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Special Theme

Ethno-graphic Collaborations: Crossing Borders with Multimodal Illustration

Collaborative Experiments in Graphic Ethnography: Emulating Political Cartooning

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Abstract

This article provides insight into the usage of political cartooning as a graphic-ethnographic medium. I narrate how I emulated the style of a Greek political cartoonist from the mid-20th century to draw graphic panels with commentary about austerity in 21st century Greece. The graphics worked as a storyboarding method for setting up a theatre performance that never happened. The immediacy of drawing enabled the anthropologist and playwright to conceptualize their respective projects and clarify their ideas through collaborative dialogue. They used their respective arts (ethnographic drawing and play script writing) to draw analogies with the past, aiming to raise awareness about the consequences of austerity for contemporary youth. Emulating the style of a renowned cartoonist, who had criticized post-war austerity in the 1950s, has paved the way for generating critical responses from the ethnographer's interlocutors in the present.

KeyWords: graphic ethnography, political cartooning, collaborative ethnography, austerity, temporality

COLLABORATIVE EXPERIMENTS IN GRAPHIC ETHNOGRAPHY: EMULATING POLITICAL CARTOONING

This article describes the inspiration I took from political cartooning to generate an ethnographic experiment.

THE IDEA

During an anthropological project that examined the consequences of austerity in Greece and Portugal,[1] I found myself demoralized by the sadness and pessimism of the topic. I struggled to find creative inspiration until I experimented with creative media forms, such as graphic ethnography.[2]

Graphic ethnography is not a narrowly defined ethnographic practice. We have recently seen numerous 'graphic-ethnographic' contributions that vary in size and artistic style. They contain combinations of text and images—sometimes even inspired by cartooning. As I argue elsewhere[3] the ambition and affordances of graphic ethnography defy definition.

THIS IS ME SKETCHING MY NOTES AT THE PORT OF PATRAS, GREECE. I ADDED MYSELF TO THE LANDSCAPE DURING THE DRAWING PROCESS.

GRAPHIC ETHNOGRAPHY CAN MAKE THE REFLEXIVE POSITIONING OF THE SELF MORE VISIBLE THAN THAT OF TEXTUAL NARRATIVES.

The experiment I am sharing here took initial inspiration from the work of a political cartoonist. His artistic name was 'Bost', [4] a shortcut of his long Greek surname. Bost's cartoons appeared in numerous newspapers and magazines in Greece from the 1950s to the 1970s. His style compressed a significant amount of text—communicating pointed irony—in panels that also contained the caricatures of well-known politicians and personalities of the twentieth century.



BOST,
MENTIS BOSTANTZOGLU 1918 - 1995



Most of my respondents in austerity-afflicted Greece recognize Bost's drawing style, which alludes to a previous period of austerity in the post-war period. This austerity period provides interesting comparisons with the present or lessons from the past, as other anthropologists have noticed. [5]

Aware of Bost's reputation, I took advantage of the recognisable connotations of his artwork to initiate a conversation about the present.



