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SOCIETY FOR
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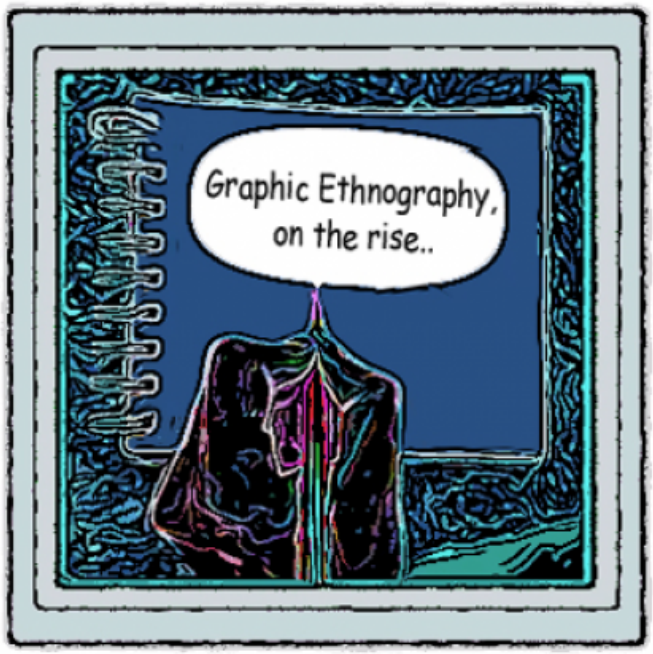
Graphic Ethnography: The Trouble with Typologies

