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Fieldwork in the hybrid field: A

"methodological novel" on ethnography, photography, fiction, and creative writing

Luigi Gariglio

Abstract

This is an autoethnographic note on conducting fieldwork with the purpose of documenting; first, outside academia--doing documentary photography; and second doing ethnography and autoethnography within academia. It explores different ways to conduct fieldwork (alone or in groups, ethnographically or autoethnographically) and different traditional and innovative ideas about how the "field" was interpreted commonsensically in the past and could be interpreted now, using the analytical dimension of the hybrid field. It is written both autoethnographically and creatively and includes a short methodological "novel." The research note concludes with a

reflection on a particular field-work experience, tackling its limitation and imagining different ways to perform it.

Keywords

fieldwork, autoethnography, hybrid ethnography, qualitative methods, visual methods, art-based methods, photography, hybrid fieldwork, fiction, ethnography

Prologue

In this autoethnographic note, I want to address two aspects of Field Work--as Buford Junker called it (1960),--the "field" and the "work" (in the field). I shall focus on documentation and parenthesizing the crucial issue of writing that has been central in methodological debate for years,¹ which I will briefly return to in the Epilogue. These ideas have emerged over the past 25 years while documenting what I observed when writing notes and taking pictures as part of my photographic, ethnographic and autoethnographic fieldwork. My field-work experience began as a documentary photographer working mainly outside academia and continued as a university researcher and lecturer. After the introduction of a few autoethnographic anecdotes, I will present in the next section a very short

«methodological novel»² in which I craft a dialogue between a tutor and three students in a hypothetical PhD seminar on Qualitative Research Methods focusing on the two previously mentioned topics: “field” and “working” (in the field).

I began my career as a photographer *Exploring Society Photographically* (Becker, 1981) outside the disciplinary frame of the social sciences in an effort to document what I selected as my topic of interest. I had been a photographer for many years before getting a tenured position and starting work as a researcher focusing on qualitative methods (Cardano, 2019), autoethnography (Gariglio, 2019) and visual methods (Gariglio, 2016). My substantive interests and practice in both photography and sociology include total institutions, coercion, mental health, and the experience and performance of “otherness.”

In my twenties, I started doing a photographic team-project on a community, then I began my long-term solo documentary project concerning prisons, prison officers and prisoners in some European countries (Gariglio, Visser, and Voltolini 2007) and then one on GLBTQ + issues and self-portrait. My approach was inspired both by artists looking at the world “out there”-- the American documentary tradition, exploring social issues and poverty during the *Great Depression*, including the works of Dorothea Lange and

Walker Evans--and by other artists looking inwards while dealing with universal issues such as sexual relations, exploitation, and gender violence and performance; Nan Goldin (1986) and Marina Abramovic' (2016) are two good examples. Thomas Strutt and Pedro Meyer were crucial in demonstrating how to deal with offline, online and hybrid spaces by documenting their worlds through the medium of photography.

By doing photographic fieldwork day in day out, I learned what documenting the world "out there" meant in practice without any conscious analytical or theoretical framework, which entered the picture only when I started studying, reflecting upon and teaching methodology. I learned how to comprehend and frame my daily work in the field: photography was both a way to get in contact with, and document, reality--a can opener in Collier and Collier's (1967) terms--to try understanding it and "write" about it visually, as well as a way to tell a story about my understanding of it. Looking both outwards and inwards was paramount. My body, my senses, and my emotions were always involved in the photographic project independently of its focus: whether myself or others. My work (in the field) consisted of producing a visual story--a document,--often accompanied by texts written by myself or others involved in the project.

Designing any documentary photographic project, I faced the same difficulties I reencountered as a university researcher afterward: writing the project, tackling ethical issues, getting funding, gaining access, time management and budgetary constraints, convincing people to be part of the project and learning to exit from it. Being clear and precise about the identification and selection of the field--intended sometimes as a geographical space, and at other as an organization or an informal group, was more relevant on some occasions--for example, to gain formal access into total institutions as well as into clubs--than in others. Building relationships and trust with the people involved in the shooting was crucial. Considering how I was affected by the field and how people in the field were affected by me was essential exactly as Amanda Coffey (1999) shows. I also learned in practice that even documentation of the prison field could extend beyond the walls. What about the complex social system and interactions that cross over the walls, linking those working or living inside with others outside? I also learned that documentary pictures were not sufficient documentation of the field, and I started writing fieldnotes, as well as asking prisoners to write texts to tell their stories (Gariglio, Visser, and Voltolini 2007). As Flick suggests: «When [...] technology is not used [or does not suffice] the medium for documenting what was observed is field notes» (2014: 44).

