

How to Write Things

Fiction, Anthropology and Foreignness in Berlin

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Why can the anthropologist be a writer but not an author? This essay reflects on the possibility of conveying anthropological knowledge through creative writing while reconsidering ethnographical authorship and its audience. The research material is a fiction written by myself to evoke a particular structure of feeling bound to a specific location, contemporary Berlin. The story is not told, however, from the perspective of an ethnographer who masters expert knowledge, but from the partial view of a protagonist that appears as a lost, hopeless, and vulnerable figure. This anthropological fiction invites us to reconsider the boundary between academic knowledge production and creative writing, rising along questions about evidence, representation and how our research could reach a general audience.



Fiction Done Anthropologically

Anthropologists and storytellers are cousins, certainly family. We both create narratives, make use of the self as an instrument of knowing, and share the same fertile ground of events (Augé 2011). Anthropology, as in the case of literature, begins with loss and an observation of habits. However, very few anthropologists have written good fiction; indeed, some colleagues have even argued that “anthropologists are bad novelists rather than bad scientists” (Leach 1982: 53). Most often, the fiction written by anthropologists tends to have a travel literature tone that disappoints many (Eriksen 1994), to the point of asking, “How could such interesting people doing such interesting things produce such dull books?” (Pratt 1986: 33). To some extent, this is due to the fact that the construction of scholarly knowledge has to follow a strict set structure and a detached tone of objectivity, since anthropological writing must always adhere to the norms of a disciplinary discourse.

Interested in rethinking academic writing, my essay proposes to expand the literary tools of ethnographic practice by reconsidering the modes of description utilized to present our data. By doing so, it claims that fiction not only can be the bearer of ethnographic observations and anthropological analysis, but also that it does so in ways different from those of conventional academic writing. Everything starts with a sense of being constrained by the forms present in academic writing, refusing to reduce all our material to analytical clarity (Frederiksen 2018), as well as the need (sometimes more personal than professional) to reveal and juxtapose, instead of exposing and ordering. This critique of an analytical standardization of the forms of description also draws on previous discussions on the right to speak personally in academic publications and on the role that subjectivity plays in our ethnographies. The need for “writing otherwise” (Hannerz 2016) has been a topic of concern in anthropology since the 1980s, critically reflecting on the limits of writing academically as well as to what extent the ethnographer’s authority is based on his or her capacity to be an author (Tyler 1986).¹

The story included in the essay stimulates questions about the difficulties of a cross-border life. It is an anthropologically grounded work of fiction written in Berlin, a city that slips away from the main character. Originally I wrote the story as a diary. Ten years later, I revised it with the air of a novella and published it in Spanish as *Paseo Circular* (2021).² For this article, however, I translated, re-wrote, and expanded some of

¹ For instance, Vincent Crapanzano (1977) refers to a dissociation between the field experience and ethnographic writing; Stuart McLean (2017) describes anthropological practice as a fabulatory art; and Paul Stoller claims that through fiction we can elicit other ways of constructing “a real sense of locally lived life” (2016a: 125).

² The story was published in Spanish as *Paseo Circular* (Bifurcaciones 2021), and in Estonian as *Kuidas Oma Asjad Ära Lõpetada* (Vikerkaar, 2023).

the entries of the original diary. We can even wonder whether these passages qualify as ethnography; what sort of genre or *-graphy* would it be?³

Has travelling become obsolete? I take the S-Bahn and feel like Fernão de Magalhães crossing the globe. In Berlin, trains are living organisms from which all vital energies emanate.

...

Foreignness and strangeness.

Walter Benjamin suggested leaving home every day as if you had just arrived from a foreign country, to start each morning as if you were getting off a ship from Singapore.

All the cities have already been told, and mapped, and registered. And whether they have changed or not, they are recursively mapped, told and mourned again and again – because they are lived anew.

But how is a journey told? We would say it like this, with a straight line... But would this be vertical or horizontal? Or round like a circle instead?

To travel, an imposture; to travel, a story, a private plot, a big lie that you tell yourself.

