

Chapter 7

Drawing as Analysis

Thinking in Images, Writing in Words

Rachel Douglas-Jones

When did you last draw something by hand? A map of how to get somewhere? A picture in a letter? A diagram? In this chapter I am concerned with the capacity of images to bring forward and assist ethnographic analysis. My argument is that during analysis, shifting medium can be generative. But I also want to suggest that, no matter how bad you think you are at drawing, your artistic abilities are simply not what is in question here. The task is one of honing the visual dimension of your conceptual imagination, the challenge that of how one might go about drawing an idea, a relation, an ethnographic problem. How can we use images to work with the inchoate? This text describes the practice of thinking with drawn images as a means of analyzing ethnographic material, with a view to providing insight into how spatial, diagrammatic, and visually materialized thought can support analysis and critique.

Ours is not the business of reporting found facts. As we make our fields, they make us, tuning our interests, speaking to our curiosities and concerns (Simpson 2006). Immersing ourselves in the things we learn to see, whether in the field or at our desk, brings us ethnographic knots and problems, puzzles and jigsaws. These become the kernels of our chapters and articles, their hearts or frames, precisely because they arrest us, challenge us in some way. Sometimes their interestingness lies in their mundanity,

sometimes in their strangeness; at others, it is the sense of unease we are left with, that something is not yet quite understood on its own terms. But how do you draw an idea, a relation, a problem?

Analyses are tricksters, appearing in one form and then another, often patterned across years but indiscernible in a given moment. The drawing I describe here is a step on the way toward analysis as newfound understanding, a mode of being with material in a way that acts as a companion and scaffolds space for thought. I was brought to image making during my own writing process while assisting on a project called “Writing Across Boundaries” at Durham University originally co-convened by Bob Simpson and Robin Humphrey (Newcastle). Thinking earnestly and intently about writing alongside and through commissioned essays from senior social scientists, I became haunted by the rather devastating sentence that opens Roy Wagner’s “Depersonalizing the Digression”: “The findings, speculations, arguments, and conclusions of an anthropologist are no better than their ability to write them down, in clear, distinct and acute prose or prosody” (2010, 1). He continues, compounding the issue: “One thinks no better than one can write, and for the simple reason that one’s audience, one hopes, is not exclusively in one’s own head” (1). But often, we need some help getting from these first thoughts to prose on the page. Over the intervening years I have worked with, against, and around Wagner’s comment that one thinks no better than one can write, because writing is a form of thought.

My examples here seek to expand the tools at hand for thinking, so as to help those thoughts into dialogue with audiences outside of one’s own mind. In analytical work decisions have to be made about what we will make, how we will give our accounts in a way that challenges and unsettles the known or the given, the author a “neophyte un-

learner” for whom perpetual openness is the doing of analysis? (Holbraad et al. 2018: 29). It is in this work that drawing—by which I mean making lines, shapes, boxes, visual associations—is a useful way of linking ideas and organizing thoughts, of living with openness and guiding the reshaping of arguments. It is a technique that we as educators often draw on in the classroom, at a whiteboard or blackboard, or even when making slides.

The techniques I describe below simply require paper of varying sizes and a pencil (for the hesitant at heart). Colors are enjoyable but not required. With a few circles, squares, and notes within them, images can be used as part of an analysis of empirical material. I am interested in images for their potential to synthesize and objectify (Pink 2006, 8)—but I am less interested in knowledge remaining in that “objectified” state. Although diagrams and drawings as method fascinate me, they are not the end point I have in mind.

<A>A Brief Genealogy of a Practice

In anthropology, drawing has been extensively used to convey research analyses. Long used in fieldwork, the diagram in its explanatory and descriptive mode has documented social life—houses, villages, markets, and kinship trees—conveying complex ideas through moves such as abstraction, simplification, and detail. Condensers of meaning, diagrams seem to offer at a single glance something pages of words might fail to convey. Perhaps in response to the resurgence of the visual in broader analysis, anthropological and otherwise (Taussig 2011; McCosker and Wilkin 2014; Kennedy et al. 2016), a range of projects are

again attending to the place of the image. Three such examples have recently come to my attention.