Further photographic projects of mine, such as one on queer families, showed me that the field can refer to a group or an organization which is not necessarily geographically bounded in place or time. I learned that my photographic field can be designed or constructed dynamically and can change over time in a way methodologically known as "shadowing" (Czarniawska, 2007; McDonald, 2005).

Now I am working in academia as a methodologist and I teach autoethnography and team ethnography and my reflections are nurtured by my photographic experience, my interest in, and curiosity about, creative and art-based methodologies (Leavy, 2020), as well as dialogue with PhD students, colleagues and artists with whom I collaborate. I have learned that different field-work approaches--photography and social science--allow us to explore and document society differently, adopting different points of view and research tools. I also learned that any approach can learn a lot from one another (Becker, 1974, 1981) and that «qualitative research [could] be understood as art and method» (Flick, 2014: 531), as bricolage (Gariglio, 2017; Kincheloe, 2005) and as montage (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003) or, which I would suggest, as a photographic sequence. My taken-for-granted understanding of field and work were too anecdotal and naïve; but I also learned that methodological knowledge can be challenged to avoid

the reification of traditional approaches addressing «the “difficulty of escaping customary habits of seeing and thinking”» (Jones et al., 2010: 479).

In the following section, I shall pretend to perform a collaborative methodological brainstorm to introduce two timely issues. I use the evocative autoethnographic approach following the model of Ethnographic I (Ellis, 2004) in an attempt to create open dialogue on the two topics mentioned above: (i) What is a field? (ii) How can we document that field?

The issues are presented by adopting creative language but are grounded in actual discussions and dialogues that have occurred over the last few years in my methodological seminars; the form of writing adopted is creative and neither replicates nor quotes anything said in those encounters; I will return to writing in the Epilogue.

A seminar on the “field” and on “working” in the field: A very short methodological novel

[Dr Murthy is the scholar organizing the seminar, John, Mary, and Eva are PhD students]

Dr Murthy: Today, we continue from our last PhD classes. Let's reflect on the assignment. What did you take home reading Buford Junker's *Field Work* (1960), published by the University of Chicago Press with an

introduction by Everett C. Hughes (1960). What do you think about it? In the title, the words "field" and "work" follow one another but they are disjointed. Can we reflect about it? Who's next?

John: It's me. I do not see the point. That's an old-fashioned textbook on doing ethnography. Fieldwork is simply the old-fashioned way to put it. We all know it refers to the ethnographic fieldwork, don't we?

Mary: I ain't sure. That volume is about ethnographic work, about working in the field. By the way, John is right. Junker's writing about doing ethnography, isn't he? What surprises me, though, is that I couldn't find neither any reference to the images many ethnographers have produced along fieldnotes as a means of documentation since the 1920's and their relationship with the contemporary photography documentary tradition, nor any clear definition of what the author means by the word "field." Yet, I could find a very interesting distinction about the social roles of the observer (Junker, 1960: 32-69). I was very intrigued by the chapter on social roles for fieldwork in which he distinguished between two different positions: the first, "comparative involvement," characterized by subjectivity and sympathy and, the second, "comparative detachment," characterized by objectivity [I would rather say plausibility] and empathy

(ibidem, 36). It reminds me of the different positionalities we can adopt on the field.

Dr Murthy: Mary, you are right in stressing the issue of photography. The issue is at least two-folded, though. On one hand it is important to stress the role of photography as an essential part of fieldwork: its specificity as a tool for documentation in relation to writing; on the other, it is important to focus on the cross-contamination that has occurred since the 1920's between documentary photography and the uses of photography in social sciences (Becker, 1981). Moving to the other issue, the field we intend to document, there's no clear definition of what the field would be, indeed. There might be some "good reasons" for it, though. There are plenty of quotations from liminal ethnographies and those can make up for the absence of explicit analytical definition through the presentation of examples of the classical field. I'd move back to the idea of social roles, pushing it more radically, introducing the fuzzy distinction between autoethnography and ethnography to which we will return later on, that can be triggered stretching Junker's distinction further.