This story is written as an experiment with narrative forms, bringing ethnographic insights, anthropological observations and self-examination into fiction. Besides integrating ethnographic insights and anthropological analysis into a fictional tale, this story included cultural references to the Berlin novel, mentioning authors such as Alfred Döblin, Joseph Roth, Walter Benjamin and Franz Hessel – who introduced the art of strolling (*Kunst des Spazierengehens*) in 1929. Nevertheless, the story does not simply introduce elements of fiction into something considered real, but there is also a transit back: reality filters in the narrative through ethnographic descriptions. It blends fictional characters with real-life observations, in the same way that a novel can include magical realism, or components of unreality.

³ Different authors have shown that linear, accumulative narrative is not everything for our discipline and that literature has something important to offer anthropological thinking. An example of this is Marc Augé's *No Fixed Abode* (2013), which blends both ethnographic research and fictional narrative to understand the experience and reasons for contemporary homelessness. Throughout the pages, the reader perceives that the story is based on anthropological research, yet the book does not provide details about the methodology used. Augé refers to it as an ethnofiction, "a narrative that evokes a social fact through the subjectivity of a particular individual" (2013: vii). He notes that the storyteller's mode of exposition is effective to mobilize emotions. Another example of making use of fiction to explore anthropological issues is Stoller's *The Sorcerer's Burden* (2016b).

Why should we go back to a place where we once were happy? Expectations... Musty, heavy coat.

I'm having coffee with my old friend Laura, an Argentine journalist who has been in Berlin for many years. She tells me that to stay in this city I need a lover, a scholarship or a job – better if you combine all three!

On my way home, I find a group of naked people waving signs and shouting: "Berlin has become obese!"

I come closer to observe the scene and discover that this is an intervention of the Hedonist International against the rise in housing prices in the German capital. Equipped with Mickey Mouse masks and music, the group boycotts the tours that real estate agencies organize to show their clients flats, and they do it by dancing naked.

The next day, I was supposed to start working in a real estate company dedicated to the Russian and Spanish markets. I lasted a day; not even that – just a few hours.

...

In the German course for immigrants, I met a Russian named Ivan. He is 56 years old but looks 65. Ivan was born in Omsk but was able to move to Berlin because of having some sort of German ancestors. He came with his family in the 1990s and has already settled in the city. Ivan has an "N" tattooed on his hand. At first, he didn't want to tell me the meaning of that N, but weeks later he suddenly explained it to me in the interval between one of the classes. When he was 17 years old, Ivan had a girlfriend named Natasha, with whom he was madly in love. Before leaving for the military service, Ivan decided to tattoo the "N" on his hand to show her that he would not forget her. When he came back from the army, Natasha already had a daughter and was married (to another person). Ivan says that on clear days he saw Alaska in the background. Not from Omsk, of course, but from Chukotka, where he did his military service. Several times a year, Ivan had to travel to Moldova from Chukotka in his red Kamaz truck.

"But the roads were very bad, weren't they?"

"Yes, of course, but with patience, you end up arriving..."

The quality of a person can be measured by his talent for the pause.

A Bildungsroman in Reverse

This essay reflects on the affinity of anthropological practice with literature in terms of knowledge-making. By doing so, it participates in ongoing discussions on the limits and potentials of popularizing anthropology. For instance, Helena Wulff (2016) suggests

to cultivate flexible writing and develop our capacity to operate in different genres in order to address a broad readership and to reveal different aspects of social and cultural life. This gesture implies to take seriously the anthropologist as an author. However, the effort to bridge the gap between the worlds of the academic and general readership is not always taken with sympathy by colleagues; among many anthropologists there is a fear of good writing, assumed to be self-indulgent and “associated with frilliness, with caviar, champagne, and dark chocolate truffles” (Behar 2009: 107).

Anthropology, as a discipline, has lodged within it a critique of our own practices, constantly interrogating how we generate knowledge, with whom, and even what knowledge is – approaching our methods as contingent and constructed, thus transformable (Marcus & Fischer 1986). One of the things that makes anthropology unique is the multiplicity of stylistic devices and genres historically explored by its practitioners to translate knowing into telling (see Narayan 2012; Fassin 2018; McGranahan 2020; Martínez 2021). Drawing creatively from other genres to convey anthropological knowledge has indeed a long history. An example of this are the metalogues of Gregory Bateson (1972), composed as a series of fictionalized conversations with his daughter about intellectual issues. A more recent example of the various tones, shapes and genres accepted as part of our disciplinary traditions is *The Hundreds* by Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart (2019). This book is an assemblage of one hundred 100-word literary exercises in prose, in which the authors explore how to amplify what is known about ordinary life in the United States.