FROM THE SERIES: Graphic Ethnography on the Rise



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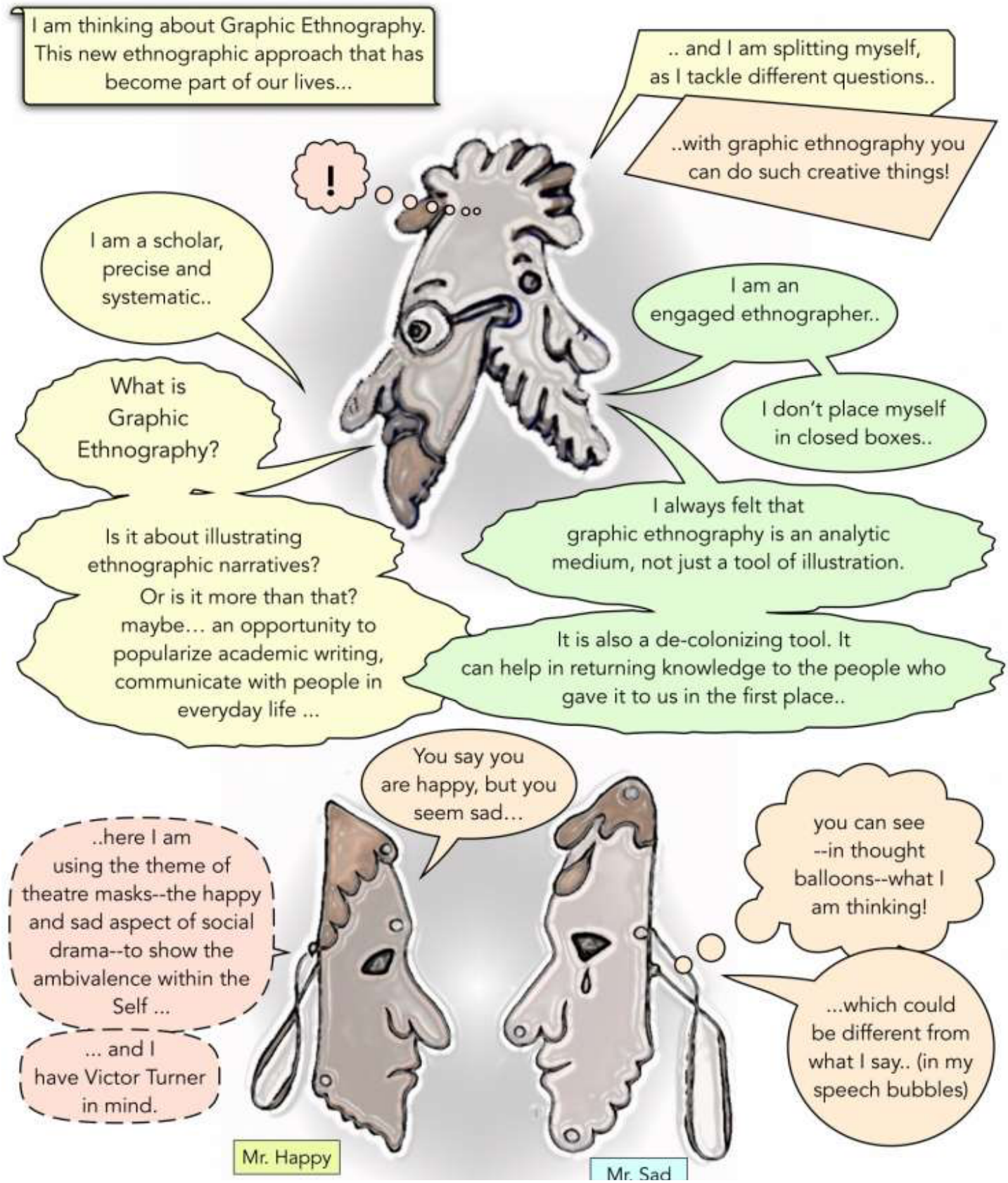
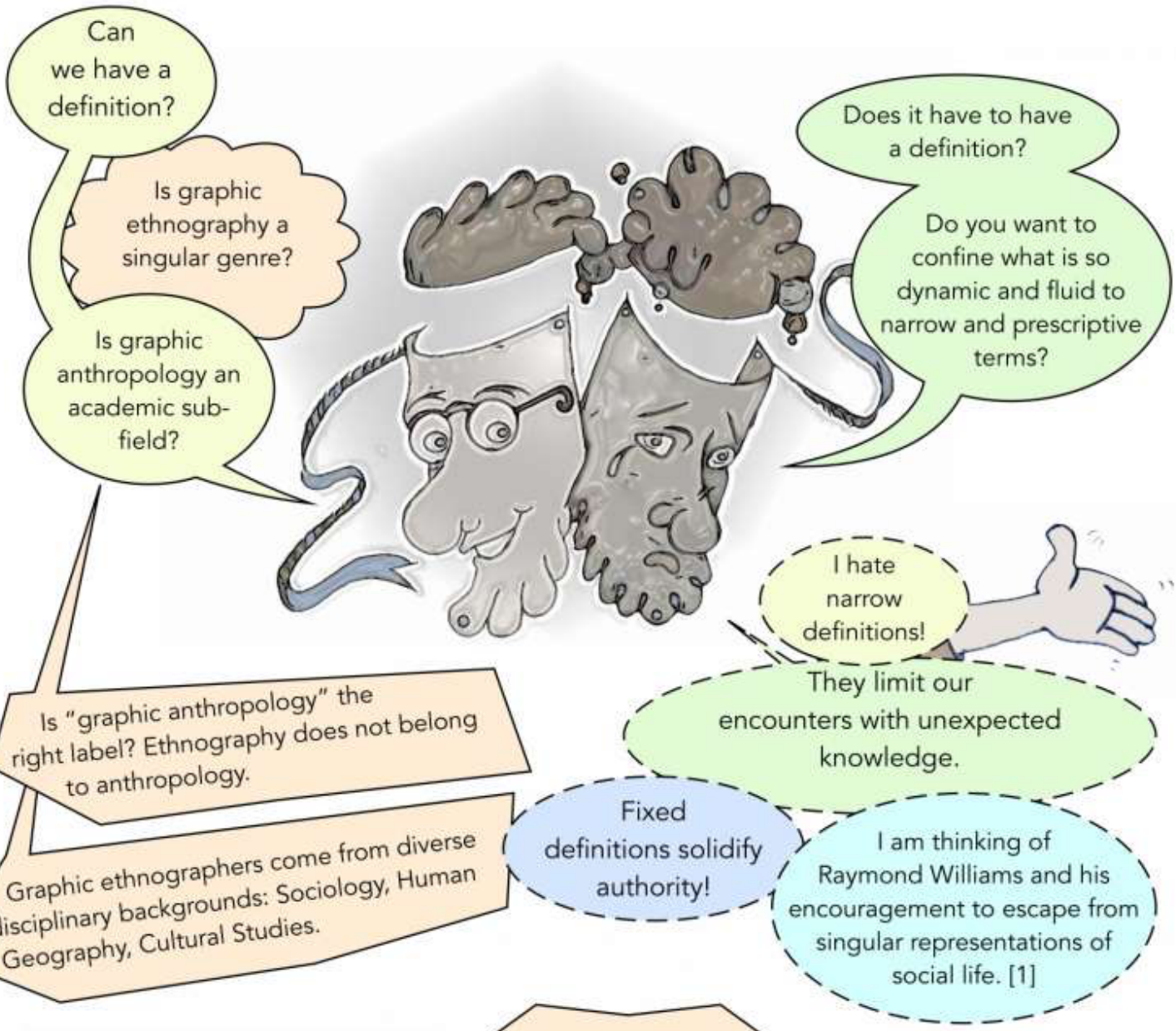
GRAPHIC ETHNOGRAPHY:
THE TROUBLE WITH TYPOLOGIES