Mary: So, you suggest that the definition of field is not missing but, rather, taken-forgranted and implicit. I see, if I got it right, the word "field" in that book refers above all--but not exclusively--to places

circumscribed by a geographical boundary, or organizations, or groups identified by ethnographers rather than by the participants as it occurs in collaborative and creative projects. Moreover, where is the field in contemporary society? Are the WhatsApp texts you are sending now and my Google searches and my likes on Tik Tok to be considered? Or should we continue as if nothing had changed after Malinowski "invented" fieldwork? And how should we go about documenting our field? Are you suggesting that we use cameras or what?

Dr Murthy: These are relevant points indeed. Times have changed and fortunately continue changing, and your generation got it clearer than many of us. Methodological distinctions are continuing to blur, as Clifford anticipated in the '80s (1986), and qualitative research is interspersed with creative and art-based methods, as well as art as such, trying to offer new complementary forms of documentation. Any subject or topic that has to be studied ethnographically, or autoethnographically, must, I would say, be explored in all its possible dimensions, both offline and online, considering also the interaction between the two and the formation of a hybrid field that will be the topic of another seminar.

Mary: Finally!!! I have been saying this all along and I have always been dismissed. Thank God! We must always study all dimensions, as you just said: online, offline and hybrid ones.

Dr Murthy: Well, to be honest, I am sorry to disappoint you. I did not mean that. I simply suggested that for any social phenomenon we should consider both theoretically and pragmatically how to design our hybrid field. It goes without saying that, on some occasions, exploration will suggest that we remain in the traditional face-to-face offline field only, while on others it will suggest other possible hybrid configurations, I mean the particular combination of what's happening online and offline. But let's go back to our topic.

John: Okay I'm not sure, what you mean. And what about art and science? Ethnography is a scientific enterprise, isn't it? Whatever the word "scientific" might mean after the writing culture debate, fieldwork is something serious and cannot be reduced to observing someone Googling or putting a like on Tik Tok, or taking pictures, can it?

Dr Murthy: I just want to add briefly that documentation should include the use of cameras or smartphones every time you think the situation calls for them. I mean, whenever the analogical nature of the technological image described by Pierre Sorlin (1997) can add new information to the

documentation rather than producing a tautological illustration of a written text. Just for the sake of clarity: you can photograph me now because you are in front of me. As soon as I leave the room you will not be able to do it anymore. Yet, you will be able to write about me or draw a picture representing me simply using your memory and ability. Drawings are synthetic images, Sorlin suggests. If I need to document a building, an environment or a face I would rather use a camera if possible; no text could do the job as well as a photograph (or a sequence thereof) can. If I want to jot down a thought or an abstract idea I would use a pen instead. And do not forget that photo documentation enhances the reflexive imagination of the researcher who is required to engage with the senses, with their way of seeing, quite literally. Let's not forget that by doing so many new ethical issues pop up; we'll discuss it in the next seminar.

Mary: Dr Murthy, can we move back to the topic now? What about the other classic on fieldwork written by Erwin Goffman (1989)?

John: Goffman? *On fieldwork*, a cornerstone.

Dr Murthy: That's now considered a liminal contribution: it was written as a brief oral speech for a lecture that Goffman gave in 1974. To be sure, he did not agree to publish that presentation when invited to do so. It was only

published posthumously in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (1989), with his widow's consent and against the author's expressed wish.

Mary: That's very interesting indeed, but it is again a bit irrelevant, isn't it?

Dr Murthy: Not really. In that lecture Goffman did not tackle what he meant by "field," just as Junker didn't before him, and that tradition of taking the field for granted has continued for many years. Anyway, I think that we can see good reasons for it; such a commonsensical conception of the field has worked quite well for many years. The word "field" was so clear that it did not need to be addressed analytically. Now, a timely definition would be useful, as I suggested a moment ago.

Mary: You're right. Now the times they are a-changin'--Internet of things, Virtual reality, social media, digitalization, and smartphones--urge us young scholars to address these issues head on and try starting to make sense of it. In my field, migration studies, George E Marcus (1995) challenged what he called the traditional taken-for-granted interpretation of the ethnographic field in favor of the multi-sided field. His well-known proposal of a multi-located ethnography deconstructs and challenges the conventional undefined and implicit definition of the field. You should also

use different ways of documenting the field, engaging with the senses as George Simmel had already suggested in 1908.