Another example is James Clifford’s (1981) discussion of the interplay between surrealist artists and early ethnographic practices in Paris during the inter-war period. As he shows, these artists also engaged in an effort of making the familiar strange, instead of striving to render the unfamiliar comprehensible. Two of the claims of postmodern critiques were also to take ethnographic narratives as literary productions, while arguing that ours is a discipline that can only speak partial truths (Clifford 1986). The rediscovery of modernist figures such as the storyteller and the *flâneur*, as well as Walter Benjamin’s take on juxtaposition and montage were also important in developing these ideas. He saw his own work on different European cities as a linguistic extension of photomontage, allowing a non-linear approach to knowledge and time (Benjamin 1979). Then, in “The Storyteller” (1969), Benjamin describes the transition from traditional oral modes of communication (through a communal listening) to a more individual experience of narratives, now composed through fragments of information to be read alone.⁴

⁴ Benjamin’s reveries were themselves influenced by the allegorical engagement with traces publicly performed by the *flâneur* (Poe 1984[1840]; Baudelaire 1922[1863]; Benjamin 1989), and by the sociology of urban life developed by Georg Simmel (1971[1903]).

The anthropological fiction here included does not develop an imaginary portrait of what an anthropologist is like while doing fieldwork. This has already been done. For instance, in a study of novels starring anthropologists, Jeremy MacClancy (2013) points out that the character of the anthropologist tends to appear more frequently than other social scientists. Either I engage with literary examples of new realism such as the work of Herta Müller and Svetlana Alexievich. My story is a *Bildungsroman* in reverse; *Bildungsromans* are traditionally path-finding narratives, employing the conscious becoming of the main character as a strategy for developing the plot (Gavrilović 2012). Yet in this case, the main character follows a path-*failing* trajectory instead. As the story advances, the main character falls into a state of withdrawal – into apathy, hopelessness and alienation, gradually dislocated from the world around him. The reader thus finds how the anti-hero faces the vertigo of his world falling apart. The text tells the entropic decomposition of the original order while the main character ends up unlearning the tools for living. He experiences a kind of suspension of everything he knows, becoming more and more epistemologically naked, having problems to distinguish between what is seen or imagined, while the city slips away from him.

Searching for work online is a matter of faith and insistence. I take a look at a web page for expats: “offers by area”.

My first impulse leads me to try in “Arts and shows”.

- Sociocultural entertainer
- Babysitter
- Belly dance trainer
- Halal chicken slaughterer

...

Where does a love story begin and where does it end?

I once knew a woman who married her boyfriend (only) because he had read all of Bulgakov’s books.

It’s four in the morning and she hasn’t come back. I decide to call her but her phone is “off or out of range”. I regret calling her. I put on some music and lie on the bed. Then, I try to think of comforting things and a TV program called “Take it easy” comes to mind, a random show that was broadcasted on Spanish television years ago. I guess it’s because I read a news story announcing the death of the host – a story that was later rectified, denying that he had died. He is alive and would even record new shows again! The internet is

marvellous: you can kill someone and bring them to life shortly afterwards without leaving any stains.

I look out the window but she doesn't come; that doesn't help me sleep either. I go back to bed to try to sleep, but once I lie down, I can't fall asleep.

I'm going to clean the fridge to distract myself.

Chet Baker sings that he's a fool and falls too easily in love.

Surrender should never happen without prevention.

How beautiful love is and how easily it can be broken.

The story deals with contemporary feelings of foreignness, loneliness and estrangement. It is not simply fictional, but it also includes elements of reality as well as of a subjective interiority to explore types of knowledge that accept the messiness of social relations and urban affects. The story also has a dreamlike atmosphere, as if it were a phantasmagoria or a *Traumnovelle* (dream story). It combines echoes of a stream of consciousness with heuristic descriptions of multiple encounters – not always understood to the end.

I walk down the Oranienstrasse and hear someone playing a guitar. I start talking to him – without knowing that he is Oskar Kamin, a well-known local intellectual. After a while, he proposes to go for a drink to a new bar called Luzia. Oskar speaks like a torrent and does not stop moving his hands.