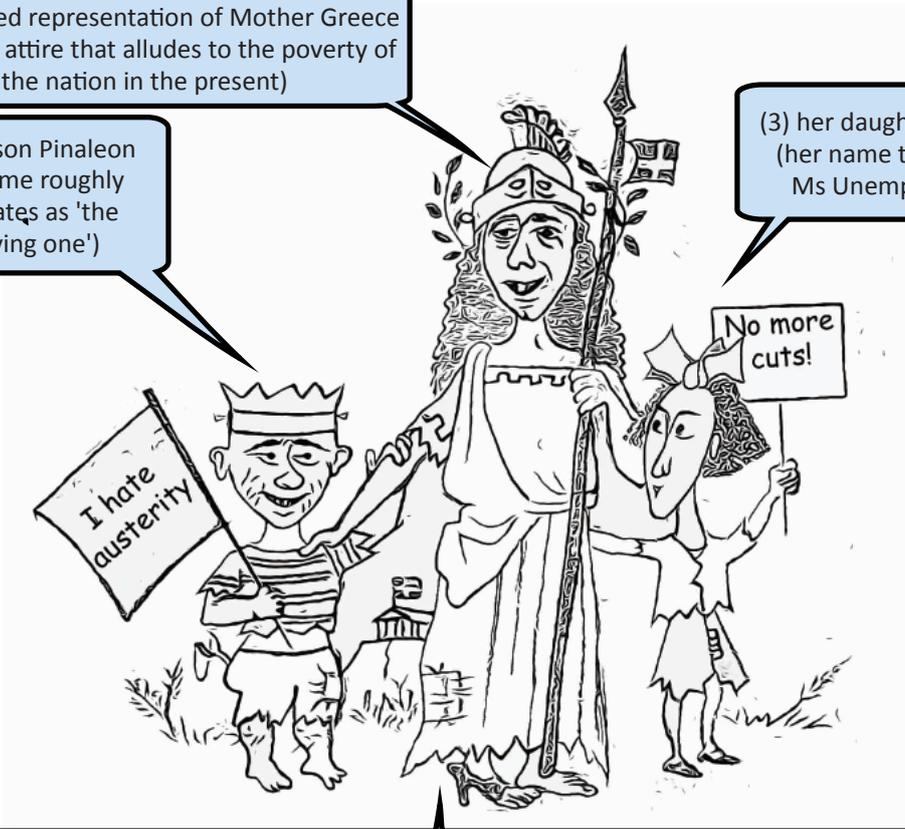
I decided to emulate Bost's artistic style and accentuate—rather than hide—the connection between my work and his. In effect, I drew graphics that looked very much like his, although my drawings addressed contemporary issues and caricatured politicians of the 21st century.

AT FIRST,
I RE-DREW SOME OF BOST'S
CHARACTERS

(1) a ragged representation of Mother Greece
(in classic attire that alludes to the poverty of
the nation in the present)

(2) her son Pinaleon
(his name roughly
translates as 'the
starving one')

(3) her daughter Anergitsa
(her name translates as
Ms Unemployment).

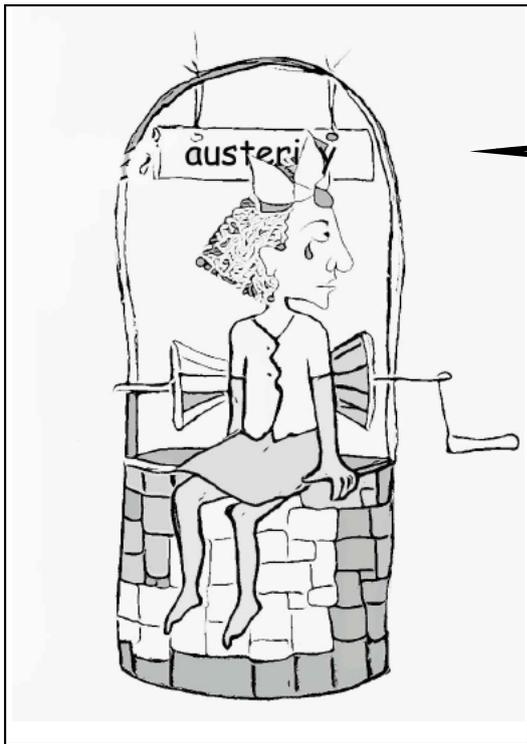


Their association with post-war poverty resonated with the current experience of austerity.

At some point during fieldwork, I realized that one of my key respondents, Iphi (or Iphigenia), aspired to produce a theatre play to criticize the imposition of austerity. Iphi and I started a conversation imagining a future theatre performance and shared our ideas collaboratively.

I redrew Bost's character 'Anergitsa' (Ms Unemployment) to represent the main protagonist of the imagined theatre performance: she represented the unemployed youth of austerity in Greece.





