ways of knowing that might not translate well (Davis 2016), but it to suggest that illustration offers a mode of collaboration that is ripe with possibility to 'challenge institutional orders' (Holsgens 2021).
- 3 The pieces presented here demonstrate how graphic collaboration has the potential to make the academic and public outputs of research more reflective of the collaborative process through which anthropological knowledge is produced. Ethnography is an inherently collaborative method based on the relationship between researcher and research participant, yet anthropological writing often does not reflect this two-way process of meaning making, instead centring the intellectualising of the anthropologist. In giving visibility to both the researcher and research participants, and indeed to historical thinkers, as in the piece by Dimitrios Theodossopoulos, we see how ethnographic collaborations unfold and how drawing can mediate understanding within this process.
- 4 Interdisciplinary collaboration, such as between an illustrator and a researcher, can provoke and enable further forms of dialogue, for example with policy makers and other stakeholders, and indeed with the individuals and communities studied. Making anthropological research accessible outside of the discipline is hindered by the infrastructures currently surrounding researchers, especially those in their early careers where individual achievement and certain forms of publishing are necessary for advancement. In the piece by Charlie Rumsby and Ben Thomas, we see an academic thesis in the process of being turned into an ethno-graphic novel. The illustrations place the viewer directly within highly emotive scenes, generating empathy for the marginalised populations being studied, while maintaining the anonymity of research participants. Such visceral work can have great benefit in advocacy and can help to expand the reach of anthropology beyond its disciplinary borders.

- 5 The piece by José Sherwood González highlights the inherently collaborative nature of oral storytelling through the medium of an interactive comic. The graphic narrative weaves audio clips that expand on the text, representing a multiplicity of voices regarding contested family history. We see how the graphic form can convey the often-contradictory experience of ethnography in a way that does not attempt to tie up loose ends or present conclusions. The non-linearity of the graphic form can be a powerful way to explore life course experiences, as also demonstrated in the piece by Megumi Ito and I. In this case Megumi's autobiographical painting was used by myself as the basis of object elicitation during an interview, the results of which can be heard in the embedded audio clips. Illustration produced by research participants can not only be useful methodologically but can form part of research communication in which participants' internal and external landscapes are visualised.
- 6 The illustrated works presented here cover a wide spectrum of topics, mediums, and forms of collaboration, yet they all share a commitment to challenge the siloing of anthropological knowledge that can result from keeping within disciplinary borders. Illustration is highlighted here as one mode of collaboration, though it is important to acknowledge the wide variety of media that anthropologists employ; rather than pit one form against another we need to create a shared critical language with which we can dialogue (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015). Ethno-graphic forms of representation join with other forms of experimental ethnography suited to collaboration to make visible the co-creation of anthropological knowledge that is at the heart of ethnography, offering a more dialogical, open, and horizontal (Holsgens 2021) mode of sharing anthropology with the world.

Notes

- 1) <https://illustratinganthropology.com>; curated by myself and Jennifer Cearn, supported by the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.
- 2) <https://illustratinganthropology.com/learning-pack>; see the exhibition learning pack which highlights five genres of illustration emerging from the curated works.

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