“In life, there is a quota of failure,” I remember him saying. “I fulfilled them all, and that is why I was able to escape from Moscow. Back then, Berlin seemed like paradise to me.” He also spoke to me about “the Russian beat” and invited me to attend one of his Wednesday sessions at a bar called Kaffee Burger, “where the most beautiful women in Berlin and the ugliest men meet.”

I pretended not to get the hint and never went.

...

Does it matter that it doesn't matter what is happening out there?

On certain days, the Sundays of life, survival consists of turning the absurd to your benefit.

“This morning Germany declared war on Russia. In the afternoon I went swimming.”

Franz Kafka

“You can't be shy with the polka” (sentence heard on the occasion of the last ball held in the Great Hall of the Winter Palace, in 1913).

...

Too late to be Rimbaud or Wittgenstein. Too late or too early, meaning contemporary.

I continue traveling with the melancholy of Frankenstein and the Werewolf. I have been a passenger and also a resident and emigrant in different countries. Migrations and cross-border movements have become my lifestyle. Leaving behind, walking beyond, and going through. Alas, you always end up in the circle of your own self, between the abyss of the infinitely large and that of the infinitely small.

The story here included is based on a personal journal. However, the voice of the author claims no authority; quite the opposite, it loses it as the story advances. Likewise, the narrative of the novel is not linear and produces affective imprints that are hardly explainable with traditional academic formats. This was pointed out by journalist Manuel Madrid (2021) in his review of the story published in Spanish as a novel. As he put it, this text is an artefact without a genre, a narrative at the periphery of canons that exemplifies our attraction to become storytellers. Also literary critic Rodrigo Pinto, in his newsletter, noted that the story reveals its own constructedness and artefacted reflexivity. This makes the book “closer to the essay than to the novel, in the vein of Baudelaire and Benjamin... a structure that makes possible to go through an infinity of topics around the urban, the ordinary and issues of mobility within a very demanding foreign city” (2021).

When writing fiction, one can feel an intimidating absence of boundaries, moving away from the need to providing evidence and the burden of representation, constantly conveying the impression of being in close contact with far-out lives (Geertz 1995). Traditionally, fiction works by showing and recounting, whereas ethnography works by describing, contextualizing and explaining. As a result, the relationship between fiction and anthropology is not always harmonic. While both can find elements of inspiration in the other, disciplinary limits tend to prevail, as well as the protocols of evaluation and accountability. Alas, taking ethnographies as a literary practice and anthropological accounts as contingent on subjective perspective have obvious ethical implications since the purpose of our research is to situate the life of people in specific socio-cultural contexts, not to imagine plots, scenarios and narrative fireworks (Narayan 1999).

Clifford himself noted (1986) that we should not give up facts and accurate accounting while writing poetically, acknowledging that still some understanding of evidence is required. Once ethnographic writing becomes much like fiction, we risk confusing the reader about where the empirical begins and the imaginary ends (blurring documentary and fictional modes). Thomas Hylland Eriksen argues so in

a retrospective reflection, and adds that, despite the qualities of a social analysis found in certain fictions, anthropologists should not use fictional stories as ethnography “since their intention is not to represent the truth” (1994: 190). He also warns that, even if the novel takes on some of the ambitions of anthropological analysis, it is difficult to determine where what is invented ends and what is described begins.

Eduard Limonov is wrong. One does not travel in order to reflect, to observe, and to compare. There is no goal in travelling, just an impulse. You travel to know the world, and for that other reason. To Berlin, you can only go because of going.

I met Limonov when I was living in St. Petersburg. It was spring and Elena, who had been the poet’s lover for a while, put me in contact with Nastia, who claimed to be his press officer and who possibly was or had been his lover too. Limonov appeared at the rally as a frail god surrounded by black-winged angels (the “nazboly”). I remember that we greeted each other without shaking hands, as if I were terrified of regulated physical contact. We walked less than half a kilometre and agreed to do an interview after the demonstration, when the Russian riot police (‘omony’) romantically emerged at the end and the beginning of the street we were marching on, on the banks of the Neva, near the university. An oblique rout ran sideways, even though there was no possible escape. I was one of the first detainees in the police van, so I was able to recreate myself contemplating the nihilistic combat between the fallen angels and the actual guardians of order in this world, both of them in black.