First, Elizabeth A. Hodson's 2016 exhibition called *Drawing the Anthropological Imagination* included marks on a surface, diagrams, maps, and visual notetaking. Curating the work of a range of anthropologists, Hodson (2016) aimed to explore "the importance of aesthetic forms for observing momentary sensations and securing fleeting ideas," studying "how these impressions and recordings develop beyond the field" both for exposition and speculation. She reveals the persuasiveness in the beauty of a well-drawn image, whether schematic or representational. In contrast with Hodson's interest in the aesthetic, Tristan Partridge's review of anthropological diagrams (2014) takes a thematic approach: the particularly diagrammed domains of kinship and exchange. Replete with examples, Partridge's text demonstrates how diagrams have been central to theoretical debate, from Evans Pritchard's visual trees of Nuer clans and lineages (despite Nuer figuring being differently organized) to the place of linearity. His opening epigraph, quoting Massumi (2011, 99), addresses the diagram as "the activity of formation appearing stilled," a formulation that prefigures his later attention to the danger of a diagram to "freeze" the flow of time, halt a world in motion, reify shifting relational states. Time, too, is a component in drawing the field. A similar attention to the temporality of images appeared in my final example, when Engelmann, Humphrey, and Lynteris convened their conference "Diagrammatic: Beyond Inscription?" (2016). As they sought to explore the "dialectic of inscription and erasure as an inherent and generative trait of diagrammatic practices", they foregrounded the way diagrams operate at the "threshold of vision and the unseen," a provocative formulation for my purposes here.

Hodson, Partridge, and Engelmann et al. all are predominantly interested in the images that emerge from analysis rather than those that constitute it. I am interested in drawings as analytical tools, part of a process often unseen. I therefore borrow from these techniques with a different aim in mind: rather than explaining ethnographic material or generalizing, the images of this essay work as a means of making visual traces of ideas that are more felt than thought, that emerge from conceptual proximities, observed elisions, conflicts, gaps, and erasures. In what follows, I explore the generativity of visual nondeterminacy, the relationship between the drawer and drawing, and the potentialities in drawing as a praxis of translation.

<A>Three Examples

To write this contribution, I had to dig into boxes for old notebooks I had used while drafting my doctoral thesis. I first drew in order to think, in order to write. My preferred notebooks at the time were very large, with the forgiving expansiveness of blank pages. The three types of drawings I discuss come from the spiral-bound pages of a notebook dated March 2012, making them early efforts. My research, which had taken place over the previous two years, was a multisite study of a regional nongovernmental organization (NGO) in Asia Pacific that was working to build capacity in ethical review. My observations came from conferences, audits, training sessions, conversations, and ethics-committee meetings. By March 2012 I was spending my days waiting around in a set of Welsh law courts, having been called up for jury service. With regard to my research, I had just arrived at what felt like a crucial wrangle with chapter 4 of my thesis. I could not take a laptop into the court's waiting room, so to give myself a sense that I could continue to think through

the chapter as I waited to be called as a juror, I took one of these very large sketchpads through the metal scanners to the waiting room, and I kept my planning and thinking work going with a pencil and paper. After my jury service I returned to my desk and kept drawing. While I have in the years since marginally refined the drawing practices I developed to work with this material, they remain much as they were at the time. Ethnographic work is perpetually open, and the work of analysis moves between openness and momentary fixity: what will hold steady, what produces something that feels like insight.

<A>Temporary Totalities: Making Things Visible

Although Wagner hopes that one's audience is not exclusively in one's own head, getting ideas out of one's head—particularly in the often solitary spaces carved out for writing—is quite the challenge. Yet it is also part of the analytic process to take moments of being overwhelmed by one's material and move in and out of it. The first technique is the “everything” route: throwing down ideas, events, moments, places, words, author names. It requires a large sheet of paper and a willingness to cover it entirely. As Fortun (2009, 173) requests a “laundry list” from her students as they begin to formulate their question-asking in always provisional starting points, this exercise asks, What is the shape of this material? What does it span? Where are the poles? What belongs together? What seems to belong together but is actually a recurrent version of the “same” thing? This is a way of beginning to see how you see.

Giving yourself a single, uninterrupted hour, without reference to notes or computer, internet or field books, throw down the scope of your thoughts. Not everything

you carry in your mind related to your project is going to make it onto this sheet of paper.¹ But things will rise to the surface: That moment someone made a comment you didn't understand. That article that changed the way you thought about how you might approach or frame something. A line from an interview. A single word. A theme you've been thinking of. A place you visited that you want to describe. A look. A discussion you had with Fred while on the bus. Don't try to specify too much; rely on your own shorthand to remind you what "apple talk" means (Fred was eating an apple at the time of the discussion you think was important). As you come up with things, try to group them together. You might choose to organize into "writing" objects—chapters, sections, paragraphs; you might work thematically. It is not intended to be exhaustive but, rather, exploratory. At the end of an hour you will have made visible to yourself materials that you want to assemble. You may have put some alongside one another or discovered that some could belong in several places. You also will have provided yourself with a snapshot of your current view on a particular slice through the material you have. And the snapshot can then become part of the dialogue of analytical work.