Eva: You're right, but is it enough? We kind of continue to think traditionally about face-to-face offline communication while, in the meantime, both of us are in front of a screen and use our phones to look for information, find a new partner or simply have a look at Insta, right? We young scholars do it in one way or another, but these topics are rarely present in mainstream methodological debates, giving the impression that they are relevant only to those scholars interested in the digital sphere. No, it is relevant for all of us!

Dr Murthy: We can return to these aspects later on. Just let me change the subject for a moment. My new questions would be: How do we do research? Why do you often refer to ethnography and downplay autoethnography? Is it the only way they taught you to do fieldwork? Are there other possibilities that you are aware of?

Mary: I would consider reflexivity as an important dimension. Ethnography is not a method, it is a family of methods and reflexivity is most relevant.

Dr Murthy: Interesting, maybe one way to put it is to consider what is the object of the research. What is our documentation all about: society, groups, or families?

Eva: Why not the self? I did some creative writing courses and they told me about something resembling autobiography. I remember that emotions were crucial and personal mindfully-crafted stories were appreciated.

Dr Murthy: Well, maybe you should consider autoethnography, then. But let's think carefully about it. Carolyn Ellis said on different public occasions that any good ethnography is autoethnographic and vice versa (Gariglio and Ellis, 2018).

Mary: No, I think that we can see from the literature and the tradition of art that there are people telling stories about others and people telling stories about themselves. That might be a relevant dimension.

Dr Murthy: It is indeed, but I think that it might be a fuzzy distinction: compare the work of artists or documentary photographers with that of social scientists who explore the world out there--imbuing their personal interpretation into it--and those starting from their own personal experiences who are capable of telling us also a lot about more general phenomena and social problems.

Mary: If we stick to social sciences, art, and literature, we can consider a continuum between ethnography and autoethnography, can't we?

[?]

Figure 1. The autoethnography-ethnography continuum presented differently.

Eva: Yes, but this distinction can be generalized to research as such and we should not limit it to social sciences: Can't we simply speak about two sets of research practices: «Ethnoresearch» and «autoresearch»? (Figure 1).

Dr Murthy: Maybe, but that's a nominalist issue and we would lose the large growing literature and narratives of the autoethnographic field. I would stick to ethnography and autoethnography, considering three main components: evocative, analytical, and artistic approaches to both the first and the second research practices. We can imagine a continuum. One pole is autoethnography focusing on the self and also looking to the social; at the other there is ethnography, looking "out there" without forgetting the personal experiences of the researcher and their being in the picture anyway. And this applies in different degrees to qualitative methods, creative methods and art as such, to online, offline, and hybrid fields--and may even include the use of photography.

Mary: I would also stress that those two poles might be performed, as Junker suggested, either alone (by one researcher) or by a research group. But what did he mean by research group? I am not sure I got it right. Up to now they have only taught us liminal ethnographies, mainly conducted by one researcher even when there were two researchers collaborating. But I supposed this might have something to do with gender issues.

DrMurthy: Well, solo ethnographies are the standard in methodological literature. But let's look ahead. What is surprising is that Junker tackled so long ago both the positionality of the research, and by doing so he introduced ante litteram the autoethnography-ethnography divide which Carolyn Ellis highlighted and, also, the other timely methodological idea of the "research group." This latter issue has recently come back to the center of the debate.

Mary: So, I think we can represent it like that [pointing to the white board] (Figure 2).

Dr Murthy: It is a bit more complicated than that. Nowadays, we should distinguish between 'team fieldwork'--when scholars work together--and we defined it as 'collaborative fieldwork' if one or more participant is invited to join the scholars to work and publish together. It is of course more complicated than that but you can refer to *Doing Team Ethnography* (Erickson and Stull, 1998; Liebling et al., 2021), to *The Chicago Guide to*

Collaborative Ethnography (Lassiter, 2005), and to Qualitative Research and Complex Teams (Davidson, 2019). Do you get why this last distinction is pretty crucial? In any case, of course, collaborative research is another very large topic we will address in the coming weeks.

Mary: Thinking about collaborative and art-based or creative methods, it is clear to me that there might be a strong power-relation issue there. Is it what you suggest?

Dr Murthy: Definitely. Power imbues any social relationship in any social group, let alone when scholars work with one another in a team or directly with participants collaboratively. So, this ought to be considered thoroughly and we will start doing so in a moment and will continue in the coming seminars.

[?]

Figure 2. Solo fieldwork and group fieldwork.

