

Essay

With the Smartphone as Field Assistant: Designing, Making, and Testing *EthnoAlly*, a Multimodal Tool for Conducting Serendipitous Ethnography in a Multisensory World

Paolo S. H. Favero

University of Antwerp

Eva Theunissen

University of Antwerp

Probably for the first time in history, researchers are faced with audiences and research participants who have access to the same means of representation as they do and who often also share the same set of technological skills. Gone are the days when the “wild natives” opened their eyes in awe in front of the “magical powers” of the (white and male) scientists’ filmmaking and photographing apparatuses. Digital technologies are entering the lives of anthropologists in the field and elsewhere, morphing the ways in which they conduct fieldwork—that is, “how they record, process, analyse and communicate their findings” (Tratner and Sanjek 2015, ix). Smartphones have indeed contributed to this shift. For those of us living in wired societies, they have become an integral part of our everyday routines, affecting our experiences of events, locales, relationships, and bearings (Collins et al. 2017; Lapenta 2011; Pink and Hjorth 2012; Tacchi, Kitner, and Crawford 2012). Moreover, as digital and mobile technologies are increasingly embedded on(to) the body, we are today also witnessing an increased entanglement between material bodies and mobile digital technologies (Favero 2016; Ibrahim 2015; Rettberg 2014). What are the implications of this for our ways of conducting fieldwork?

Smartphones are obviously pushing further the implosion of the boundaries between fieldwork and everyday life, home and away, which have characterized the recent history of anthropology (see Clifford 1983; Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1995). In parallel to the fields moving closer to our homes, the smartphone has made possible what we call “serendipitous ethnographies,” or the capture of significant quantities of material even in the most unexpected, mundane moments. As tools for representation are moving closer to our bodies, so is fieldwork crawling closer to our private, everyday lives. This essay taps into this terrain, exploring the connection between mobile digital technologies and fieldwork from the point of view of a digital tool. This tool, called *EthnoAlly*,¹ consists of a smartphone application (producing GPS-tagged multimodal material) and an online platform (for archiving, organizing, and analyzing such material) that was created in order to exploit the new possibilities materialized by smartphones and digital technologies at large. A tool for making and organizing multimodal fieldnotes, *EthnoAlly* is at once a personal assistant for ethnographers in their exploration of

people and places, and a participatory tool researchers can use with their interlocutors. The smartphone application belonging to *EthnoAlly* can be uploaded onto the mobile device of a research participant and, functioning as an extension of the ethnographer, provide material in the shape of images, text notes, sound files, and metadata (geolocative and temporal data) to the *EthnoAlly* online platform.

Designed by one of the authors of this essay, and tested by the second author, *EthnoAlly* responds critically to a world that is digitizing itself at an increasing rate (importantly, also beyond the capitalist West) and, moreover, to the shift imposed by “new images” (Mitchell 1994). Further inspired by phenomenological approaches to the lived world, the tool has developed into a multimodal technology capable of grasping the situated, layered, and multisensory character of human experience. Despite foregrounding emerging technologies, *EthnoAlly* should not be conceived of as yet another hymn to novelty. Highlighting the importance of focusing on the layered, situated nature of human experience (that is, small and slow rather than big data), the tool has urged us to exploit the integration of new technologies with more “old-fashioned,” conventional ethnographic practices.

The present text dialogues with another that can be found online. Here the reader will be able to find reflections on the core theoretical and methodological contributions offered by *EthnoAlly*. We will elaborate on the ways in which *EthnoAlly* can be used as a tool for defamiliarizing our everyday perceptions of spaces and on the extent to which the tool can be also employed for teaching students to conduct visual and multisensory ethnographic research. The online version will provide additional technical, practical, and methodological insights on how to engage with *EthnoAlly*. We will also look into the extent to which the tool may assist researchers in conducting participatory fieldwork and especially in (remotely) generating multimodal diaries in situations where the presence of the ethnographer may be problematic.

