Chapter 8

Ethnographies

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In the Kitchen of 'More-Than-Textual' Ethnography: Introduction

What Is This Thing We Call Ethnography Today?

Throughout the last century, ethnography has come to stand as anthropology's main empirical approach. Over this period, ethnography has developed into a particular mode of enquiry, partaking in and learning from the worlds and lives of people and other beings. Most anthropology programmes across the globe have made great efforts to train upcoming anthropologists in this peculiar relational engagement through which we learn to ask questions, plunge into other lives and worlds, and craft accounts of our encounters.

Interestingly, despite its great success across disciplinary boundaries, ethnography has become a rather difficult matter to pin down. For decades now, ethnographic practice has been a widely debated issue in anthropology – leading to the problematization of its extractivist, representational, and colonial epistemological foundations, its capacity to respond and engage with ongoing local and global pressing issues and to discuss different modalities of authorship and authority beyond an individualist framing: a reflection sometimes discussed with reference to the Writing Culture debate (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Marcus 2012). These important

questions have propelled many scholars in anthropology and neighbouring fields to explore other modalities of doing and accounting for fieldwork.

Recently, some of our colleagues have engaged in fascinating explorations into different modalities of representation – both textual and 'more than textual' – different from the hegemonic, authoritative and single-authored monograph (Bakke and Peterson 2017; Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019). These concerns have also affected the need to readdress the fieldwork encounter proper in more collaborative and experimental terms (Estalella and Criado 2018; Martínez 2021). In part due to the availability of communication gadgets, there has been a proliferation of fieldwork experiments with the media of ethnographic practice, extending the ones already happening in ethnographic film making and visual anthropology (Collins, Durington and Gill 2017).

These more or less collaborative experiments have opened up promising avenues of enquiry, storytelling and conceptual abstraction through a wide variety of devices and platforms. They have helped destabilize writing and reading as exclusive modes of anthropological knowledge production and have afforded 'more-than-textual' forms in which writing could be attempted. These 'multimodal' changes and challenges to ethnographic practice through a wide variety of storytelling devices are not mere methodological matters but epistemic issues through and through. Indeed, touching upon experiments in, say, not-only-textual fieldnotes (Sanjek and Tretner 2015; Taussig 2011), digital platforms for alternative ethnographic engagement (Fortun et al. 2014; Kelty et al. 2009) or a wide variety of venues for collaborative analysis or speculative approaches to the conceptualization of complex ethnographic problems (Ballestero and Winthereik 2021), what we're witnessing is not just a 'more-than-textual' reshaping of anthropology (Westmoreland 2022) but the interesting, inventive articulation of ethnographic problems (Criado and Estalella 2023) and ways of doing with our counterparts (Miyarrka Media 2019) that also change what anthropology might turn into.

This chapter aims to explore the challenges and possibilities of 'more-than-textual' approaches, paying particular attention to our own collaborative experiments as well as those of others who inspired us or with whom we have been in conversation. In reflecting about their challenges, we aim to foreground the 'adventure of relevance' (Savransky 2016) that contemporary explorations in jointly crafting research objects and conditions of contemporary anthropological

enquiry might entail. We will discuss how contemporary ethnographic works have not simply expanded beyond the *graphic* but have affected our approaches and our objects of study, also refiguring how and what we take the object of anthropology to be, well beyond *ethnos* (Ingold 2019; Rees 2018). Indeed, going beyond functionalist, structuralist or cultural–interpretivist approaches, some colleagues have started foregrounding multi-species (Bubandt, Oberborbeck Andersen and Cypher 2023) or more-than-human or environmental concerns, engaging with hard-to-grasp atmospheric phenomena (Peterson 2021).

What we find so intriguing about these experimental openings of the 'more-than-textual' is that they force us to consider the following questions: What is ethnography today? And, even more importantly, what could it become?

A Conversation on 'More-Than-Textual' Ethnography

However, rather than reproducing already published reflections on what ethnography might be (such as the ones substantiating the aforementioned claims) when approaching our contribution, the proposal was to do something a bit more tentative – empirical, even. Some of this was a way of responding to the original commission that paved the way for this writing project: together with being invited to act as 'chapter editor', Tomás Criado had the task of selecting collaborators to accompany him in this reflection. Following an editorial suggestion, these were to be ethnographers at different stages of their careers, experimenting with and exploring the media of ethnography and a wide range of problems. This entailed inviting relevant colleagues different from his regular cothinkers or coinstigators. Also, it required finding the appropriate way of discussing these matters without the grounds of existing knowledge or interactions, and without a suitable opportunity to meet in person to do this. To respond to this challenge, Tomás conceived his role less as an editor and more as a 'host': the facilitator of a collaborative process, taking pains to create the conditions for the conversation to be fruitful in a rather open-ended way.

> *Host:*
> **Tomás Criado** has been grappling with how diverse embodied experiences, sensory knowledges, and modes of dwelling come to matter in democratizing city-making, experimenting with forms of anthropological intervention, and multimodal devices for storytelling, joint problem-making, concept work or pedagogy. For this he has been convening collaborative

ethnographic initiatives like En torno a la silla, the Collaboratory for Ethnographic Experimentation (#Colleex), the Stadtlabor for Multimodal Anthropology and xcol. An Ethnographic Inventory.

Bearing in mind that no possible selection of interlocutors could ever be neutral, for such a conversation he invited as 'guests' a series of fascinating colleagues working in Europe and the Americas, some of them developing their work where they live or far away: at home, at home from afar or searching to find another intellectual or field-work home elsewhere. As a way of having some common ground, all of them are situated at the crossroads of science and technology studies (STS), art-inspired undertakings and engaged approaches to activism – a mixture perhaps associated with the English-speaking arenas of Cultural Anthropology. Even if he hadn't cowritten with any of them, he had already met or been in conversation with some of the 'guests', while some others were fresh acquaintances who, perhaps after this process, might turn into collaborators. All in all, the most important criterion for the selection was that the projects and trajectories of all participants could be in dialogue with one another, hence enabling different conversations to arise from their own projects.

