

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY: MAKING SENSE OF THE EMPIRICAL DATA OF PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Given that musical performance is created in intersubjective construction, different styles of ethnographies can come into play. Taking two examples of my fieldwork experience, I focus on the analytical challenge posed by the transformation of empirical data into an ethnography of performance. Here, a closer look can for instance reveal slight discrepancies between the verbal accounts of the stakeholders and my own observation or experience of the performance. I resolve these ambiguities under different epistemological conditions. Yet, the similar outcomes suggest a flexible handling of ethnographic writing styles. The emphasis lies therefore on foregrounding this analytical path of transformation into an ethnography, calling it “performing ethnography”.

Keywords: Performance, Ethnography, Brazilian Culture, Capoeira.

INTRODUCTION

During my study of philosophy, I often secretly wondered what it is these philosophers questioned, particularly the question of what we can really know. The available answers never seemed to be very plausible. Yet, now as an ethnomusicologist, the epistemological question of what one can really know about the world has revealed its undeniable importance. Contemporary post-colonialist approaches have essentially triggered this question (e. g. Clifford/Marcus 1986; Roth et al. 1989). There has been a greater willingness to scrutinize one’s own perception and finally, the representation of the reality of “the other”. Starting off with the “self-reflective anthropology” (Watson 1991:81), ethnomusicology benefited from new ways of approaching fieldwork and ethnography (e. g. Grenier/Guilbault 1990; Barz/Cooley 2008). Hence, the new challenge was and maybe still is to apply these insights to the study of musical performance (see also Wong 2008: 77).

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In an ethnography which deals with performance situations, the author is faced with the impossible, yet desired “holistic perspective” (Béhague 1984: 10). As the Performance Study researcher Jnan Blau puts it, the event opens up “music’s text, music’s performer, and music’s audience to their polysemic possibilities and inter-influential realities” (Blau 2009). First, the ethnographer will decide on the data to gather. One of the next steps consists in the transformation of these layers of experience, witnessing and recording into a coherent writing style. It is this transformative process I am particularly interested in since, often hidden, it informs so much the written interpretation of the data. Therefore, I will foreground this path of analysis, without necessarily giving advantage to one style of ethnography over another.

Taking two examples from performance situations, I will point to different levels of empirical access in the data – these verbal accounts and observations. I will highlight how these levels can be linked in a sensible way, especially in cases where they don’t seem to quite match or even contradict each other. I believe that looking at these kinds of ambiguities which at first glance seem to elicit an immediate understanding can fruitfully enhance the research enterprise in musical performance studies.

FIRST EXAMPLE: BRAZILIAN PERFORMERS IN LISBON

I have been in Lisbon, the capital of the South-Western European country Portugal for most of 2003 and later, studying the local Brazilian musicians. They stem from the vastly increased number of Brazilian immigrants to Portugal, comprising nowadays one of the youngest and biggest immigrant community in the former mother country (cf. Malheiros 2007:16-17).

Brazilian music has enjoyed a high reputation in Portugal for a long time, not least due to both countries using the same mother tongue Portuguese. This provides a good opportunity for immigrant musicians using Brazilian music in the local music market. Most of them came to Portugal at the end of the 1990s. Their musical practice is mostly found in local venues such as discos, bars, restaurants, stages in music shops or shopping centres. These venues became crucial places for me to contact the musicians. Within my PhD, I integrated some subjective descriptions of particular evenings in order to make these performances more accessible to the reader. I didn’t use the recorded music as a primary material for analysis. In my opinion, this would have given me too much license in interpretation. I rather based myself on the verbal accounts from the interviewees, as it has also been proposed in ethnomusicology (e.g. Béhague 1984: 9; Stokes 2003: 230). Hence, there I haven’t found an explicit enough background which would theoretically support the link between what people say and what they do. I therefore drew on the extended discourse analysis by the German sociologist

Siegfried Jäger (1993; 2001). He refers to Foucault's notion of "dispositive" which would connect the said and the unsaid just as in a web, but which was only adumbrated by Foucault (cf. Foucault 1978). Jäger refines dispositives as process-related elements of knowledge which are enclosed in a rotating circle of thought/speech, practice and the respective materializations (cf. Jäger 2001: 83-84). In order to gain access to non-verbalized knowledge or reifications, he then suggests using explanations from people or the texts they respectively produce (cf. Jäger 2001: 86-88).