Blurred types of “working” (in the field) and the components of the hybrid field

Considering the plot that I presented in the previous section in the hypothetical conversation crafted ad hoc, I jump for the sake of brevity to the proposal of a blurred classification of fieldwork. All configurations can profit from visual forms of documentation and can appear in offline, online, or hybrid fields.

Figure 3 considers, on one hand, the continuum autoethnography-ethnography proposed by Carolyn Ellis with, on the other, the distinction of

solo and group research proposed by Junker (1960). It defines for both autoethnography and ethnography two types of working (in the field) configuration as mentioned above: solo or in group (either in team or collaboratively). The writing, in any research configuration, will produce particular «hierarchical arrangements of discourses» (Clifford, 1986: 17) that have to be addressed.

Before concluding, I intend to introduce some suggestions to trigger further and deeper analytical and creative reflection to address the (hybrid) "field"?

The new social context in which contemporary qualitative social research takes shape requires standing on the shoulders of George Marcus (1995). He challenged the standard ethnography and demonstrated the fact that ethnography has always been multi-situated. By the same token, I say that the traditional way of teaching and doing fieldwork silences the relevance of the online and hybrid dimensions of any social phenomenon, reducing it to the "normal" face-to-face dimension. The implicit assumption of unity of place guided the choices of what should be considered "the" field. Similarly, today, research design often adopts a customary approach whereby the field, whether single or multi-located, is

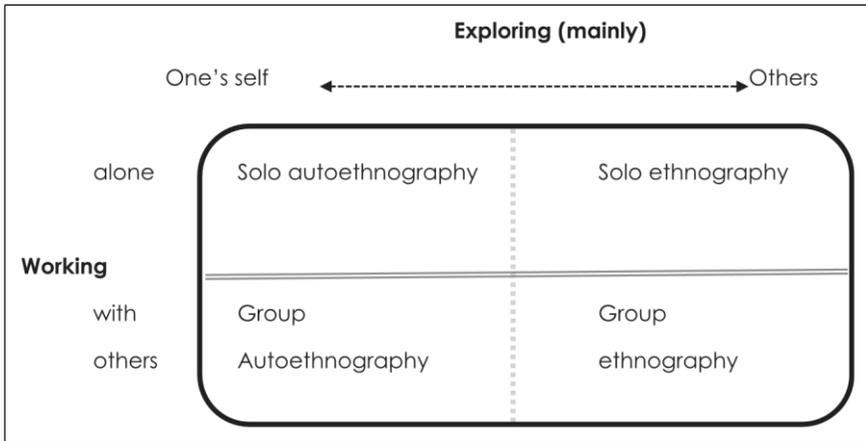


Figure 3. Types of working in the field. (Adaptation from Cardano and Gariglio 2022: 65).³

defined as something “out there” in which face-to-face interactions take shape and the online dimension is considered a corollary, if at all.

There are inspirational and groundbreaking scholars working on this hybrid frame (Hine, 2015; Przybylski, 2021) using images consciously. However, the written-only traditional face-to-face approach remains hegemonic; what happens digitally and on social media remains in the background; photographs remain unpublished, if used at all. Here, we propose reflection on the field as such and in particular on the necessity to move consistently towards a new norm: the “hybrid field.”

Sketching a provisory definition of the "hybrid field," we compare it to the traditional one, focusing on the "assumptions"--either implicit or explicit--that innervate the selection, that is, the exclusion or inclusion, of the portions of the "online field" and/or the "offline field" and their combination in contemporary qualitative and creative research.

The adoption of the concept of hybrid field is based on the following assumption: the investigation of any social phenomenon always requires careful evaluation (and an exploration of a theoretical or empirical nature) regarding the relevance of the online and offline components of the phenomenon under study in order to be able to operate in a conscious way the appropriate choices regarding the portions of the field, which are offline or online, to be included in the "hybrid field." This assessment can have two main outcomes: (1) the hybrid field coincides with the traditional field. In this case, the significant difference between the two relates to the fact that in the case of the traditional field the exclusion of the online field is not the result of critical reflection or empirical exploration but more simply of a convention. (2) The hybrid field includes both the offline and the online, resembling to a high degree the mundane experience of day-to-day life that requires new reflexive ethical consideration as well as new technical digital skills (to navigate those spaces).