Guests:
Maka Suárez, part of the Kaleidos collective (Universidad de Cuenca, Ecuador), who collaborated in the construction of the digital ethno-graphic platform (EthnoData) designed by Jorge Núñez to pursue research and public engagement work on data practices in and around different forms of violence in Ecuador.
Claudio Sopranzetti, coauthor of *The King of Bangkok*, a collaborative ethno-graphic novel with editor and translator Chiara Natalucci and illustrator Sara Fabbri based on fieldwork on political movements in Thailand.
Indrawan Prabaharyaka, a member of Labtek Apung (Floating Tech-Lab), a collective whose members are a chemist, an engineer, a visual artist, an architect, and an anthropologist. We work on urban ecology. We have done several projects on river pollution, we are currently experimenting with architectural-cinematographic techniques to immerse in and engage with the world of nonhuman primates in Muaragembong, mangrove patches at the periphery of Jakarta.
Marina Peterson, who besides her interest in airport noise as amplifying the indefinite urbanism of Los Angeles has been exploring how experimental forms of writing and sound recording can probe into difficult-to-grasp atmospheric phenomena. She is codirector of the Bureau for Experimental Ethnography at UT Austin, which organizes events and

activities around practices that include listening with transducers, haptic film making, poetry and book-making.

After a series of initial conversations among us, the proposal was that the writing of this chapter would happen by means of a series of online conversations from what we might call 'the kitchen of contemporary ethnography'. In many languages, like in Spanish or Bahasa Indonesia, talking about 'the kitchen of' signals an informal place to share approaches, inspiring takes from other people's work and tips or tricks of the trade. In these conversations, we attempted to think together, searching to provide tentative answers to the complicated questions around what ethnography might mean and what it might be turning into.

Indeed, we met and shared in a rather informal way, which allowed us to touch upon different not-so-known dispositions and interests that might have enabled the different participants' more or less experimental formats. These 'kitchen' conversations, then, developed into something in between a meta-anthropological work of not-so-discussed topics – such as Jean Jackson's studies (1990, 2015) on the changing practices and meanings of field notes through a study of how anthropologists take them – and what Chloe Ahmann et al. (2023) might discuss as 'fieldwork confessionals' – confession being a practice of 'admitting together', perhaps opening up forms of joint thought and writing wherein the opacity of what cannot be shared publicly creates other bonds, enabling discussion of what matters and can be publicized.

In sharing fragments of our choral and virtual kitchen-like exchanges, we aim to further the book's concern with collaborations and engagements, discussing the 'more-than-textual' transformations of ethnography. As we see it, this entails: (i) learning to appreciate collaborative experiments, projects and engagements – hence, opening up to the multivocality of the places we do research in, the plurality of ways of thinking, doing, telling and conceptualizing already present in the lives of our epistemic partners, from which we could re-learn and re-imagine our practice; and (ii) discussing the challenges of doing multimodal ethnographic projects today – the hopes and wishes, but also the problems or the predicaments encountered when exploring ethnography's different means and modes of storytelling and doing abstraction.

Arranging the Kitchen, Setting Up the 'Table'

But before doing that, a caveat: in preparation for our meetings, Tomás also took his role as host to this virtual kitchen to be one of setting up the table. However, for the lack of an actual four-legged piece of furniture on which to share food and drinks, the kitchen's table was to be converted into another kind of platform: a text box, where we could introduce the different dimensions of our projects. This was our first common task. Each text box would include a *title* and *author* and a fifty-word *summary*. Drawing inspiration from the work done by Tomás together with Adolfo Estalella in xcol. An Ethnographic Inventory,[1] the 'table' was to contain a series of key elements helping identify what the host's and the guests' projects could mobilize as a conversation – namely:

– A *file card* providing short statements on the following aspects:
1. *Object of enquiry / research question*
2. *Location(s)*
3. *Dates, duration, temporality* (continuous, intermittent, iterative, etc.)
4. *Mode of work* (i. individual / participant observation, other; ii. team / mention the team members and other relevant counterparts, detail the kind of collaboration and skills, disciplines/background of the different people involved; iii. aims: goal oriented / political, speculative / experimental, research / science communication, or a peculiar mix of these and other relevant aspects)
5. *Relevant 'more than textual' aspects* (sensory aspects, knowledges and their materiality, forms and genres of circulation; be they: i. learnt from the actors in the field; ii. in how the empirical work was approached, as 'field devices'; iii. in how you approached analysis; or iv. in how you approached representation)
6. *Main takeaway / learning / insights* (what it might mean to do ethnography in such a setting and time; what does this project tell us about what ethnography in the contemporary might look like)
7. *Sources* (listing two or three works, projects, readings, etc., ethnographic or otherwise, with which your work dialogues or that served as inspiration – try to provide a reason for this, however schematic).
– A *taster* (something to help the others appreciate the way the project was undertaken, the mode of analysis or its representation).

This table was to be filled up and shared with one another in advance of our first meetings, with the aim of setting up the conditions for a dialogue. We met online several times between March and April 2023, mostly in blocks of sixty to ninety minutes. Due to complex arrangements of time zones and work predicaments, the five of us only met together once. The rest of the meetings, as happens in

the kitchen at parties, were attended by two or three of us. Text boxes acted as enablers of our conversations, helping to focus on details while also liberating us from the burden of having to explain our projects to one another in full. This helped in creating an atmosphere in which looser conversations might emerge.

The meetings were framed around two main questions: (i) What were the conditions (training, career stage, milieu, institutional environment and funding, fieldwork conditions and epistemic partners, as well as interests – political or otherwise) enabling the different guests' more-than-textual projects?; and (ii) how are 'more-than-textual' approaches enabling ethnographers to deal with issues of representation, analysis and conceptual abstraction?

Our online conversations were recorded. The videos were made collectively available, so everyone could be aware of what the others had been talking about. Later, a transcription of selected fragments was undertaken. What follows are slightly reworked excerpts from our talks, woven together by the host, also acting here as the one who has to tidy up after the party is over: summarizing, connecting and contextualizing key moments around the two main questions that had gathered us together. Many lovely thoughts and realizations have necessarily been left out. As expected, beyond searching for clear answers to what felt like admittedly broad questions, our online kitchen turned out to be an informal space of tentative thought, of sharing our work and that of other colleagues. That is, a site in which to confess and discuss hesitations, conundrums and predicaments regarding what 'more-than-textual' approaches might afford today's ethnographic practice. All in all, this was a very enjoyable process. We hope the result is also interesting for you, reader!