BACKGROUND

A core part of the labor of ethnographic fieldwork consists, as we know, in bringing together the various materials collected during a day in the field. This is a daily task—one that has to be done in a coherent way in order to generate an intelligible archive for further consultation. The ethnographer needs to be able to find their way through this mass of notes much later on, once the direct memory of the events portrayed will have failed them. However, in such cases the crucial

importance of notes is sidelined by the sheer laboriousness of this activity. This is perhaps especially true for those of us conducting research in semiotically dense environments (such as urban hubs) or in contexts where little time is left during the day for writing notes and collecting our thoughts (think of ethnographies conducted in hostile environments or in moments of crisis). During fieldwork we often and almost simultaneously take a photograph, record a conversation, and note a term that has popped up while talking. Once back home, we must then laboriously reconstruct the day, reincorporating our notes into a chronologically ordered structure of events. Only then do we manage to produce “thick” fieldnotes (Geertz 1973).

Today, mundane consumer technologies can help us in organizing such delicate tasks. Smartphones, in particular, have become, in a McLuhanian (1994) fashion, a prosthesis of the body of the ethnographer and hence a repository of different types of fieldnotes. Digital technologies have been increasingly incorporated into the “method toolbox” of ethnographic fieldwork (see, for example, Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hine 2015; Horst and Miller 2012; Markham 2013; Murthy 2008; Tratner and Sanjek 2015). Smartphone applications, however, have received relatively little attention (exceptions are Collins et al. 2017; Durlington and Collins 2015; Goggin 2009; Tacchi 2014), which is remarkable considering that such technologies, and particularly GPS-driven apps, have received a great deal of attention outside the field of ethnography. We believe that smartphones (particularly, mobile applications) provide convenient tools for tackling the “messy” character of fieldnotes. A smartphone is a very handy tool for taking a quick image, recording a sound, storing a particular place on a map, and so on. On top of this, Internet platforms offer increasingly powerful tools for visualizing, organizing, and archiving such material and hence for helping us structure audio-visual-geolocate information. These tools allow us to use all of the metadata that images and other types of notes carry with them today. The merging of these two tools—of a smartphone application and a devoted Internet platform—are the impetus for the creation of the tool that is at the center of this essay.

DEFAMILIARIZING SPACE

Much research on the phenomenology of space (Irving 2011, 2013; Seamon 1980; Wunderlich 2008) highlights the need to find tools for interrupting the taken-for-granted interpretations of the spaces we explore in our everyday lives. This is what the Situationist International did when they staged fights in the middle of a Parisian café, and stimulated people to rethink the nature of the environment in which they were dwelling. This is also what they did with the “*dérive*” (Debord 1958), a practice allowing individuals to rediscover the spaces they occupied by drifting away from the known. A similar phenomenon takes place when you walk around a city for the first time with a small child. The child’s tendency to look up in order to attract the attention of grown-ups allows them to see details of, for instance, ceilings and roofs,



FIGURE 1. *Footprints on the ceiling.* (Photograph by Eva Theunissen)
[This figure appears in color in the online issue]

elements of material culture a grown-up would habitually barely notice. Their attention has a defamiliarizing potential, one forcing the grown-up to rethink ordinary spaces.

During a “psychogeography” walk,² Theunissen was exposed to this process of defamiliarization. In particular, she became aware of the role of sound in designing space. Walking around a cathedral during the first of her two psychogeography tests, Theunissen collected random video clips describing the stops she made. When looking at the clips later, Theunissen commented that she had not been aware of the church bells’ capacities to define the boundaries of neighborhoods.³ Contrary to McLuhan and Fiore’s description of the ear as “a world of simultaneous relationships” (1967, 111), soundscapes appeared to her as spaces that, upon further reflection, could be clearly detected, identified, and studied. Viewing the materials online through *EthnoAlly*, Favero and Theunissen started delineating a map of the neighborhood on the basis of this soundscape. The mirroring of the multisensory into the multimodal character of *EthnoAlly* made evident the entanglements between vision and the other senses in crafting mundane experiences of space. Having developed an attention to sound through the use of videos, Theunissen also started to rethink her taken-for-granted experiences of the visual field. The photograph above (Figure 1) was made after Theunissen had just finished her first psychogeography walk on her way back to the office. Waiting for the elevator in the basement of the university building, she suddenly noticed a pair of footprints on the concrete ceiling. This photo led us to raise a series of questions regarding the ways in which the spaces of the university are used, by what actors, through what forms of policing, and so forth.