Once the vans were full, and before going to the police station, they asked us one by one “who are you” and “what were you doing here”. I replied that he was a tourist looking for a Spanish restaurant. I was then able to confirm that the “omony” also laugh. I never heard from Limonov again and Nastia stopped responding to my messages. Somewhere, in some drawer, I might still keep the list of questions I had for the interview.

...

I meet my friend Pablo, with whom I lived in Moscow a few years ago. Pablo is even poorer than I am, and yet he insists on paying for the Falafel Tellers we eat. We often meet at Baraka, a North African restaurant near Görlitzer Bahnhof, and he is always the one who pays. Sometimes, when Pablo goes to the bathroom, I run to the bar to pay and discover that he has already paid.

Pablo makes a living by donating semen and also by donating himself to the pharmaceutical industry. He then disappears for two weeks, confined to a hospital to have new developing medicines tested on his body.

The waitress asks me how long I've been in Berlin.

"Five months," I tell her.

"Ah well, by now you shall drink sparkling water and everything."

"No, I actually don't."

"So you know, sparkling water has many advantages. For instance, it helps to avoid stomach aches, diarrhea... here we take it with everything... with wine, with juice, with beer and we even give it to the babies and use it for cooking."

"I will take note! I assure you."

How long could I stay out of "the Deutsche Vita"?

One day you make a concession, and then another one, and another one, and in the end, nothing matters anymore.

If discussing on the affinities between fictional and ethnographic writing, we have to pay attention to the different notions of authorship at stake: inventing, expanding and intensifying stories, in the case of fiction, and articulating an analytical narrative that follows a sequence of reasoning, in the case of ethnography (Behar 1996; Narayan 2012). Nevertheless, literature and ethnography have also been presented as twin forms of attention (Zani 2023). Likewise, the increasing experimentation with different textual devices indicates a fresh momentum for creative writing in anthropology. In this vein, colleagues such as Anand Pandian and Stuart McLean (2017) have noted that, at some instances, other narrative genres may offer more effective means for us to convey social relations and human experience.

Different forms of writing can do different things for the audience, and therefore, have a complementary relation (Frank 2000). For instance, the use of creative writing in ethnographies allow us to inject new liveliness into the conventional writing genres of our discipline and to aim our work toward new readerships (Gottlieb 2015). So, if the possible articulations between anthropological knowledge and literary invention range widely – from the scientific to the artistic, why do we need to choose a narrative genre to write anthropology and stick to it *ad mortem*? Since writing anthropology is more than providing content by an innocent bystander, there is a constant need to overcome the disciplinary limits of representing knowledge and analysis.

At the third beer I get on perfectly with my Polish neighbor, who closed the carpentry workshop earlier to have a drink with me at the Hirsch.

"You're crazy to keep so much money under the mattress," I tell him.

“In my country, nobody trusts the banks. Besides, it is money that I cannot declare because most of what I earn is black money.”

(Eric has over 80,000 euros hidden somewhere in his apartment).

“And what are you going to do with so much money?”

“At first, I saved it to take my family to Chicago, and of course, part of what I earned I sent to my wife. Also, when I see my children I give them some money, as well as to my Russian lover so that she can improve her life a little.”

And you never told anyone where you kept the money?

“I did not. To nobody.”

“Not even your wife or your children?”

“I just trust myself ... my wife asked me for a divorce after I paid for the house in Poland. She said that I only thought about work and rarely went to see her ... and now she has another man.”

Surely, if we had understood everything we were saying to each other, our friendship would now be much less intense.

...

One way to perceive the diversity of Berlin is to observe the differences in the sense of ridicule among those passing by. A diverse array of people walks through the streets of the city with a particular lack of inhibition... For example, a strange character sits next to me and talks to me about East and West, and about Franco Battiato. To look strange in Berlin one has to mix words from Arabic, German, Russian, Ukrainian and Finnish, in a potpourri like the one of this man next to me, who also claims to be the king of Shambhala, “where watermelons blessed by Jesus are sold.”

He is not drunk, though he insists on telling me how the world was created.