Meetings on the 'More-Than-Textual'

Warm-up: Talking about Our Projects

Tomás: When thinking about my work, even if I have been doing different things I think I have been exploring anthropologically what Isabelle Stengers calls the activation of the possible, a question she connects with the notion of care. Working on urban arenas and being, as I still am, interested in the political and conceptual transformations of urban care, this interest has led me to explore different ways in which I could be in the vicinity of urban design activists, both professional and amateur. I have always tried to approach my work

with urban actors treating them as what Adolfo Estalella and I call *epistemic partners* (Estalella and Criado 2018): people with whom I could learn to partake of the places where we were living, research then being a way of dwelling in and thinking about them. My collaborative and experimental engagements have been about creating the conditions for materializing different learning devices for an enquiry into the city otherwise. The notion of device sometimes took a looser meaning, as material interventions that enable peculiar research approaches, but mostly having to do with developing concrete and small, even portable, gadgets whereby these learnings could travel.

This is true of the main drivers and outcomes of my work between 2012 and 2016 in Barcelona as an ethnographer-cum-documenter of the activist design collective En torno a la silla (ETS): there, we worked on a series of prototypes to explore possible relations beyond ableism. Far from being perfectly finished objects, we tried putting into practice 'technologies of friendship',

> with this term ETS refer[ring] to how we experiment with our attachments through the prototypes, the documentation and the actions we perform. In doing them ETS seek to support a space to add up our different and sometimes clashing skills, aims, ideas, and intentions, putting centre-stage the issue of care and how to support our everyday ways of making and thinking together.[2]

Intriguingly, in the course of what was going to be a project of a few months' duration – in part due to the repercussions of the open documentation of the project (having an online presence and a desire to articulate and discuss what we were doing) – ETS got to 'meet' many other similar projects in the country, and were invited to or ourselves organized events and workshops wherein the prototypes were expanded and discussed among other projects. This sparked us to continue, with the project mutating and engaging others. I was not the main intellectual engine; rather, ETS were all 'epistemic partners' in what we sometimes called 'joint problem-making'. The project unfolded, unexpectedly, until it could no more . . . ETS slowly faded away between 2015 and 2016, when it went into an undefined hiatus.

In 2015, I myself moved to Germany. I joined fellow urban anthropologist Ignacio Farías to work at the crossroads of the STS and architecture departments of the Technical University of Munich. When approaching the teaching of architects, En torno a la silla's explorations became something I regularly revisited. There, I attempted to find ways to transform the pedagogy of design into an approach that would sensitize designers-in-training to work in such

a collaborative and experimental way. This was to be done by means of challenging briefs that might put their design approaches in crisis, pushing them to work together with other urban actors. This led to a series of design studio courses we called Design in Crisis, where the radical encounter of 'joint problem-making' with, say, blind activists (Criado 2021)[3] or urban beavers (Farías, Criado and Remter 2023)[4] should lead our students to materialize 'learning kits' or 'toolkits' not only summarizing their main learnings but also enabling a different kind of architectural practice.

In 2018, Ignacio Farías and I relocated to the Humboldt University of Berlin, the team mutating into an urban anthropology platform. What travelled with us from Munich were the interventive and not-only-textual approaches of the urban designers and practitioners we had been working with for several years. Hence, when we took charge of an already existing laboratory of urban anthropology (Stadtlabor) we started considering how to continue working as anthropologists, together with other urban actors, using material approaches to urban intervention. This is how we came to call it Stadtlabor *for Multimodal Anthropology*. One of our first endeavours was working on games. We did so in two projects having to do with urban market assemblages. We got interested in games because of their potential to analyse in miniature complex socio-technical infrastructures (Dumit 2017) – also exploring their scenographic features as modes of fieldwork or representation, contributing to an existing vernacular urban genre. Games have indeed featured as modes of urban activism and analysis (e.g. *The Landlord's Game*, the anti-monopolistic predecessor of *Monopoly*). We have developed two, in highly interdisciplinary teams: *House of Gossip* (an immersive and role-playing take on the conundrums that the tenants of a building must face in a volatile real-estate market like Berlin's)[5] and *Waste What?* (immersing players in the predicaments of circular-economy activists, as they try to reuse and repurpose an avalanche of materials that a throwaway culture discards).[6]

In a way, I think that what I was doing with ETS, in Design in Crisis and in the Stadtlabor was working on what I could call 'learning devices'. All of them had a public dimension, as peculiar multi-sensory assemblies that enable highly specific forms of research on urban phenomena; elicit fieldwork materials to engage in composing diverse kinds of publics; and also document and inscribe our learnings from working in these peculiar urban fields – hence, acting as learning devices of sorts. Even if I am currently writing a book about most of these things, it feels a bit like 'the past'. These days I'm slowly

beginning a new project in Barcelona on urban heat-prevention plans (such as shade infrastructures) and the environmental challenges of ageing-friendly cities, thinking about them as more than human landscapes, which is forcing me to pay attention to atmospheric forms of care. In the last few months, I've been working on a new collaborative platform, called the Department of Umbrology,[7] which will develop a more-than-textual approach to this . . .

Maka: After a year of interdisciplinary and collaborative ethnographic research with public institutions including the National Police, General Judiciary Administration, Attorney General's Office and civil society organizations working on femicides and missing people, we launched EthnoData in November 2020: an STS-inspired multimodal and multimedia platform for the study of data concerned with violent deaths in Ecuador.[8] EthnoData began as a hermeneutic tool to investigate state statistics but soon developed into a more complex platform. EthnoData's team assumed the challenge of anonymizing and cleaning official datasets to make them publicly available. This process was accompanied by another methodological aim of the platform that sought to include users in the labours of data storytelling using ethnography to do so. Here, the team relied on Jorge Núñez's nearly twenty years of work in prisons and around violence in Ecuador. For this project, our purpose was to generate a collaborative mode of enquiry with an emphasis on the politics behind state-produced databases.