<figure 7.01 about here>

For example, one thing that became clear to me in doing this exercise myself was the challenge I would have in describing the NGO I had worked with: How "big" was it? I had drawn its name in large letters at the center of several stories, but at the time it had little standing in the international literature. More interestingly, I realized it was "made small" by other actors who dismissed its work. Through making choices about how large or small to make the NGO's activities, this "making things visible" exercise became a form of relating to size as a problem in my field. In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour asks us: "Does it

not make perfect sense to say that Europe is bigger than France, which is bigger than Paris, that is bigger than rue Danton, and which is bigger than my flat? Or to say that the twentieth century provides the frame ‘in which’ the Second World War has ‘taken place?’” (2005, 185). It does, Latour, it does. This is the everyday work of contextualization, and it is also often what feels comfortable in making this kind of organization. We lean toward the nation as “larger,” a somehow explanatory force. But this blinds us to the everyday work of scale making being done in our material. “The big picture is just that: a picture” (Callon and Callon 1981). What kind of picture have you drawn? More importantly, whose? Making semiotic assumptions visible (such as the “size” of our actors) makes them more tangible, arguably much more so than organizing a Microsoft Word document to carry and contain them. An organization can be “drawn large” (e.g., the World Health Organization) far more easily than this weight can be conveyed in writing, and as such, this exercise allows for the drawing of a “proportional field” (after Corsín Jiménez 2010) in which we attend to the given weight and size of actors in their accounts as much as in our own.

Fortun (2009, 183) reminds us that ethnography is not about everything. As an exercise that aims at having your project before you such that you can survey its contents, drawing offers the opportunity for a moment of selection and, with the resulting physical piece of paper, a chance to take hold of its character. It is a tool for all that it will include and all that you will forget, the initial scoping of exclusions, its politics of representation, and its many possible routes forward.

<A>Indeterminacies: Separating and Distinguishing

Above I have described a technique for exploiting something of the “all at once” character of images on paper. I now move to the image as a focused technique for thought. Much analytical work depends on carefully distinguishing, selecting, weighing what belongs together and what should not be elided. Here I want to argue for the generativity of visually sorting out ideas and its potential to help clarify—particularly in the case of making distinctions. The diagrams described in the “Diagrammatic” conference occupy “a liminal space between representation and prescription,” existing in this “dialectic of inscription and erasure” (Engelmann, Humphrey, and Lynteris 2016). It is a lesson that revelatory moments of analysis are frequently not the end point but another step toward a good description, a precise conceptualization, another turn in the lengthy processes of analysis.

For example, while researching the professional background of one of the conference speakers I’d seen present, I found a set of slides from an earlier conference that discussed the concept of “duty-based ethics.” Although these slides referenced Kant, I knew that the way “duty” was being taken up among my Asia Pacific interlocutors bore little resemblance to Kant—it was being interpreted and put to work in quite a different way. I also knew I hadn’t thought very deeply about ideas of duty. To bring these ideas together while thinking about their separateness, I drew a circle with a line through the middle, putting choice on one side and obligation on the other. Did knowing more about ethics oblige them to act in a new capacity in their workplaces? How did the invocation of a Kantian duty-based ethics appeal to those at the conference? How did it play out within professional settings?

<figure 7.02 about here>

Using the space of a sheet of paper, ask yourself what binaries seem to organize this topic or field within the literature—more interestingly, within the field itself. Set them at opposite ends; a spectrum isn't necessary unless you feel one is already being drawn up. Before allowing the polarization to settle, now ask what doesn't fit those oppositions. What is pulling in another direction entirely? As above, once the drawing is laid out, there are questions to be asked of it. Whose are these contrasts? How are they produced? What are the "motivated oppositions" (Strathern 1980, 181) within them? What is presumed given in this setting?

These questions are necessary because diagrams can mislead us, reveal us in our assumptions. In *The Gender of the Gift* (1988), Strathern considers a diagram drawn a decade earlier by Godfrey Leenhardt to depict New Caledonian personage. Leenhardt argues that, "[w]e cannot use a dot marked 'self' (ego), but must make a number of lines to mark relationships" (Leenhardt 1979, 153, cited in Strathern 1988, 270). He is left with a diagram that centers the self, the personality, and the ego: a "star shaped configuration carries the one and same presumption: living within, guided by, driving, functioning as, or knowing these structures of relationships must be the individual subject" (Strathern 1988, 269). Strathern's critique draws together Leenhardt's diagram and his "discursive observations" (Strathern 1988, 268–69) to observe that the diagram has led Leenhardt astray: it does not allow for the subtleties of his notes, recorded elsewhere in his ethnography, to lead him to a different conclusion from the one prefigured and underpinning his diagram's imagination.