In the case of the musical practice from a performance, I could therefore revert to everyday language of informal conversations as well as to the detailed interviews I had conducted. These interviews served indeed as an important source because here, implicit meanings which the stakeholders wouldn't necessarily (need to) flesh out in everyday situations became explicit (see also Charmaz 2001: 340-1). The analysis of these verbal accounts would thus show an important link to the musical practice.

At first, such an analysis looks quite simple but there may be some pitfalls. Such as when what the interviewee says doesn't seem to entirely match the observations of the performance. Here is an example: in 1995, when he was in his mid-forties, the singer-songwriter Renato Corrêa came to Lisbon where he now plays guitar in Portuguese and Brazilian restaurants. He also uses a small drum-machine for percussive accompaniment. Together with his soft voice, he is able to create a comfortable atmosphere for the diners. In the interview, Corrêa describes his choice of repertoire as follows:

Corrêa: "Eu toco basicamente músicas do Chico Buarque de Holanda, Caetano Veloso, Djavan, Ivan Lins – como é que eu te falei naquele dia, né – a elite brasileira". Translation: Corrêa: "Basically, I play the music of Chico Buarque de Holanda, Caetano Veloso, Djavan, Ivan Lins – as I told you before, the Brazilian elite" (interview 26/09/2003).

For Corrêa, the musical "Brazilian elite" refers to artists of MPB, "Música Popular Brasileira". Since the mid-1960s, these very creative and successful singers and songwriters fused Anglo-American music with regional Brazilian styles (see also Stroud 2008: 39-44).

During a performance situation, Corrêa indeed plays cover versions penned by this "Brazilian elite". Nevertheless, the whole repertoire of an evening can show a far more heterogenic picture. It may also include music from other Brazilian genres such as "axé" and "pagode" which started to be highly visible in the 1990s. So, let me be a bit nit-picking and state: Corrêa's verbal account does not totally match the observation of the repertoire of an evening. In the course of interpreting the data, I have to wonder how to go about this now. Should I really introduce a distinction between "true" or "false", or "true" and "more-or-less-true" (see also Hammersley 2001: 109-110)?

Possible ambiguities between what people say and what they eventually do were also observed by the British ethnomusicologist Jonathan P. J. Stock. He refers to research on English folk music sessions in a pub in Sheffield:

“The numbers of an ensemble might claim (and believe) that interpretative decisions are made democratically during rehearsal while observation reveals that one individual normally provides most of the direction” (Stock 2004: 19-20).

Stock presumes that there may be areas of practice which aren't as he puts it “readily talked about” (Stock 2004: 20). Though, back to the Brazilian performer, he actually explained the sometimes heterogenic repertoire of an evening. These are unpredictable situations during a quite interactive performance where some people from the audience might come up with their own musical suggestions:

Corrêa: “E também coisas eu toco, eu não gosto muito, é às vezes músicas assim pagodes, algumas coisas mais comerciais brasileiras, eu faço algumas. [...] Eu tento escapar, fugir. Mas às vezes, eu não consigo fugir”. Translation: Corrêa: “And there are things I play which I don't really like; sometimes Pagode, well, more commercial Brazilian stuff. Some of them I play. [...] I try to escape, but sometimes I can't” (interview 26/09/2003).

Here, “pagode” refers to very popular Brazilian music, either from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (the Samba Pagode) or from Salvador de Bahia (the Pagode Baiano). They are very danceable and may have choreographies to lyrics which can be very vulgar, at times.

Taking the example of Corrêa, I would like to highlight two different levels of speaking. These levels are distinguished by the effect on the actual practice. For a start, there is what the performer really wants to play and will, for the most part, play: his “Brazilian elite”. Besides that, there are songs which he only adds during the performance, due to the interaction with the listeners. Inspired by Lundberg et al. (2003:20) and their distinction of two dialectic realities, I assigned Corrêa's “Brazilian elite” to be a musical ideal: “[...] a discursive level which describes the world both as we understand it and as we wish it was” (Lundberg et al. 2003: 20). The outcome of a performance may follow this ideal, but not entirely. While Corrêa is enacting his vision of musical preference, he considers other aspects of the performance context, too.