The aim of EthnoData, going forward, is to provide cross-disciplinary and politically engaged digital research spaces – for instance, for the critical study of financial power. At the same time, it opens a virtual sharing of empirical data, something not often done in anthropology, which allows multiple users to think together – and differently – about the same material. This collaborative reflection is one richness that this project provides since different engagements are then possible. For some, it might be writing; for others, performance, or painting, podcasting or film making – all formats we have moved through and with at Kaleidos, the interdisciplinary research space I cofounded at the University of Cuenca in southern Ecuador.

The current platform I'm developing (together with a team) is a module about financialization and the possibilities for countering financial power. In this sense, I ask: What new spaces for collaboration and critical enquiry are possible around the countering of financialization in a transnational conversation, by focusing on issues like the right to housing or the rights of nature? What interventions and dialogues are highlighted through interactions with

'more-than-textual' formats? What pedagogical openings does a collaborative form of anthropological analysis of this sort allow for in a digital space (and which does it close down)? What political alliances are possible with academia (as formally understood)? What opportunities do these conversations generate for thinking about what else academia could be?

To have a space where actively participating actors can collaborate and contribute creates room for making decisions based on extensive conversations about the meaning of the concepts used, the material included and portrayed, and for the discussion of ethical dilemmas in politically sensitive topics such as the repercussions and responsibilities of sharing and making public different materials, among others. This is a lengthy knowledge-making practice but one that recognizes the challenges and possibilities of working across disciplinary boundaries, building collaborative affinities and negotiating frictions between diverse methodologies and epistemological approaches.

Claudio: *The King of Bangkok* (Sopranzetti, Fabbri and Natalucci 2021) is part of a larger ecosystem of research outputs based on ethnographic work I conducted among motorcycle taxi drivers in Thailand, with a particular focus on how they allow Bangkok to move and how they bring it to a halt during protests. More than a decade of fieldwork and archival research generated a variety of materials – or so-called 'data' – that demanded different forms of expression to try to grasp the experience of these drivers and render it out to a variety of audiences. *The King of Bangkok* is one of these outputs, based on a collaboration between an ethnographer, a comic artist and an editor/translator. In many ways, this project was born out of frustrations – frustrations with the limits of academic writing, the exclusionary nature of its jargon, and the type of thinking and representing that it allows but also limits. These frustrations, however, were in no way an indictment of traditional academic texts but, rather, an admission that any attempt at representation – whether visual, sonic, performance-based or textual – carries limits and blind spots, invitations and closures. Therefore, trying to grasp reality, how people construct it, make sense and make do with it – in our view, the objective of anthropology – demanded a variety of modes of thinking, analysing and representing – each offering an unstable, partial, yet complementary 'footing'.

The idea of providing this specific footing came out of a conversation among our team about the two main aspects of fieldwork missing, or at least sacrificed, in traditional textual form: the utterly mundane and concrete (the materiality of spaces, the smell of foods,

the sluggishness of time at street corners) and the profoundly abstract (the feeling of a sunny afternoon on a porch overlooking dry, cracked fields; the rage and impotence felt after the protest has been dispersed; the mixed sense of inferiority and pride felt every day at street corners; the warmth of endless conversations in the dark). Words could only feebly and partially evoke both elements, but comics – with their mix of words and images, use of colours and sounds, and their invitation to readers to fill in the gaps between sequential art – could help us grasp them.

Making this shift required that we take a step back, sharing these frustrations and asking for help from the members of the team who had mastered those languages. This was the beginning of the five-year-long journey that generated *The King of Bangkok*, and of a process of 'discovery' of the potentialities of these forms for ethnography. These, in fact, revealed themselves slowly, in a collective engagement directed to 'think graphically' about ethnography. Each reflection, narrative choice, graphic solution and script line was the result of incessant teamwork filtered through three brains and sets of hands, generating a multivocal result.

This multivocality was one of the main affordances of the medium we chose. Comics in this sense – with their peculiar hybrid verbal and visual form; their ability to centre the perceiving subject; their spatial grammar, temporal flexibility and more-than-textual epistemology – can contribute significantly to contemporary debates on the social sciences' epistemologies, temporalities, spatiality, affects and realism.

In particular, the comic form provided an opportunity to create an affective and emotional engagement with readers by directing their attention to a simplified version of reality. Scott McCloud, one of the main theorists of comics, has called this process 'amplification through simplification'. Comics, for him, are the result of a process of abstraction and simplification, and 'when we abstract an image . . . we're not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details by stripping down an image to its essential meaning' (McCloud 1994: 30). As a result of this process of stripping down to 'essential meaning' – a process that occurred for us through long conversations – ideally readers are allowed to project themselves both imaginatively and emotionally onto the characters, focusing more on the message than on the messenger.

This offered us a refreshing move away from a kind of formalistic truth, built through a careful composition of details, typical of ethnographic realism. Here, on the contrary, details get erased and

selected, reduced and condensed, while lyrical images, profoundly unreal, allow us as readers to project ourselves into the characters and their surroundings while also seeing them as emblematic figures at the nexus of processes of migration, class discrimination, economic transformations and political awakenings.

Indrawan: My doctoral project *When Infrastructure Is a Verb* has a peculiar, reciprocal relationship with Labtek Apung, a trans-disciplinary collective whose interventions are in the area of urban ecology: it tells the stories of and around how the collective came into being and at the same time it exists thanks to the collective. In short, one makes the other, and vice versa.[9]

The idea of making and nurturing a collective has been around since 2015, when I was still working at the Ministry of Planning in Indonesia. The former Director of the Human Settlement Division gave me considerable freedom to design and organize a policy-making and gathering event. There, I worked with creatives from Jakarta Art Council and tested out a short-lived collective between policy-makers and creative workers. In 2016, I started to work at the Munich Center for Technology in Society, where I was exposed to Tomás's work in En torno a la silla. They inspired me to make a particular collective, in which the members were politically active by means of making objects. That was a cool intervention, I thought. I also learned from them about the problem of durability in nurturing a collective. I remember in one of Tomás's presentations, he told the story of how he planned for a gathering in winter and there were only two or three of them who attended it.