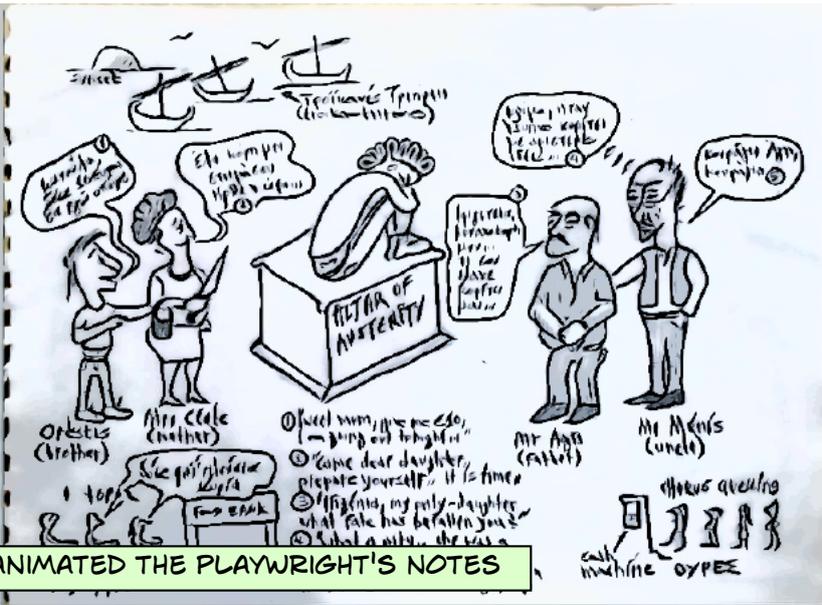
Iphi, my interlocutor in the field, is an unemployed playwright. She has chosen to name her imagined theatre play "Iphigenia of Austerity" to draw a metaphor with Euripides' classic tragedy, 'Iphigenia at Aulis'.

During our conversations, Anergitsa (Ms Unemployment, Bost's character from the 1950s) and Iphigenia (the classic heroine, who was killed by her parents) merged as one contemporary theme: the sacrifice of Iphi's generation of young Greeks, who have fewer opportunities than previous generations.

Note that Iphi's first name is Iphigenia. Many contemporary Greeks have an ancient Greek name, which, from her point of view, is a burden of responsibility. Her generation, she says, would never achieve the glory of the past. The analogies between the present and past are multi-layered and aim to generate irony and political critique, which is the aim of the envisioned theatre play.