“The world and also the moon?” I dare to reply.

Another Kind of Ethnographic Writing

This essay points to the processes of in-textualization involved in our discipline and articulates a critique against ordering the messiness of life-as-lived while introducing another kind of ethnographic writing by blending fiction with real-life observations. So we are not talking of making up our data, but of bringing ethnographic insights and anthropological analysis into fictional writing. The idea, thus, is to explore how the realm of everyday life, our surroundings, and the affects related to both, can be narrated

differently. Any reconsideration of how and to whom we convey our knowledge causes us to reflect upon our style, and eventually, explore different formats. Alas, as remarked by Tim Ingold (2007, 2014), anthropology is not simply ethnography. In his view, these two activities have different objectives and also produce different types of narratives.

Anthropological writing can also be concerned with a researcher's subjective life experiences, referring to inward feelings and sensations – as autoethnographic practices have shown (Lavolette 2020). The autoethnographer might be written into the moment, combining personal experience and analytical tools to illustrate cultural practices (Ellis, Adams & Bochner 2011). Nevertheless, this kind of accounts have been referred to as “ethically dubious and of peripheral relevance” (Sparks 2002: 558). In any case, what anthropologists often do is to tell stories, most often someone else's stories, while creating analytical narratives based on what we have heard and observed. These stories are recollected from “a place” that is called “the field”, from which we have to leave in order to write about it. Later on, we are expected to turn what we gathered orally or visually into a written ethnography that both describes and explains, in a scientific sequence of reasoning. So these stories go from the field, to our desk and are finally delivered to fellow anthropologists (our community of critics) who eventually mark it as having scientific relevance. This chain, in turn, creates the belief that our knowledge is gleaned “not from storytellers but from informants” (Taussig 2006: 62), a form of authoritative relation that gives us disciplinary gravitas.

Still, in a work of fiction, writers can manipulate the dialogue, the story and express character's silent thoughts in order to build plot. Hence, neither the stories nor the informants have to appear exactly as they were. Some things might be exaggerated, and some others masked or alleviated, as either a form of augmented reality or to show things in ways that do not imply any potential risk or offence to the person in question. Moreover, while in fiction, constructing a narrative might be more important than the falsity of some of the descriptions included in the story, in ethnography, writing is an authoritative practice, expressing research as disciplinary prescribed and favoring determinacy over indeterminacy. Ethnographic writing thus is not simply a device of communicating findings, but an element of the politics of knowledge. Musing on this, Eriksen has criticized the limited publicization of ethnography, venturing the failure of anthropology to communicate in the public sphere: our writing “tends to be chiefly analytical” and “we rarely get on with actually telling stories.” As a consequence, our books and articles hardly “attract anyone but other anthropologists” (2006: 35, 36, 32).

Sadness and hair, seasonal mood.

I cut my hair, hoping to recover. Leaving the salon, I contemplate the leftovers on the floor, as if they were a trophy.

I meet my friend Julia. She always takes care of me; she makes me tea and cuts cheese, and then we recollect stories from my last stay here in Berlin.

Also in Neukölln I meet Alex. We go to the Späti to drink a beer and smoke a ciggy, sitting on the bench. At the counter, in front of us, there is a well-mannered woman who orders something in German with a Chilean accent. Her name is Eli. She lives in Paris and is visiting her mother. Eli sits with us; she makes movies and uses expressions like “cachai”, “kokoroko”, “concho”, “pucha” or “fome” that I have to search on the Internet to know what she’s talking about. How cute is Eli. We spent the next five days together. We go to exhibition openings and drink vodka mules for free. Another night we go to a concert. Then, we ride our bikes throughout Berlin. Has she come to visit me or her mother?

The night she returns to Paris, Eli leaves a photo strip in my mailbox with Adieu written in red lipstick.

If you want to be boring just say everything.

...

The journalist who hired me as a ghostwriter calls me to come to her office for coffee. She tells me that our email communication is rather cold, that she would prefer to have a more personal and close relation. However, she didn’t mention anything about having a real job contract for me.

In all wars, there is a moment in which you reckon what you are firing at.