With graphic ethnography you can easily reveal hidden contradictions..
If you have the courage to do so..



Early career researcher

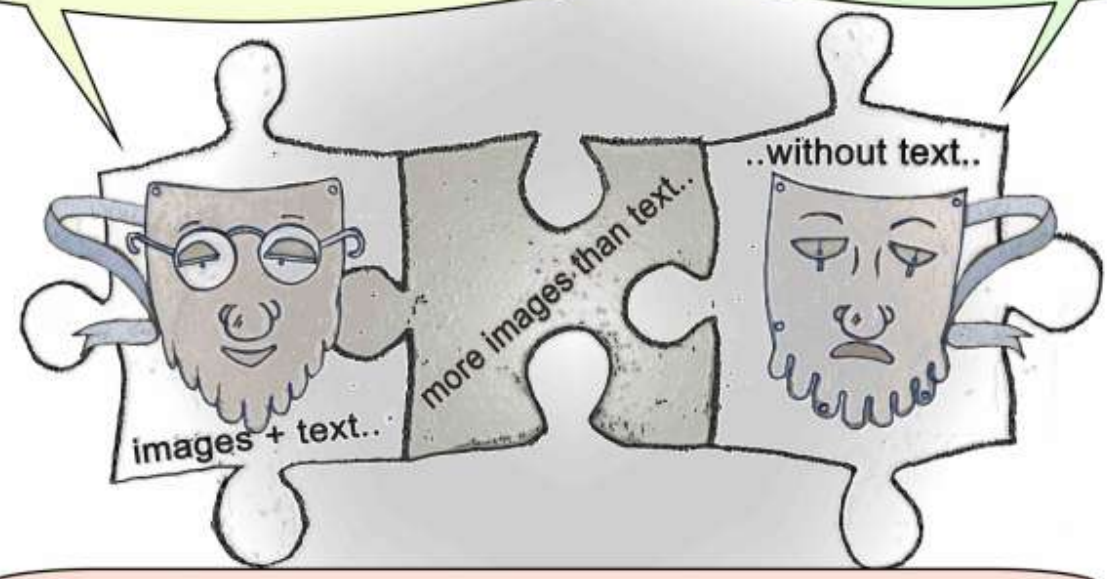
Let's make a new start..

Graphic ethnography relies on images, but words are still important...

... it provides an analytical combination of image and text, that invites irony, destabilizes academic authority, and makes available unexpected points of view.

What you describe here sounds like a definition.

Remember, we can have graphic ethnography without text at all!



The overall combination can allude to sensory dimensions: smell, texture, temperature, small details in the background ... or various unsolicited insights that emerge from humor or self-irony.

Graphic ethnography is ideal for communicating ideological tensions: all those cases where there is more than one voice, which we may want to respect or critically oppose. This is what I like about it. [2]

But, ideally, without superimposing one authoritative opinion over another.

In this way,

we may evade the singularity of ideological dimensions: the graphics often reveal multiple layers of representation.

There is so much productive complexity and variation in graphic representational styles.

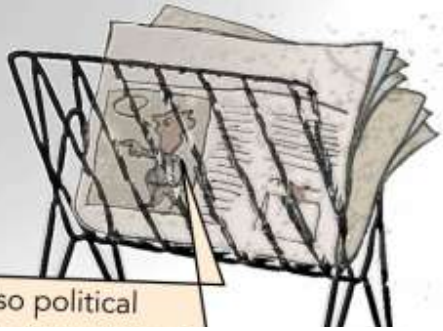
...this is why I resist limiting such creativity within narrowly specified sub-fields..