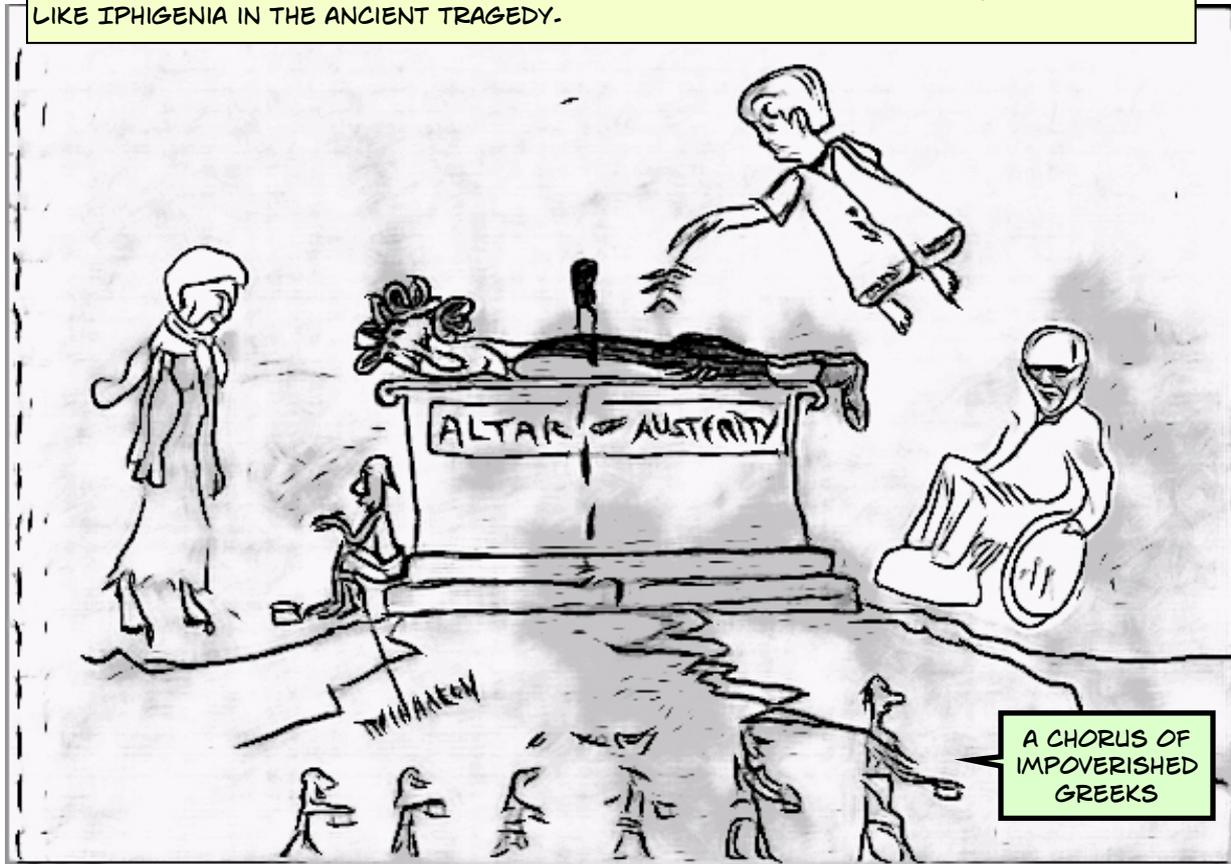
As my drawings accumulated, I generated a storyboard drawn in a graphic form while emulating Bost's cartoon style. Iphi used my drawings for inspiration and commented on my graphic narrative. She also showed my drawings to her family and friends who provided additional commentary.

The commentary, which reflected on the felt consequences of austerity, provided abundant inspiration for my research. As Iphigenia said, the emerging conversation and my drawings provided her with the motivation to start writing her yet unfinished playscript.