Let me introduce another example in order to clarify this two-fold verbal account and its match to an observable performance situation. The singer Sílvia Nazário is, together with her musical partner Claudio Kumar, very interested in presenting their own compositions. In a different way to Corrêa, she sets much more rigorous limits to what will enter her repertoire of an evening. Nevertheless, the levels of her “musical ideal” and so to speak “performance-reality” are again very clear in the verbal account. There she states “I will make my own music [...]”

(“Eu vou fazer a minha música [...]”) which can be interpreted as her musical ideal. She continues to refer to the social context of a performance, namely her employer and the audience:

Nazário: “Obviamente eu tenho que ter um respeito ao público, eu tenho que ser uma profissional. Eu fui contratada pra tocar num lugar, eu tenho que equilibrar os meus originais com coisas que são conhecidas do público também. E em respeito a eles, eles ficam felizes quando ouvem uma bossa nova que eles conhecem. Eu equilibro isso o máximo possível. Mas alguém vai chegar pra mim pedir por eu cantar *Ah, canta ... – Desculpa, eu não posso, eu não sei. Não sei, pra mim, não sei*”. Translation: Nazário: “Obviously, I have to show respect to the audience and maintain my professionalism. I was employed to play in a venue. So I have to balance my originals with things people also know. And they are happy when they hear a Bossa Nova they know. I try to balance that the best I can. But if someone comes and asks me to sing something *Sing ...!*, I say, *I’m sorry, I can’t. I don’t know that*” (interview 29/06/2004).

What I want to highlight here is an awareness of, at first sight, possible discrepancies between what people say and what one can observe. Some qualitative research handbooks already mention this difficulty but don’t offer a solution (cf. Silverman 2005: 69; Charmaz 2006: 25). An ethnomusicological perspective may contribute to this methodological field. It opens the possibility to not only look at the autobiographical narrative of the stakeholders but also to take the aspect of their social and respective musical practice into account. A distinction within verbal accounts, these musical ideals and considerations of the particular context, can be helpful to revive the artist’s decisions made during a performance. Thereby, overlapping layers of priorities can be revealed. The artist’s own musical aspirations have to be brought in line with the expectations of the audience and their vision of “Brazilian music”. Discrepancies between what a person says and what they eventually do are linked to these negotiations between artistic vision and contextual sensitivity. Philip Auslander, coming from Performance Studies, even coined the term of “musical personae”: “When we hear a musician play, the source of the sound is a version of that person constructed for the specific purpose of playing music under particular circumstances” (Auslander 2006: 102). This contextual approach clarifies that the person talking about their musical ideals must not necessarily be consistent with the person on stage. Hence, while Auslander draws on examples of highly successful performers, he sees the construction of the “persona” only within the relationships of audiences and genre constraints (cf. Auslander 2006: 104). Additionally, my research in an urban and local setting revealed the dependence of the musicians on the audience via their economic needs as well. To please an audience or the owner of a venue can for example guarantee the financial survival, let alone the continuity of a musical career. The actual

repertoire of an evening is therefore also a reflection of how “the conflict between musical and economic capitals” (Cottrell 2002: 72) is individually resolved.



Fig. 1 – The Brazilian singer Sílvia Nazário is performing with her musical partner Claudio Kumar (left, guitar) and Chyco Nascimento (right, bass) in a Portuguese restaurant in Lisbon (02/05/2006).

Two years after the interview with the singer Sílvia Nazário, I met her again in a new venue. There, she refused to make compromises for her listeners even more strongly. This was her way of getting closer to her musical ideal – of presenting her own compositions – which she assigned to be her self-realization (*realização pessoal*, conversation with Sílvia Nazário, 02/05/2005). Over the following few years, Corrêa increasingly also came to realize his musical ideal of the “Brazilian elite”. He participated in recordings of cover versions of Bossa Nova and MPB in Portugal (e. g. Velez 2005). By viewing this over time, one can notice how the realization of the expressed musical ideal is intensified. In that way, I suggest that this level of verbal account approximates itself more to the observable action and reveals its power for the individual to decide on their next steps in their musical career. One could almost speak of the creation of individual “audiotopias”. Josh Kun introduced this term to denote “sonic spaces of effective utopian longings” (Kun 2005: 23). While he exemplifies this effectiveness within the “American audio-racial imagination” (Kun 2005: 25) it might be applicable to the power of individual sonic spaces which in this case musicians envision and gradually take possession of.