Long story short: Sri Suryani and I kickstarted the embryo of the collective. I started my fieldwork in 2017. One of the key research objects I observed was a raft on which people hang out, smoke, talk, wash laundry and utensils, bathe, poop, pee. Children swam around it. Sri Suryani (an architect) introduced me to the raft. She was working in an activist organization, Ciliwung Merdeka, that has been protesting against forced evictions in that segment of the river. She won a small grant from *National Geographic* for studying some segments of Ciliwung River in Jakarta. Together with Sri, we created the WhatsApp group Ngebikin Bareng (literally means: 'cocreation') and invited some friends, mostly architects and engineers. There were more than twenty members of that WhatsApp group. Brainstorming, discussions, heated debates happened there.

In 2018, we prototyped Labtek Apung as a working title for our activity. We didn't think at all back then that this was going to be a collective. It was called Labtek Apung (which roughly means

'Floating Tech-Lab') simply because we'd been working on and with the bamboo raft, a tricky floating object that many if not most outsiders thought was dirty, unhygienic, a symbol of backwardness. We partially agreed with that. Of course. The raft floated atop of a highly polluted river and its craftsman had fallen ill after being exposed to the pollution for decades. But dirtiness was not all that we wanted to address. So we thought at that time, what would happen if we were to add one more activity other than hanging out, smoking, talking, washing laundry and utensils, bathing, pooping, peeing: doing water-quality testing. Of course, you could read this as a conventional citizen-science activity. But it's not. We didn't mean to teach and lecture. We meant to educate just as much as miseducate ourselves and learn together. So it was.

Labtek Apung started to become a thing. Sri and Novi (a chemical analyst who worked at the Jakarta Wastewater Company) started to get invitations to tell their story here and there in Jakarta. The raft turned into one node of the first virtual conference of the Society for Cultural Anthropology, 'Displacement', in 2018. At the end of 2019, Sri got a doctoral scholarship. Her project proposal was about river cultures, too. She said goodbye to Ngebikin Bareng, left the WhatsApp group. Within the next months, the WhatsApp group was abandoned. Soon, it was 2020 and the pandemic paralysed everything. That was the moment when I thought, whatever we had done would be dead. I was absorbed by the final pages of my dissertation.

In September 2021, Novi organized an event at Muaragembong (an estuary in the Jakarta suburbs) with some local volunteers and two other collectives, the Jakarta Birdwatcher's Society and the Home River Bioblitz. A couple of weeks later, we saw the invitation from Laura Sobral and her collective, Trialogue, to a small workshop at Floating ~~University~~ Berlin. Early in 2022, after my doctoral defence, she kindly made a video of Labtek Apung to be published on the Goethe Institute's website. Things started to roll again from that point. Jamie Scott-Baxter (an architect) and Laura Kemmer (an anthropologist) invited Labtek Apung together with Ground Atlas (São Paulo) and Floating ~~University~~ Berlin to be part of a proposal for South Designs Competition. We won the competition and Labtek Apung is now busy experimenting and preparing for next year's events, one of which is a joint exhibition in Berlin.

Marina: Currently, my work is concerned with amorphous, atmospheric forms, and that which is indeterminate and vague. I am invested in writing and book forms that are adequate to atmospheric dynamics; in creating spaces of collective experimentation that are

conceptually generative. This might be in the classroom, or through groups such as the Bureau for Experimental Ethnography.

Playing improvised music informs my research, writing and thought. I've explored ways of thinking through how that practice supports conceptual concerns, especially of materiality – of instrument, of sound, energy – and of a kind of presence and mode of attention. Improvisation is an inherently uncertain process of listening *with*. It is also something of a problem for anthropology insofar as it is an abstract, non-representational form. As such, it puts pressure on anthropological categories and modes of enquiry, especially those concerned with difference and representation. While conducting research for *Atmospheric Noise: The Indefinite Urbanism of Los Angeles* (Peterson 2021), I made wind-noise recordings as a reflexive investigation of the microphone – as a response to the way the microphone is taken as transparent, whether by acoustic engineers (noise-monitoring equipment) or phonographers.

My book *Atmospheric Noise* and my current project, *Weathering Uncertainty*, both suggest the need for a 'patchwork ethnography', albeit one that goes further to consider alternative ways of doing ethnographic fieldwork that do not necessarily maintain a commitment to durational presence in an 'othered' field site. John Jackson Jr's (2013) approach to 'thin description' is useful, insofar as it recognizes the knowledge-making practices of the research subject and the impossibility of a 'holistic' account of a place or community. To this end, I would espouse a research methodology that foregrounds a kind of attention – which is immanent and allows for uncertainty – rather than duration or immersion. I draw on ethnographic and archival material, without necessarily distinguishing between the two; there are moments that matter as historical, but also trends and tendencies that are continuous, or ways that history seeps into the present (i.e. in terms of a past of coal mining in Appalachia, and current engagements with that history). I read archives ethnographically and 'against the grain' – drawing out uncertainty from science and engineering, for instance, or gestures and unrecorded sound that is marked by its absence.

What Were the Conditions Enabling Our 'More-Than-Textual' Approaches?

Tomás: One thing I'd love to discuss with you is 'How could our projects be possible?' This might allow us to talk about the role

of the 'more than textual' in our own training as ethnographers, or at what stage in your career this could have become something relevant or even reasonable, perhaps with regard to your institutional emplacement or having to do with the traditions you have been part of. Not necessarily in terms of, you know, complex or big national traditions – I don't know, North American or German anthropology – but the kinds of fields you have been trying to work in, or how people from potentially different generations, trained in different places with different leanings, might be approaching the 'more than textual'.

In my own case, I began experimenting with 'more-than-textual' approaches as a postdoc in Spain, a place without much of an anthropological tradition in the sense of the big schools of thought of Britain, France or the US. I was full of fear, since what I felt prompted or compelled to do in En torno a la silla – working in an activist setting, speculating with others, setting up digital platforms for that, et cetera – was somehow opposed to the sort of textbook representation of what ethnography 'should be' in my training. In some places in Europe, and it's absolutely the case in Spain, it's particularly brutal how ethnographic manuals or handbooks sort of format how we go about our projects, you know, I wouldn't say necessarily in an objective or distanced way – but, rather, using a methodological or procedural inductive logic. Perhaps, writing about this modality of fieldwork with Adolfo (Estalella) in *Experimental Collaborations* helped to create the grounds to develop more programmatically what I later did: the pedagogic toolkits, and the games. But how about you? Who would like to go first?