HERE IS ONE OF MY INITIAL STORY-BOARDING DRAWINGS

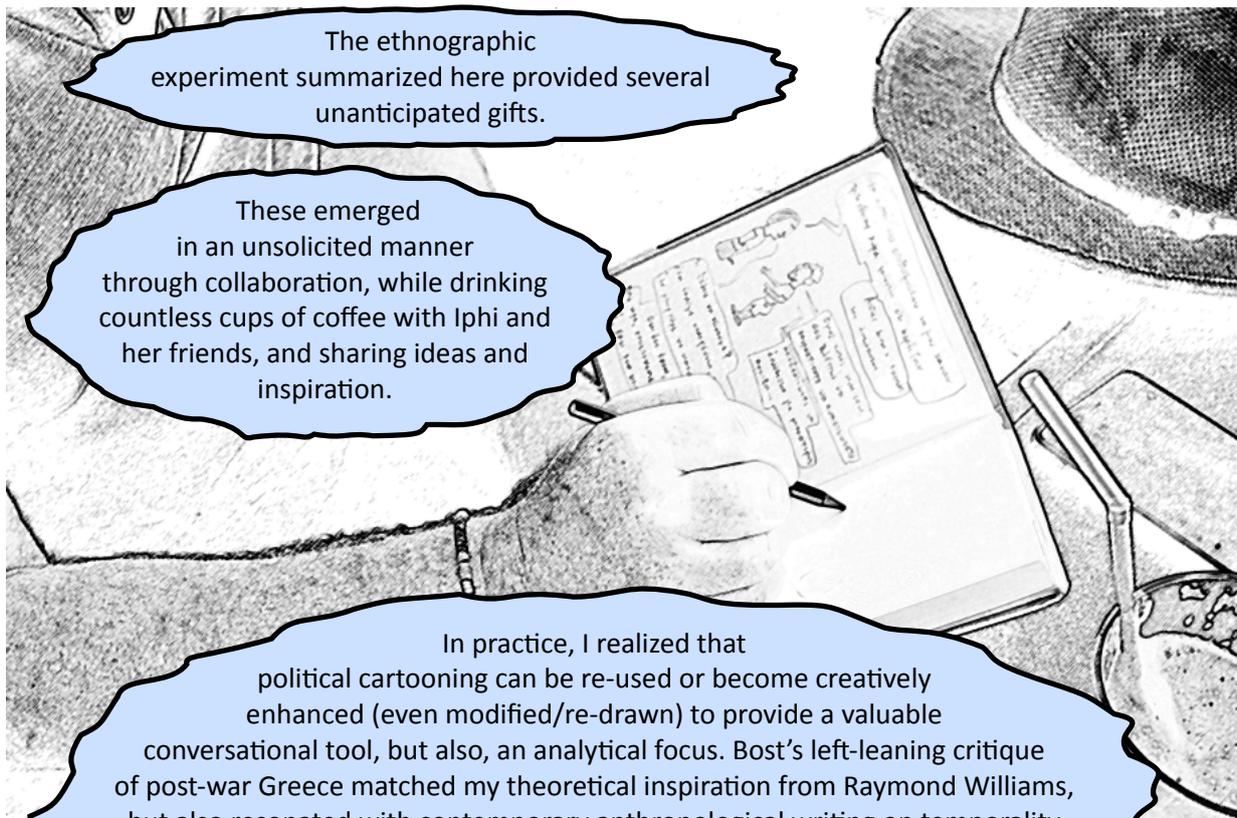
WE SEE THE SPECTRES OF MAJOR EU POLITICAL LEADERS, WHO ARE SEEN BY MANY GREEKS AS HAVING SACRIFICED GREEK YOUTH ON THE ALTAR OF AUSTERITY, VERY MUCH LIKE IPHIGENIA IN THE ANCIENT TRAGEDY.



LATER ON, IPHI ASKED ME TO ADD THE CARICATURES OF GREEK POLITICIANS: HERE WE SEE THREE EX-PRIME MINISTERS OF GREECE, WHOM SHE ASSOCIATED WITH AUSTERITY.

IN ALL THESE RESPECTS, MY DRAWINGS, THEATRE PLAY, AND SEVERAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT AUSTERITY EMERGED ORGANICALLY THROUGH A CREATIVE PROCESS. THIS WAS FACILITATED BY THE IMMEDIACY OF SKETCHING AND DRAWING.