Consistent with Hannerz’s (2006) notion of “serendipity,” *EthnoAlly* stimulated a critical awareness of the sensory and affective character of our life-worlds,⁴ which may go unnoticed in the everyday contexts of our lives, leaving little space for reflection or for explicit sensory

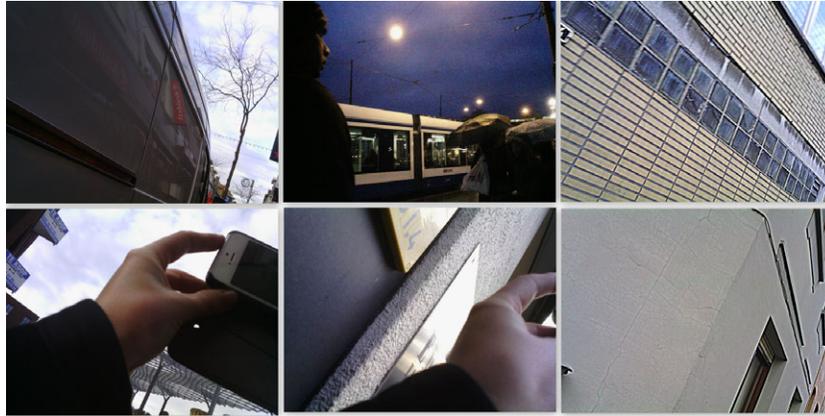


FIGURE 2. Life-logging-camera photographs. (Photographs by the authors) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

awareness (Seamon 1980, 153). Resonating with McLuhan and Fiore's claim that media alter "the way we perceive the world" (1967, 26), *EthnoAlly* seems capable of opening up our senses and making us rethink the nature of the places we visit and move through. It generates instances of what Wunderlich describes as "conceptual walking" (2008, 132–33)—that is, a "reflective mode" of walking and a "creative response to our interpretation of places" that helps us to critically "build awareness of urban environments" (132). The defamiliarizing effect, we realized, also provides a perfect companion for teaching students to conduct visual ethnography.

LEARNING AND RETHINKING VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

At the very beginning of her work with *EthnoAlly*, Theunissen felt that it was difficult to get accustomed to the tool. During the first test in Amsterdam, she lost her way. She was so focused on the app that she stopped paying attention to her immediate surroundings. As a result, we paired the app with a life-logging camera.

This was a path-breaking event. Due to the life-logging camera's repositioning of the body as a viewfinder⁵ (Favero 2016) and its timer-based selection of when to capture an image (automatically every thirty seconds), Theunissen was given a chance to refocus on the experience of being in space, letting the camera support her in the collection of visual material. Reviewing the images taken by the life-logging camera (see Figure 2), Theunissen was given access to new layers of meaning, allowing her to revisit her conventional ways of seeing, sensing, and experiencing familiar and unfamiliar places.⁶ In a way, this pairing brought her in touch with what Benjamin (1972 [1931]) called "the optical unconscious."

The introduction of Theunissen to visual research was, therefore, supported by an attention to incorporating the "new" with the "old." The use of emerging technologies had, in Favero's view, to be supported by established ethnographic methods. Grounding the above-mentioned experiments with readings on ethnography, observation

practices, and interviewing techniques, they tried to generate a set of dialogues across digital and nondigital methods. They looked, for instance, into various types of mapping and contrasted the use of geotagged data with what Seamon (1980) called "place-ballets." They applied elicitation techniques (Collier and Collier 1986) onto the varying materials generated with the app (photos, sounds, videos, maps) and addressed different types of interviews that could be conducted when using *EthnoAlly* as a participatory tool. Finally, they enacted a series of repeated interviews and observations focusing particularly on glitches and misunderstandings.

To give some concrete examples, in the first two participatory tests Theunissen interviewed her interlocutors on the basis of the material produced during a forty-five-minute walk. This led to the identification of some interesting areas to explore, such as the relationship between time and memory (Does time experimentally move more slowly when we experience strong emotions?); the choice of formats (When do we use horizontal versus vertical formats? Still versus moving?); the relationship between the visual and the aural (When do we need sound?) and between visuals and words (text, captions). We have conducted a number of other participatory and multisensory experiments of this sort that are discussed in the online text.

CONCLUSIONS

Digital technologies can provide the researcher with (new) tools for exploring and participating in field sites (Cruz and Ardèvol 2013; Murthy 2008; Postill and Pink 2012). Using *EthnoAlly* as a tool for conducting ethnographic experiments has allowed us to reflect on some of the challenges of digital ethnography in actual lived space. The present tool can be a useful partner in organizing fieldwork activities and, particularly, in bringing together data gathered by ethnographers with those generated by participants themselves. Furthermore, *EthnoAlly* has the potential to defamiliarize our perceptions, hence functioning as a precious tool in teaching students to learn to see, sense, and observe.