Writing an anthropological fiction helped me to engage with that feeling when you fall out of place, musing on the relationship between the interiority and exteriority of a person, and how they emerge within particular socio-material environments (Desjarlais 1997; Irving 2017a, 2017b). The story itself has several beginnings. For example, at the EASA conference in Stockholm (2018), when Tomás Errázuriz, co-director of *Bifurcaciones*, asked me if I had written any fiction. It also started in 2008, when I left my job as a journalist in Russia and travelled to Berlin with Ksenia, where I began to write my observations between long walks. We can go further back and remember when I realized that I have both fondness and appeal for peripheries, as a fecund borderland as a site of imagination, invention and eventually unlearning. I realized this, for instance, when a marble businessman from Alicante proposed me to become the director of their new headquarters in Ho Chi Minh City. Such an unexpected job opportunity came after

helping him (or rather helping us, as I was in the same situation) to return to Spain on Christmas day in 2007, following a tough negotiation at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport. I could go back in time to remember when I first sensed the adrenaline of travelling abroad; I was 12 when my uncle Agustín took me with him to Portugal in his truck. As a child, I also experienced the excitement of the storyteller through my great-grandfather, Paco "El Chengo", who took care of me while my parents were working. To my amazement, every time he told us a story, both the narrative and the performance mutated as a living organism. And so, successively, the storyteller ends up forming a multi-linearity of beginnings, with no clear end or constriction, except the own capacities for storytelling.

"I have six cats at home. Well, five plus one."

At first, it seemed like a flirtation from a person who was rather nice, so I went with her, not because of the cats, but because she was nice and because of the things she was saying and also by how she looked into my eyes. Elena took me to her little apartment, a few hours after meeting at the Kirk bar on the corner of Schlesisches Tor. A mutual friend introduced us – Igor. The truth is that we had already met once, always around Igor's orbit. But then I was on to something else; and so was she. The apartment was about 35 square meters in size, and the cats were jumping, from the bed to the carpet, and from the chair to the kitchen. When I asked Elena if she had any beer, she told me to get one from the fridge, and there I found the plus 1, wrapped in a plastic bag.

When fucking, the cats appeared from below and above. I left at dawn and she got mad because I didn't stay for breakfast.

She later told me that she hadn't had time to bury the sixth cat.

...

I am coming home with a woman from Martinique. She arrived in Berlin hitchhiking and sleeps every night wherever she can. She transmits a very particular aura of persuasiveness; she convinces you to do almost anything.

That night, I was lucky. Several men were after her with their claws but she ultimately went home with the one who tried the least – me.

We stopped by a 24/7 store to buy a couple of beers and snacks. Well, to buy is just a saying because she hid the stuff in her jacket and then left without paying. Before we went to bed, and without her knowing it, I closed the latch on the front door of the apartment and hid the key.

The dynamic of leaving and creating new homes in other places has been at the core of anthropological research and also of my work (Martínez 2020). As an adult, I decided to move several times. I have been a passenger, as well as a resident and an immigrant, in several countries. I have been crossing thresholds and frontiers; migration, foreignness and cross-border movement have become my way of life, leaving friends behind and a bit of me too. In the end you cross borders that pass through yourself. As the novel shows, you travel far but you always end up in the circle of your own – between the abyss of the infinitely great and that of the infinitely small.

I love her the way eels love each other: crossing barriers, travelling thousands of miles to make love, and then leaving nine million descendants.

We have been together three days in a row without leaving home. There is no food left in the fridge.

Then, we talk about sects and Mormons and I fall asleep (possibly snoring) in the nakedness of the night.

...

The quantum physics of relationships, of beginnings, endings, and all what happens in the meantime.

One can feel very lonely in a house.

I came to be with her, but I can only see her for a few hours a day even though I have all the time in the world.

I go out for another walk and discover a tent in Komenius park with a large sign that says “Max Opportunities”. I decide to go in but only find coats from last season, all of them either too big or too small...

Daniel, a Uruguayan DJ who came to Berlin to try his luck, also attends German classes. Failure stories have always been infinitely more interesting than those of success, and Berlin has become a port for stranded boats and those tanned with loneliness.

“I came to Berlin to learn about music, but in Montevideo I had access to more music than here,” regrets Daniel, who cannot return home because he has run out of money.

“In Montevideo I played in various clubs and lived well; here, they don’t even want me to be the lowest restaurant worker.”