Indrawan: Shall I? Well, I worked in a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Jakarta, in a setting of urban poverty, doing social work. This was my first experience, falling in love and broken-hearted at the same time with . . . how social science and science in general are being applied for the 'improvement of human life'. I left, worked on some art projects, went broke. Then, after doing my MA abroad, I returned to Indonesia to work at the Ministry of Planning, worked there for about two years. In 2016, I moved to Germany. I was inspired by the kind of collective work you, Tomás, had been doing in En torno a la silla. As part of my fieldwork in Jakarta, I got in touch again with architects, chemists, engineers, designers, and we prototyped the Floating Tech-Lab. From that point, it became an interesting place where we could experiment. We could do something that we cannot do in the university. Later, I moved to Berlin to continue my PhD at the Institute of European Ethnology; around

2018–19, there was this momentum for multimodal anthropology there. And I thought, why not continue, and kind of radicalize what I have been doing in Jakarta?

Tomás: I think there's something interesting in what you've said. Some of these demands for the 'more than textual' do not necessarily come from, you know, the kinds of academic spaces where we might have created the possibility for this to happen. What's interesting is that sometimes this comes from the very actors we are working with, who are not somehow very interested or invested in, I don't know, just reading academic papers or a monograph.

Maka: In my case, how I came to multimodality relates to trying to think differently about anthropology and knowledge production in academia when, together with other colleagues, we cofounded a research centre in Ecuador called Kaleidos. From its beginning, there was an interdisciplinary and collaborative approach to it. Quickly, multimodality became a common language for us – partly due to many of us coming from different disciplinary backgrounds as well as diverse ideas of how to produce knowledge and how to account for that knowledge. At the same time, being in South America, we benefited from a rich tradition of decolonial thinkers who have questioned who gets to speak – and which epistemic authorities count, and which don't in academia. The development of multimodality was, for us, very much related to that conversation. For me individually, multimodality isn't something I was formally trained in, but it was part of my PhD fieldwork. The people I worked with in Barcelona, the social movement 'La PAH' (the Platform of People Affected by Mortgages), constantly explored innovative ways of communicating and sharing their work. They found ways to connect with very different publics, and to make complex ideas understandable in accessible ways. Their multimodal approach came from collaborations with artists and the legacy of the 15M mobilizations in 2011, as much as from the participation of people from all walks of life – including many migrant groups who had not usually been involved in political mobilization in Spain (even though they had in their own countries of origin).

I'm currently working on a new project about 'transnational multimodal platforms'. I think we are at a crossroads where many of these global conversations between activists from different places have come together in unprecedented ways. This also has an ethnographic impact for me in the ways we maintain those conversations with people with whom we are very much, not only in solidarity, but in continuous political engagement. So, the sort of collaborative

digital spaces that I am interested in cobuilding are linked to that, and they necessitate methodologies and outputs that are never just written. That has been very important for me in thinking about what I want to coproduce – not in extractivist ways but, rather, in projects that can open up new conversations and space for more actors.

Tomás: How does that resonate with you, Claudio?

Claudio: Yeah, quite a bit. I guess, for me the two questions have always been 'How do I make academia work for people I think with?', but also 'How do I make it work for me so I can continue to think with them?' In conversation with political movements I was engaging with, I tended to ask myself: What do you bring to the table? How do you articulate your presence here in a way that is not, as Maka was saying, just extractive? What do you offer? This question was often not just on my end. People also said: 'You have a good time with us, but we need you to do other types of work because you have a set of skills.' One of the things that came out of a lot of this conversation was basically the following: the type of labour and what we do has one privilege, which is time. We have time, which most people don't; if they have to go tomorrow to work in a factory or in the office, they don't have the time to read, to process, to bring ideas, to look at what interesting stuff might be happening in other places.

But I think there was also the realization that, okay, I have these ideas and stories, interviews . . . and time I spent with people, and it just seemed like an enormous waste to exclusively put it into an academic book that very few people will read. So how do I find my own place in all of this?

These questions directed much of my last decade of work. When I was in the middle of the protests in Thailand, I started writing a blog, doing what I thought was like pure ethnography and narrative. So, every day I would have an interview with one person, describe their life in the middle of the protest and put it up. Originally, it was my way of processing what I was experiencing, these very violent protests. Then that blog got read extensively, because there was very little material available that looked at processes in the streets, and the movement was struggling to present itself internationally. So, some friends in the movement said to me, 'you need to put this into a book, to tell what we have been doing'. That book came out before I was done with my dissertation (Sopranzetti 2012), and I realized that I could actually do something that also worked for them.

In that sense, this emerging narrative of multimodality as an experimental cutting edge – rather than something that is demanded

of us from our friends in the field, and that is often absolutely necessary for our work to continue to exist – is an incredible privilege that most of us don't have. I went to this public anthropology conference a few years ago, and it was fascinating because the keynote speakers, aged over fifty, were talking about the importance of public anthropology to a room of people below forty who commented, 'you are presenting it as if this was a choice', as if you could decide how to live in academia because you have your job. It was really interesting to see this generation saying, 'that's not our experience at all: while doing my PhD I have to work and collaborate'. 'In order to do my postdoc, I have to work for NGOs', 'I have to write reports', 'I have to think about these other dimensions.'

Marina: I feel like I have a more conventional approach to this, insofar as my work has largely been textual and largely in the form of academic production. This is making me think, though, about how to articulate the spaces and modes of experimentation and critique that I've embedded in my work from the outset. I would say there are two strands.