SECOND EXAMPLE: LEARNING CAPOEIRA

My second example will furthermore illustrate the link between verbal account and observation. This time, I can draw on a much more actively involved observation. Since 2004, I've been a student of Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art. It's noteworthy that it is not only a very playful game between the opponents, but also a musical framework. Since the end of the 1980s, the continuous flux of Brazilian emigrants has brought this martial art to many European countries, too (cf. Assunção 2005: 191-3; Delamont/Stephens 2008).

For me, the bodily exercises as well as the musical culture have been a great challenge since it was in both cases an introduction to a new mode of expression. In order to learn and understand, I listened attentively to the words of my teacher, went to workshops with other instructors and read the available books in Germany (e. g. Pinto 1991; Capoeira 1999; Onori 2002). Looking at it from today's perspective, I have heard things I didn't immediately understand. A frequent statement was that the musical bow in Capoeira, called the "berimbau" was the "master of the Capoeira" (e. g. Mestre Leo quoted in Rodust 2005). Of course, the instrument cannot play itself! Yet, it is the sound of the Berimbau which indicates the style and speed of the game in Capoeira between the two opponents in the center of the circle (the "roda"). Equally, the Berimbau – or rather the person that plays it – marks the beginning, the end or can even intervene in the game. It's these crucial functions originating from the Berimbau that give it the reputation of being the "master of the Capoeira". So taking my own experience and participant observation during a performance into account, that statement is eventually clarified.

Yet, I often heard many more pregnant sentences. For example, there is a common one which this time I cite from Mestre João Pequeno, an old and highly respected master in the international Capoeira world: "Capoeira can teach you everything" (quoted in Rodust 2005). Well, can it really? These kind of sentences, I often retreated into the subconscious of my Capoeira practice. They didn't seem to be of much importance to my own experience where I perceived Capoeira lessons and the actual game as very different from my normal life. – What is at stake here again, is that verbal account and observation don't seem to quite match. But never would I have dared to publicly doubt it, out of respect for the instructors and their wealth of experience.

In May 2007, I went to a Capoeira workshop in Hamburg, Germany where they had also invited the famous Brazilian Capoeira mestre, Mestre Acordeon (Capoeira10: 25/05-28/05/2007). It really was a huge event, a happening, with hundreds of Capoeira practitioners. By that time, I wasn't a total beginner anymore. Nevertheless, looking at all these fantastic Capoeira practitioners, including women with great fighting spirit, I started to lose courage right from the first day. Finding myself now outside of my familiar group, I trembled and felt very unsure about my position, for instance in the decision whether to go into the

beginner's or advanced class. I remember I even shed some secret tears over these feelings of inferiority. In this vulnerable situation, the words of Mestre Acordeon came to me. In a lesson, he had reminded us to always really be there and use the training time. Neither compare yourself with those of a belt color that marks a higher graduation, nor underestimate those with a lower belt color. Always and in every situation, you can learn from people. But most importantly, mind your own progress in your own time.

For the next three days, these words became an important guideline for my training and my experience. The feeling of helplessness left me. I realized I didn't have to be as good as the others. I didn't have to be in every "roda" (the circle where the opponents meet). What counted now was *my* way of learning, be that in situations of training or of the actual Capoeira games ("jogos"). So for those performances, it meant that I stepped back, remained reticent. I still participated in the essential singing and hand clapping to help create and maintain the good energy called "axé" for the opponents in the circle. Suddenly I realized how I was enjoying just watching all these fantastic and spectacular players. And yes, I still was a beginner.