EthnoAlly responds to a world that is digitizing at an increasing rate. As pointed out above, this tool moves in the opposite direction of the ideology of big data (Broadbent 2012). Rather than aiming to generate a large quantity of material, our aim is to dig deep into the material produced by a small sample of research participants, producing a wide variety of perspectives on the same topic—small and slow data, as a matter of fact (Banks 2014). Building upon ongoing dialogues between the online and the offline, the digital and the material, researcher-driven and participant-driven materials, the tool may function as a bridge between different research modalities. As a tool capable of grasping the situated and layered multisensory character of our experiences, we should make clear that *EthnoAlly* does not aim to join the choir of celebrations of the new as a way to overcome the old that often accompanies the introduction of new digital practices. Instead, we call for an ethnographic methodology combining the old with the new, the established with the emergent.

NOTES

1. *EthnoAlly* was conceived by Favero and designed in collaboration with Alfonso Bahillo Martinez (University of Deusto), who also handled its technical realization/development. The tool has been designed in collaboration with Theunissen (who curated its UX and conducted the first ethnographic experiments on the field) and Ali Zaidi (who curated its UX and aesthetic features). *EthnoAlly* was made possible by a grant awarded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO).
2. We are grateful to Andrew Irving who inspired Favero to use this particular mapping during a lab held at the 2014 EASA conference in Ljubljana.
3. See online paper for the accompanying soundscape (Figure 6: Map and sound clip).
4. For more about this, see online version.
5. See online paper (Link 15: Walking time lapse audio clip).
6. With a background in philosophy and an MA in film studies and visual culture, Theunissen was actually entering the terrain of visual ethnography for the first time with the help of *EthnoAlly*.

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Film Review

Women in Sink

Iris Zaki, dir. 36 min. Hebrew with English subtitles. Israel: Go 2 Films, 2015.

Ellie Lobovits

San Francisco State University

"I actually know nothing about Arabs. That's why I came here. To learn." These lines, delivered off-camera by Iris Zaki, the director of *Women in Sink* and an Israeli Jew, are stated plainly to the Arab client whose hair she is washing at Fifi's Salon in Haifa, the third-largest city in Israel known for its heterogenous Arab and Jewish population. *Women in Sink* is set entirely within the microcosm of this salon, which is owned by Fifi, a Palestinian Arab¹ woman. The salon is frequented by women who are also Palestinian Arabs. The term Palestinian Arab generally refers to people who are Israeli citizens and whose families lived in Palestine before it became the state of Israel in 1948.

Zaki's sentiment ("I came here to know you") is a succinct expression of the classic problematic ethnographer's objective: to go out in order to understand an "unknown" people. Two elements make this particular ethnographic encounter striking: one of spatiality and the other of power. First, Zaki has chosen to film in her own hometown rather than go to some far-off place. She films people who are her neighbors but who have remained exotic to her due to systematic separation and historic inequality between Israeli Jews and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel. Second, Zaki is

a filmmaker, not an anthropologist, yet her sentiment raises the same issues that have been laid bare by anthropologists, most famously by Ruth Behar, who questioned the directionality and power dynamics of this quest "to know." In the ethnographic or filmic encounter, who is really getting to know whom? When you have a certain amount of power, or, in Zaki's case, are a member of a politically dominant group, how does that inform or hinder your process of knowing?

Zaki brings up issues that carry great political weight—racism against Palestinian Arabs, the evacuation of Arabs from Israel in 1948, Israeli settlements on Palestinian land—with both the Arab and Jewish clients that take a seat in her chair. Dalia, a Jewish client, tells a story about the Arab evacuation, but then immediately doubles back and states that "there was no Arab evacuation," clearly articulating a painful cognitive dissonance. Reem, an Arab client, speaks of the racism—both blatant and "under the surface"—against the Arabs in Israel. Irit talks about coming to Israel as a Holocaust survivor, and Lea, also Jewish, articulates her resistance to boycotting Arab businesses in response to terror attacks in one perfect sentence: "I'm with Fifi [the salon owner]."

Despite the film's rich political themes and cross-cultural exchange, I found myself wanting more—more depth, more intimacy. Zaki's use of reflexivity (that is,