I have seen full-length graphic ethnographic 'monographs'; that is, whole books presented like graphic novels. [3]

Monographs and edited volumes

More frequently, we see smaller graphic interventions. Graphic panels supporting academic articles, books, research reports, or blogs. [4]

You have to factor in the logistics of labor here ... Drawing is more time-consuming that

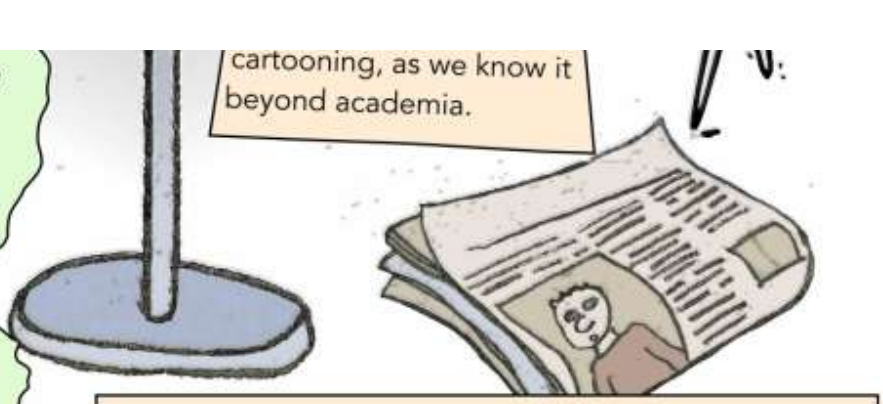


There is also political

writing. It is costly to generate graphic ethnographies at book-length, especially if you rely on the work of artists...

... whose labor requires fair payment and generous acknowledgment.

cartooning, as we know it beyond academia.



Political cartooning can be emulated to serve graphic ethnography: drawing cartoons to complement a textual critique—e.g., as newspaper articles often do. [5]

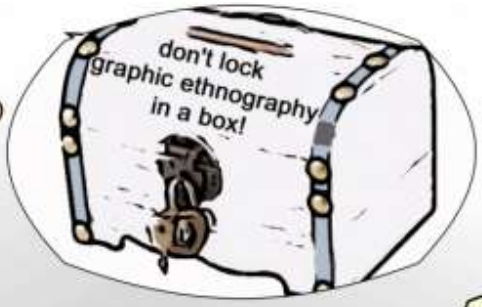
All these graphic styles and possibilities generate the impression that something new is happening in contemporary ethnographic practice..

I disagree... You try again to frame this creativity as a new academic "turn".. as if a new generation has reinvented the wheel!

This new 'graphic turn' is a distinctive 21st century development... ...part of a more general shift towards multimodality.

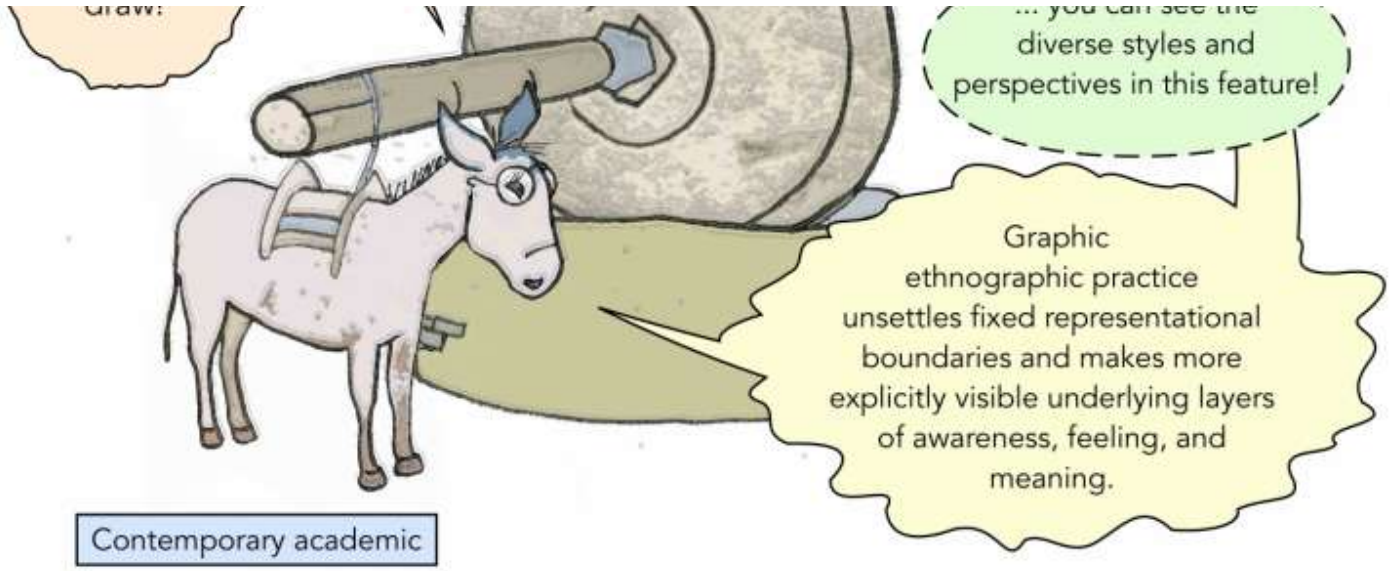
In my view, such multi-modal trends wouldn't exist without the anti-positivist critique of the late 20th century. Feminism, post-structuralism, and experimental ethnography have set the foundations..