I was initially drawn to anthropology through Writing Culture (Clifford & Marcus 1986), but what I got from it was just a very general sense of a discipline that could critique itself – at least, the classical or canonical mode of doing anthropology. Those kinds of questions and concerns guided my selection of research subjects, which had to do at that point with trying to take an anthropological approach to things that are produced as neutral. My first conference paper was on classical music, and what do we do with something like this when it tends to fall out of the purview of a field that is invested in difference. My dissertation research, published as *Sound, Space, and the City: Civic Performance in Downtown Los Angeles* (Peterson 2010), took up similar concerns by looking at a downtown urban public, ultimately considering how an urban public is produced around agreement and consensus.

The second strand was that I am also a cellist. I was trying to figure out how to engage both my interest in the urban and my practice as a musician in a research subject. For my dissertation research, I played with a hip-hop orchestra. That became a way of making my work legible for something like performance studies. I ended up getting a job in an arts department, the School of Interdisciplinary Arts at Ohio University, where I was hired to teach performance studies. That was an interesting decade of trying to figure out how to communicate with colleagues working on arts as scholars, not as artists. I was also actively performing, travelling to play experimental music

and also doing programming, bringing people to Ohio and organiz-
ing workshops and events, and doing house concerts. I had moments
trying to figure out how to write about that. I have a chapter on a
collaboration with Lebanese improvisers (Peterson 2013), which is
more of a historical, ethnographic investigation of an event: grap-
pling with the problem of how to treat an art form that doesn't
have the kind of parameters of modes of identification, the sort
of cultural content of artistic projects that anthropologists engage
with. But then there's also the question of how to treat the sound
itself, the practice of the sound. Those, again, are generally things
that I've found to be illegible to anthropologists but that I'm
interested in.

   Experimental artistic practice continues to percolate into my
research, even if inadvertently. For instance, my recent work on
atmosphere and air develops conceptualizations of immaterial-
ity through discussion of noise. *Atmospheric Noise: The Indefinite
Urbanism of Los Angeles* (Peterson 2021) is in the form of a textual
academic book. It has five chapters. It's very research driven. I played
a little bit with form in one of the chapters. But the critique, or the
creativity or the experimentation are in terms of the epistemological
methodological work.

What Does the 'More Than Textual' Do? Representation, Analysis, Abstraction, Making the Otherwise

Tomás: So far, we have been discussing our trajectories – going from
one place to another, from one disciplinary context to another –
and how that had an impact in creating a set of dispositions. It is
also very interesting that in different moments we've been touching
upon variegated forms of engagement as having had an impact on
this, for example working together with political groups, and how
collaborative work might have always been at the core of anthro-
pology. And we've also touched laterally on the different ideas of
relevance that could be paving the way for more-than-textual pro-
ductions to emerge, the different positions or dispositions and work
constellations in which this approach makes sense. I've also heard
in many of our conversations some of you expressing your concern
with the limits or the boundaries of some of the categories that we
might be using, such as the very notion of 'multimodal' or catch-all
programmes like 'public anthropology', and the problem of seeing
multimodality as hype. In these conversations we were really talking

a lot about how we came to do these kinds of things, whether it was from training proclivities or engaged work pushing us to deal with different ideas of relevance and engagement. But I was hoping we could devote some time to discussing the affordances of the works, the productions we might have been engaged in.

Claudio: To me it's really about thinking: Okay, what kind of eco-system or ecology of output I can generate with the material? So, I would not like to create this duality between the textual and the non-textual or the 'more than textual', because the textual *is* multimodal. I mean, I find it funny when people engage with your graphic work and say: 'oh, that's so cute' or 'you translated your writing into this other form', as if you had done research in writing in the first place. The question for me is reflecting on the affordances of different forms: What can I do with writing? What can I do with a certain type of writing? What can I do with drawing? What can I do with images, with photos, with networks, with media participation, with games? Working with comics as a form in our last project, for instance, it became clear to me this was a form of thinking, of organizing archival material, of thinking about realism and abstraction, about conceptual work in a different way.

Indrawan: Marina, in some of our previous conversations you mentioned the writing of your book to be connected to multimodal practice. I was left thinking to what extent do you think this work was also facilitated by your training as a musician? To what extent do the personas of Marina Peterson as a musician and as an anthropologist merge in your book? To what extent might this sensitivity to music inspire an attention to noise?

Marina: I guess the kind of attention that it requires is what makes the connection between writing and multimodal work, even if it takes the form of academic writing. I'm doing work in the words, writing through material in a way that does theoretical work in the writing, with attention to the kind of matter at hand. But it is absolutely informed by musical practice, or a sonic practice that is very much about experimentation with sounds in a material way.

The moments in my career of trying to bring musical practice and anthropological work together have focused on music as practice. I treat noise or sound as a process, something that's not an object. In terms of multimodal theorizing, I think this is key. I like the example of playing with paper on the cello, because experimentation with sound puts you on the edge, into uncertainty. Similarly, wind-noise recordings have to do with that. How does a microphone listen, when the microphone is generally taken as a transparent device that

gives us some kind of sense of realism? These are key theoretical problems of anthropological multimodal work.

Tomás: In my case, besides the more activist requests to rethink my role as an ethnographer, as one having to do with purely documenting for the sake of academic output, I guess an important part of what prompted me to start playing with some of the devices I talked about before comes from certain political and epistemic aspirations that I believe have taken root in STS, perhaps because of an interest in non-conventional forms of knowledge and what that might do for worlds to be made or conceived otherwise. This made me reflect a great deal on my role as an ethnographer, beyond the idea of being 'a translator' between cultures – a classic role, even if it has been revamped by the likes of Viveiros de Castro (2004) in his works on 'controlled equivocation', foregrounding a way of interpreting this role as one of betraying the language of origin of the translator, somehow intervening in Western categories of origin, to open up other registers of the possible.