<A>Analysis as Ordering, Organizing, and Aporia

Although an image's capacity for simplified summary can be uncritical, it can also take us to sites from which new critiques can be formed. From this exploratory point of view, starting with text in order to generate text is frustratingly linear. Learning how to order ideas, the stages at which they need to appear in a narrative, is difficult, and in today's working conditions it is regularly subordinated to the continuous scrolling up and down a laptop screen.² Something else is required. In this third technique, the visual becomes a summary of a different kind. Still analytic, these drawings offer a more structured opportunity to organize materials. As much a form of composition as analysis, in the creation of an ethnographically driven argument the two are deeply intertwined. The order and tone of our stories changes how our analyses proceed when they are shaped into linear unfolding.

<figure 7.03 about here>

Let us take an example I was working with. It is a form of archaeology because in this case the image itself is merely a tool for clarifying an idea or thought. It has no place in the final text, as a diagram would, and may not even be the form the analysis eventually takes. The problem was a chapter. I had the cluster of things belonging to the problem, so to each topic I gave a section and boxed it off. I organized the layers of text according to what needed to go in what sections, which paragraphs. Visually planning my discussion and analysis of the practices of ethics review committees led me to a problem I was otherwise not aware of: although I had plenty of stories and ideas to put in my sections on how committees handled their sense of making judgments of colleagues, I had very little sense of what belonged in my section called "localism." By making a drawing of the chapter, I

realized that while I thought it was important and belonged there, I had yet to articulate to myself the character of the connection between hierarchy and localism, localism and judging. I also realized that while I had given the grouping of thoughts a name (“localism”), I had not yet assembled what it would contain.

<figure 7.04 about here>

Composing our ethnographic moments, our stories and insights, is the relational work that brings an argument together. Image-based analysis exists prior to a clearly articulated argument; it exists at the level of a sense that these stories speak to one another. Although drawing did not tell me what those relations between localism and my other sections might be, the exercise pointed to a gap in my explicit understanding of what they were, or why I was drawn to discuss these topics together. An image of what you are combining is an exercise easily undertaken, quickly sketched, straightforwardly organized, if one is willing to face aporias. Once laid out, a drawn ordering can help produce statements that articulate your choices as particular and deliberate, and whether those statements themselves remain in the final text, they can act as the momentary grounding necessary to step again into the unknown.

<A>Conclusion

One does not need to be a fine artist to draw on image-making to aid analysis. Spatial, diagrammatic, and visually materialized thought can support analysis and critique in the ways I have outlined here and doubtless many more. In her contribution to the Writing Across Boundaries series, Marilyn Strathern writes that, when starting new projects, “[a]n air of unreality hangs over my beginning efforts, though if I am lucky that can temporarily

clear by my hanging the argument on someone's else words (you know how real other people's words appear, solid and sensible things as they are!), just as I began this piece" (2009, n.p.). In suggesting you "draw" out ideas emerging from your ethnography and the nascent conceptual space of analytical work, I am proposing a shift of medium, a form of work that steps around the screen and keyboard and takes place with simpler instruments. On these images we can "hang our arguments" built with tools well suited to making material the problems, concepts, and moments that occupy our ethnographic everyday. Analysis, when read in published form, appears in its synthesized completeness. The uncertainty bound up in arriving at a configuration of thought is concealed because the author has moved themselves beyond their earlier drafts. Large sheets of paper offer a chance to make material connections between as-yet unclear ideas, bringing the practical profane into sight. I maintain that writing is a form of thought; that when we write, we work at the edges of what we know. That is understandably a daunting place. If a drawing, diagram, or outline tacked to a desk or office wall can provide a sense of company, a sense of being already in the material, this may be enough to provide an analytical space wherein we can put our descriptions to work.

<A>Protocol

- At any time during your fieldwork or writing period, switch mode from words to images.
- Use the blank page to spatialize and organize your thoughts. Don't think "art"; think about affinities, shapes, circles, proximities. Depending on what you want to achieve, you might throw everything that comes to mind onto a

piece of paper and start to link things together. Or you might make a separation between things you perceive as distinct but don't yet have reasons for.

- Be in dialogue with the image you have made: reflect critically on what you have put together, what assumptions your organization of field moments or terms reveals. How could this be thought otherwise?
- Move on from your drawing. Part of the purpose of drawing as analysis is to move you forward through realizations and toward the eventual textual format your work will probably take.
- Let time pass.
- Revisit the images you have made: Are there things in them that you have forgotten or that have become natural? Things that no longer make sense? Seeing disjunctures is part of analytic work—seize it!</BL>

Notes

¹ A chapter or an article are equally suited brackets to this practice.

² Multiple monitors help but still have their limitations.