Contemporary anthropologists carry the burden of all that knowledge, and often work under unfavorable labor conditions.



Despite constraints of time and labor, graphic ethnography continues to grow ...

There is so little time to draw!



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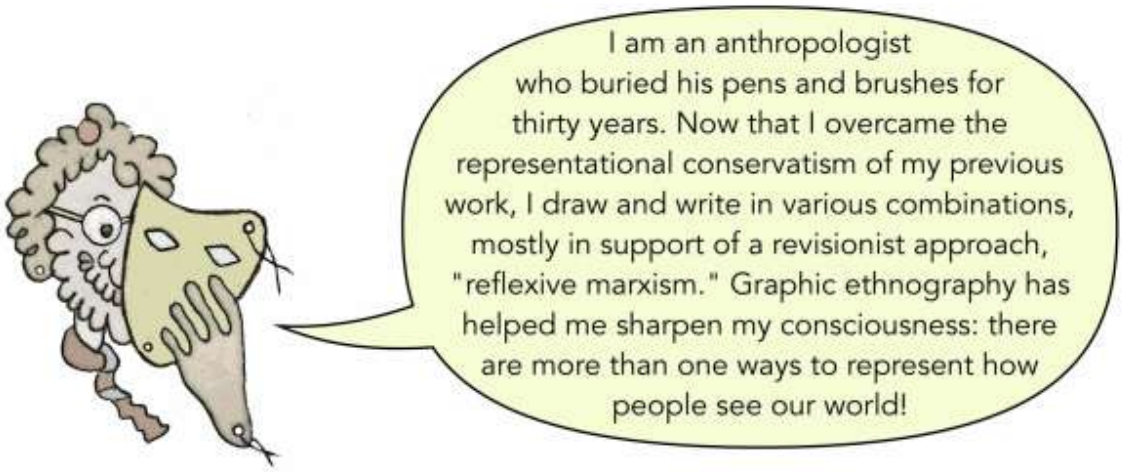

[1] Williams encouraged us to avoid singular and closed academic narratives, a point he made before the corresponding anthropological critique of the 1980s; see Williams 1977.

[2] Our ethnographic interlocutors are often in doubt about their own views. I have found the graphic approach very helpful in capturing their ambivalent stance, or even ideological conflicts, but in a manner that does not single out conflicting views in mutually excluding terms; see Theodossopoulos 2020a, 2020b.

[3] University of Toronto Press has dedicated a book series to full-length 'ethnoGRAPHIC' monographs. See: *Lissa* (Hamdy and Nye 2017), *The King of Bangkok* (Sopranzetti et al.

2019), *Light in Dark Times* (Waterston 2020), and *Gringo Love* (Carrier-Moisa 2020). See also: graphic books that divert from the sequential graphic novel format: *Things that Art* (Jain 2019) and *The Inheritance* (Povinelli 2021).

[4] There is great variety of “shorter” graphic outputs. Some of them popularize the content of academic articles and books. One of my favorite examples is a graphic that outlines Imogen Tyler’s critique of Erving Goffman; see Bailey and Tyler 2018. There are also recent graphic interventions that popularize abstract academic concepts in a format that can be read by local populations—such as the indigenous interlocutors, the people that generate the knowledge (or ideas) captured by ethnography; see Theodossopoulos 2019 and Mookherjee and Keya 2019.

[5] I refer here to a research project during which I emulated the representational style of a political cartoonist who exposed social inequality in the 1950s and 1960s. I drew like him (and recycled his cartoon-characters) to introduce an ethnographic comparison with austerity in the present time; see Theodossopoulos 2022.

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