We take a few passes and shots in the park. Daniel tells me that when Uruguayans arrive in the area, they never miss a goal.

Perhaps, instead of learning anthropology, one ends up being an anthropologist. I have doubted my faith in academia at various periods in my career. However, I remained in it, I suppose in the same way as I began: by a conjunction of casual elements that lead me to multiple translocations.⁵ Eventually, the result is the constant confrontation with that part of you that no longer belongs anywhere.

I eat pelmenis in front of Ostbahnhof. They are served by Vladimir Egozov, who tells me his story. Vladimir (or Dyadya Vova as he wants to be called) was born in Altay; and from there, he moved to Moscow at the age of 17 to pursue engineering studies at the military aero-academy. Once he graduated, he worked in Riga for almost 30 years in an electrical factory, producing microchips for the military industry. As factory coordinator, he ventured into a private business following the economic opening promoted during the Perestroika. For a couple of years, he made some money installing (Swedish) cable TVs and then he left the country. His first wife was Jewish. The marriage lasted five years and they had a son, who received a German passport after the reunification. Dyadya Vova came to visit him a couple of times, and in 1992, he decided to stay in Berlin. What he likes the most about Germany is... the order. Between 1992 and 1998, Dyadya Vova lived from the social money provided by the state. He did not speak German and had no access to any job. Occasionally, he repaired televisions and washed cars. In the meantime, he had a project in hibernation, growing in his mind: to create a thematic park, a little Soviet Union for leisure in a former military base in Brandenburg. He saw the opportunity when the last Soviet soldiers left in 1994, but at the time he did not have important contacts in Germany. However, he calculated the costs, designed the park on his own, and began to present the sketches to different institutions. To earn a living, he decided to buy an Imbiss in front of the Ostbahnhof. "This business works because people got tired of McDonalds. People come here just to eat my pelmenis." Now he's 79 years old and has already realized that his dream will not come true. He keeps working in the Imbiss because his only stable income is the modest pension he receives from Latvia.

In some instances, success might be a failure, but failure is certainly not success.

⁵ During one of my periods of doubt I read Michael Jackson's *The Accidental Anthropologist* (2006); a hypnotic memoir in which Jackson tells how his involvement in the academy has not been a linear and clear path, but rather accidental and determined by contingent factors. Jackson concludes that, for reasons that he cannot fully understand, he always ends up returning to anthropology. His sensibility to the contingency and unpredictability of human life is also deployed in the philosophical fiction *Harmattan* (2015).

Concluding Remarks

This essay explored various aspects of the relation between anthropological writing and fiction, particularly in terms of ethnographic authorship and the dynamics of evidence, testimony, and knowledge production. It is a part of a growing movement of creative anthropology and experimental ethnography, stretching the limits of what is possible to say about social relations, human life and the different worlds coexisting on our planet. The essay thus makes a case for considering the ways fictional writing is able to convey anthropological knowledge at the edge of academic genres, while aiming to reduce the distance between audience and ethnographer. It shows how we can enrich the ethnographic material with other forms of representation, dissemination and knowledge-making, while emphasizing that there is anthropological knowledge to be found in fiction.

Experiments with writing invoke other ways to practicing anthropology and make it possible to go beyond detached cultural descriptions in our ethnographies, as well as to reflect on those things that are not fully comprehended (Martínez, Di Puppò & Frederiksen 2021). Such exercise brings further questions to the table, as for example, if the disciplinary standards of ethnographic work should be limited to the field and how this kind of knowledge can be used, evaluated and eventually institutionally audited. My answer to the first question is that our research can enter public discussions differently if engaging in creative writing. In relation to the second question, this essay demonstrates that there are particular outcomes that should not be subject to academic accountability, even if they contribute to knowledge-production and dissemination.

Traditionally, ethnographic narratives vacillate amid a series of tensions: between the excess of the practice and the rigor of the discipline, between representation (objectification), and reflexivity as writing (positionality), between making room for the voices of others and heroic individual authorship, between academic meaning making (positivist analysis, boundary-work) and other experimental possibilities of knowledge production. This essay, however, has shown, that experimentation with other forms of writing anthropology appears as useful to engage with the contemporary, allowing new possibilities for expressing knowledge to spring up.

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