One example of the hybrid field combining both offline and online is digital team ethnography (Beneito-Montagut et al., 2017) on the uses of social networks as a tool for emancipation from loneliness in the elderly. It takes shape starting from physical places of aggregation and face-to-face interviews, then extends to the online platforms used by participants to interact (Facebook, WhatsApp, email). Another example would be Ronald Hallet's research (Hallet and Barber, 2014) investigating the ways in which undocumented foreign students manage to study at an American university. It starts offline from empirical cases studied in person; it then moves online where it investigates not only the Facebook pages of the participants but also Facebook groups relevant to the field.

Autoethnographic Epilogue. Fieldwork, documentation, and writing

Photography showed me what fieldwork was in practice; methodology taught me the conceptual framework to think about fieldwork. The combination of both triggered the ideas I have introduced with this note. By reflecting critically on my own lived experience of documenting the outside world and using both words and images, working solo or in teams, online and offline, I

would like to propose a few further considerations about documentation and, eventually, tackle briefly the issue of writing.

Documentation can be performed in a variety of ways both within and without academia, as my experience in photography and in social science illustrates. Rethinking my ways of using pictures, I can now see that exploring society with the goal of documenting it is a very rich, complex task than can be achieved only partially. Rather than dismissing the knowledge produced by documentary photography, I would suggest taking the medium of photography seriously in order to enrich our capacity to translate the world into a text engaging with the senses, combining words and images, as Howard Becker and Doug Harper have shown (Gariglio, 2016, 2017), remembering that neither words nor photographs are "innocent," and the active role of readers and spectators should also be considered. My experience suggests bearing in mind that: (1) any phenomena can potentially be documented both offline and online, and we have to learn new modes of inquiry to adapt our practices to these new circumstances; (2) doing documentary fieldwork alone as a "lone wolf" is neither the only nor the best way to do it, even if it remains the most common. Working in teams with colleagues or collaboratively with participants are further most promising option available to be taken into account seriously; (3) reflexivity is a key

feature of contemporary ethnography; autoethnography emphasizes this point considering also researchers as legitimate participants among others. Combining multiple methodologies (Taber, 2010), autoethnographers and ethnographers working in a team is another valuable option. Finally, I learned that photography should be embraced as a normal tool in the field. Photographs document aspects of things that can hardly ever be translated into words quite as clearly and work very well in soliciting discourses during photo elicitation interviews (Gariglio, 2016).

The issue of writing has long been a crucial one in qualitative research, as we suggested above. Now we know that writing cannot be neutral even though it may pretend to be so. Autoethnography, creative methods and collaborative methods are simply starting from this basic assumption, pushing the boundaries of what can be considered proper academic scientific writing and proposing new forms of composing academic texts by using performance, videos, poetry, and creative non-fictional writing. Ellis' methodological novel is the form of creative writing I decided to adopt in this contribution to stress the relevance of innovative non-hegemonic ways of writing in academic texts. Although there is a growing literature on new forms of creative writing, they are still confronted with skepticism. I think that the combination of different writing styles can help authors to broaden

their capacity to communicate the complexity of the worlds they face not only to colleagues but also, most importantly, to people outside academia. The world out there is simply too complex to continue as if nothing had changed.

To conclude, looking backwards at the solo-traditional ethnography I conducted in a total institution (Gariglio, 2017), I can underline two significant traits I would now address differently, not having considered them thoroughly hitherto. The first refers to my solo approach. Despite my habit of working in team in photography, I turned to a solo approach having been taught that ethnography would most likely be an individual enterprise. By the same token, the second limitation was to conceive a traditional field independently of the possibility of considering both face-to-face and online fields as Christine Hine (2015) had already shown clearly--and I had already done in a previous photographic project within the LGBTQ + community. I was unable to progress beyond what I was taught good ethnography would be despite my experience in documenting the world through images. Sticking to what I had learned about fieldwork in ethnography, I was happy to follow a traditional ethnographic path without adapting the method I was familiar with to the changing world I wanted to study and the new opportunity that

narratology, autoethnography, and both art-based and collaborative methods could offer me.

Notes

1. James Clifford wrote in 1986: «Writing has emerged as central to what anthropologists [I would add sociologists] do both in the field and thereafter» (2).
2. The use of this expression refers to Carolyn Ellis's splendid book: *The Ethnographic I. A methodological novel about autoethnography* (2004).
3. Figure 3 is grounded on Mario Cardano's idea (Cardano 2019).

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