But what I became very much interested in was how can anthropology, a particular anthropology having to do with the worlds of design, bring that otherwise to bear on the works of experts and technicians that play an important role in hegemonic forms of materializing the world, perhaps inspired by the pluriversal design attitude of Marisol de la Cadena and Arturo Escobar (2023)? Even if anthropology might also be a modern profession, we are pretty much down below the hierarchy of hegemonic knowledge when compared with, say, physicians or engineers. I mean, sometimes this might not be the case, but not very frequently. What I have been interested in when inventing these devices together with the people I was working with was all about sensitizing ourselves to the possibilities of other knowledges – of what the urban, in my particular case, could be. Some of these devices might have enabled forms of joint analysis, like in En torno a la silla's blog posts or in the toolkits for architects. But what I believe has been at stake in the gadgets worked out there, as well as the games, has been working collaboratively and tentatively on a peculiar form of material abstraction whose aim is not to capture the state of the world but to stage or elicit how to search to 'transform' it, if I may use this term. Put in other words: as miniature devices for sensitization towards other possibilities, where the ethnographer doesn't reappear again as a hero or creator but as a facilitator of alternative relations.

After-Party: Some Inconclusive Last Thoughts on 'the Multimodal'

In our conversations, there has been a running theme: sometimes an undercurrent, other times a clear concern with how 'the multimodal' – one of the recent, trendy terms for talking about more-than-textual productions – might develop not just into a moniker for certain kinds of works within anthropology but as a driver of the transformation of contemporary ethnography. In closing, allow us to share some of our inconclusive thoughts on the matter.

Marina: I'd like to suggest engaging the meanings of the multimodal with this group, something that maybe needs to be unsettled precisely because of the different places that we're coming from, which are not necessarily easily folded into 'the multimodal' as it has become defined in North American anthropology. How does the multimodal get operationalized, and by whom? There are many interesting things that the multimodal could be – abstraction or remixing, for instance – processes that are not really legible or possible in a disciplinary practice that has tended towards documentation and realism. Perhaps a different kind of multimodality could be discussed as a kind of minor anthropology, one that doesn't necessarily have to make big claims or make anthropology relevant, like holding onto a sense that there's an ethical imperative and that there is good within anthropology.

I think what is more interesting is the kind of work that some of you are doing, especially across disciplines, where anthropology becomes minor or provincialized in relation to other disciplines and other kinds of practices. And so, it's just one among others. There is so much siloing around the discipline. Perhaps if the multimodal affords something it is somehow giving a name to these kinds of engagements that we seem to all be invested in. Like this, the emphasis is on the engagement – on process rather than on product.

Tomás: I was thinking of your comments and was wondering that if we perhaps managed to institutionalize 'more-than-textual' ways of doing as a regular way of doing (as proposed in Criado, Farías and Schröder 2022), we could avoid the certain posturing of a turn as well as criticism from a certain 'classic' ethnographic establishment. I mean, we could also foreground the pervasive centrality of public life in our ethnographic work (Fassin 2013) or, you know, the fact that we exist as people working among publics (Collins et al. 2013; Kelty 2008), traversed by different forms of communication

that inform everything that we do, right? And how difficult it is not to be working together with, say, journalists, people in social movements, community managers, all kinds of people . . . Perhaps, paradoxically, institutionalizing the multimodal might pave the way for it to unsettle the discipline, as an unsettled mode of practice, like Marina was talking about it.

Maka: I think perhaps the most relevant connection that you've made me think about in these conversations is the pedagogical aspect of multimodality, and how that has to do with the unsettling of the disciplinary boundaries: that, to me, is interesting in itself. I think for this to matter, we would need to try to create new forms of accounting, and I think that's part of the challenge for people involved in multimodality: How would it continue to keep on existing? So, we can continue to do the collaborations we want to do and we might need to rethink the kind of academia we have, not to be bound by the metrics of publication. Then it might be that the so-called 'multimodal turn' might be a possibility for that: not for creating turns just for the sake of, you know, new academic turns but rather as forms of resistance to things we don't want to see in academia and to reclaim university spaces where we want to build certain forms of knowledge production; collaborate, in tune with political engagement; and, you know, think towards the outside.

Indrawan: When thinking what multimodality can be, and perhaps following what Maka said, what I find interesting is that it's another way to produce knowledge, perhaps even challenging the status quo of knowledge production, where multimodality is less a thing and more a method for a kind of uncharted land that doesn't refer to particular media, like drawing or film, or what have you. A practice where the multimodal is not yet a thing. I think this is an interesting tension, with regards to – I don't know what to call this – materialization perhaps? Where multimodality could be about the ephemeral or like . . . unpredictability.

Claudio: I don't know, if we think historically inside the discipline and we take the Writing Culture moment, we realize that it truly opened a space to think outside the textual. However, in order to do that and create an opposition with the past, they had to reduce everything that had happened before to the textual, create a sort of straw man and put it at the very core of the discipline, shrinking the importance of previous experimentations. Just as an example, Pierre Bourdieu collaborated with an illustrator in the 1970s (Barberis and Grüning 2021). These things, which we might now call multimodal, have been done by people at the very top of the discipline fifty

years ago. So, this process of collapsing the past into the textual was not because of the marginality of those experiments but because the Writing Culture reflection took attention away from them in an attempt to develop its main contribution. And the same happened with films: they have been produced for as long as anthropology has existed but somehow they do not figure prominently in that reflection. This is why I think Writing Culture is a fascinating moment to look back to, precisely because in order to open up a space of possibilities they had to shrink the space of those that had already taken place. I think it would be really nice, especially for this piece, if we didn't reproduce this, and avoided thinking of ourselves as innovators.

Tomás: I love this: the multimodal is not an avant-garde!

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Notes

1. See https://xcol.org/ (retrieved 1 September 2023).
2. Taken from the website: https://entornoalasilla.wordpress.com/english/ (retrieved 1 September 2023).
3. The documentation of the course is available at: https://designincrisis.wix site.com/designincrisis2017 (retrieved 15 September 2023).
4. The documentation of the course is available at: https://thedesignincrisis .wixsite.com/designincrisis/beaver (retrieved 15 September 2023).
5. See https://tscriado.org/2022/04/05/houseofgossip/ (retrieved 15 September 2023).
6. See www2.hu-berlin.de/stadtlabor/publication/waste-what/ (retrieved 15 September 2023).
7. See https://umbrology.org/ (retrieved 15 February 2024).
8. See www.ethnodata.org/es-es/ (retrieved 15 September 2023).
9. See www.goethe.de/ins/id/en/kul/onk/22900276.html (retrieved 15 September 2023).

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Figure 9.1. Notes on Anthropology, AI and Nonbeings
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