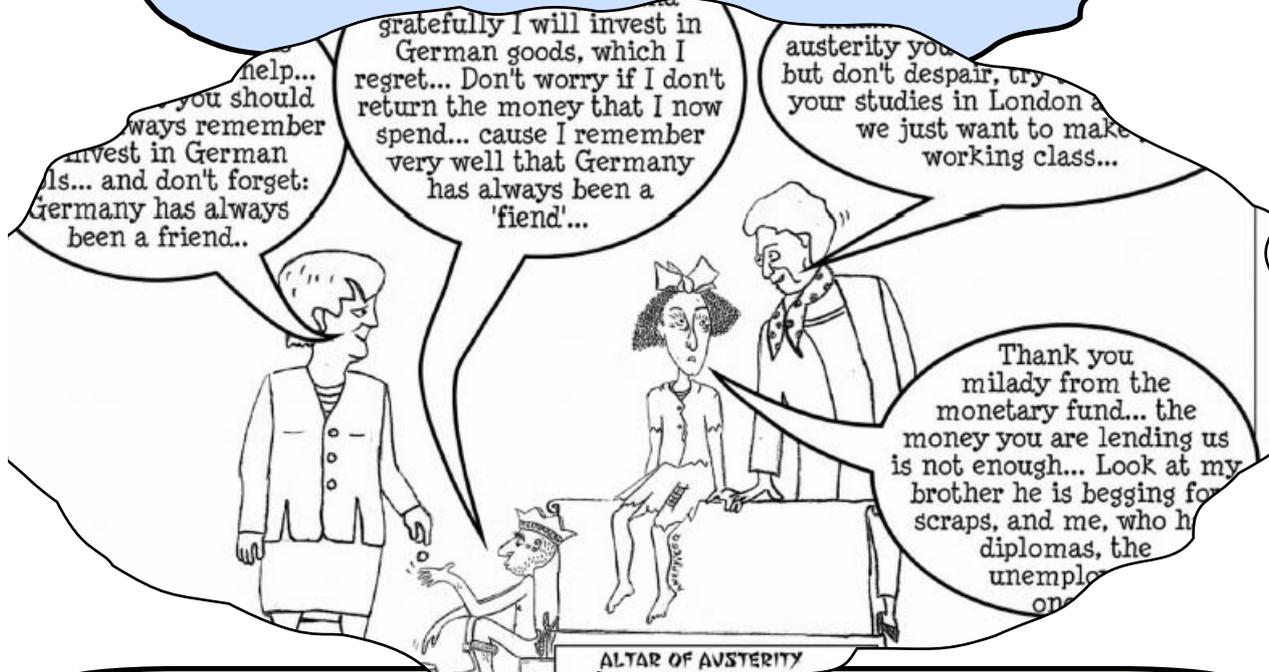




The ethnographic experiment summarized here provided several unanticipated gifts.

These emerged in an unsolicited manner through collaboration, while drinking countless cups of coffee with Iphi and her friends, and sharing ideas and inspiration.

In practice, I realized that political cartooning can be re-used or become creatively enhanced (even modified/re-drawn) to provide a valuable conversational tool, but also, an analytical focus. Bost's left-leaning critique of post-war Greece matched my theoretical inspiration from Raymond Williams, but also resonated with contemporary anthropological writing on temporality and historicity. [6]



For a developed theoretical analysis of this project see Theodossopoulos, D. 2020 'Iphigenia's Sacrifice: Generational Historicity as a Structure of Feeling in Times of Austerity.' *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 26 (4): 842-863.



Notes

[1] Our research on the consequences of austerity in Greece and Portugal was supported by United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). Research grant ES/L44588//0.

[2] From the same project emerged articles that included experiments with graphic ethnography. See, Theodossopoulos, D. 2016 Philanthropy or Solidarity? Ethical Dilemmas About Humanitarianism in Crisis Afflicted Greece. *Social Anthropology* 24 (2): 167–184. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1469-8676.12304> (accessed November 1, 2021)

2020a Iphigenia's Sacrifice: Generational Historicity as a Structure of Feeling in Times of Austerity. *The Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* 26 (4): 842-863. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.13419> (accessed November 1, 2021)

2020b Solidarity Dilemmas in Times of Austerity: Auto-ethnographic Interventions. *Cultural Anthropology* 35 (1): 134– 166. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca35.1.10> (accessed November 1, 2021)

[3] See a forthcoming section of *Theorizing the Contemporary*, in *Cultural Anthropology*.

[4] Mentis Mpostantzoglou was a Greek cartoonist born in Istanbul in 1918. His full name was Chrysanthos Mentis Bostantzoglou (Greek: Χρύσανθος Μέντης Μποσταντζόγλου). He died in December 1995. The Greek public recognises him as Bost (Μποστ).

[5] Sutton, D. 1998 *Memories Cast in Stone: The Relevance of the Past in Everyday Life*. Oxford: Berg.

Knight, D. 2015 *History, Time and Economic Crisis in Central Greece*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

[6] Knight, D. and C. Stewart 2016 *Ethnographies of Austerity: Temporality, Crisis and Affect in Southern Europe*. *History and Anthropology* 27(1): 1-18.

Palmié, S. and C. Stewart 2019 Introduction: The Varieties of Historical Experience. In S. Palmié and C. Stewart (eds.) *The Varieties of Historical Experience*. London: Routledge.



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