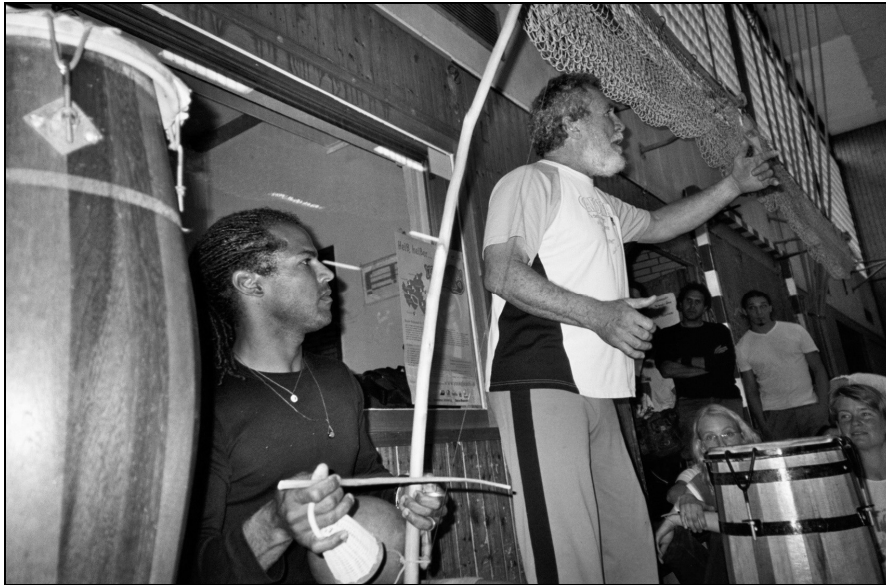


Fig. 2 – Mestre Acordeon speaks to the participants of the Capoeira Workshop in Hamburg, Germany (25/05/2007). To the left of him, the instructor Ricardo Queiroz holds the important instrument, the Berimbau, ready to play.

During this workshop, my passion for Capoeira moved into its next phase. It still was a game, a physical challenge, a musical event. But Capoeira had taught me more. The words of Mestre Acordeon had helped me to overcome a crisis. A crisis

which I knew well from other instances when I had felt very unsure of myself be that questions of whether I could finish my PhD, whether it would ever measure up to..., whether... Capoeira has shown me a way out. That is to concentrate (not to compare or worry) as well as accept my own way of learning. Only thereby can I shape my individual path of knowledge which is able to connect my life's lessons of the past with those of the near future. In this sense, I feel Capoeira may be a tool which can "teach you everything", as Mestre João Pequeno (and other teachers) expressed it before. Yet, similar to the example of Brazilian performers in Lisbon, for the individual there can be a temporal gap between a verbal account and a congruent experience.

After the incident in Hamburg, I started to "tune" my ears in a new way to the lyrics of Capoeira songs which always accompany the physical practice. For example, the song "Menino novo" serves now as a musical reminder. In the lyrics, the young practitioner is admonished not to take the belts of Capoeira as *the* reality for his way of learning:

"Menino Novo, Preste atenção, Não julgue o capoeira, Pela cor do seu cordão". "Não julgue o capoeira, Com a corda que ele tá, No lugar onde eu pisei, Você ainda vai pisar". Translation: Chorus: "Young Man, Be aware, Not to judge the other, By the colour of their belt". Verse: "Don't judge the other, By the belt he's got, Where I have stepped, You still have to go" (Mestrando Bigodinho, sung by Soares 2007).

In that fragile moment of my learning Capoeira I was lucky to have a teacher like Mestre Acordeon helping me to build a bridge in order to overcome these feelings of anxiety and uncertainty.¹ In his book *Capoeira: A Brazilian Art Form – History, Philosophy, and Practice* (Almeida 1986), he reflects on his personal experiences of becoming a "capoeirista" (a Capoeira practitioner). He doesn't leave out how he turned away from Capoeira and then discovered it again in a new light. His own crisis might thus have made him very sensitive to the difficulties of his students; even more than twenty years later. In his book, Bira Almeida alias Mestre Acordeon recalls how at one point his own limited perceptions hadn't let him see "anything more in Capoeira" (Almeida 1986:145). He describes his own way of overcoming this attitude as a challenge since he had to leave the comfort of familiar ground what he calls "playing in the light". He resumes:

"I think that in order to progress in Capoeira as well as in life one must have a curiosity and drive for more knowledge, even when the sacrifice of the comfort of 'playing in the light' of already known stages" (Almeida 1986: 147).

¹ In my first participation in a "campeonato", a concourse of Capoeira practitioners, I won the first prize in the beginners' category (06/12/2009, Campeonato of the group "Brasil Capoeira" with Mestre Matias; Berne, Switzerland). So, I may have learnt my lessons well.

Taking this quote, it is interesting to see that Almeida naturally links Capoeira to broader lessons in life, too. – But then, how can practicing a martial-art be thought of as being separated from “life”? Why is it that not only me, but Almeida too, are referring to Capoeira *and* life? We seem to create an artificial gap between the experiences of daily life and the practice of Capoeira. Surely, those experiences seem to be embedded in very different contexts. Yet, by taking my perspective as the main relator focus, the distinction between performance and “ordinary” life has become blurred.

Recent approaches to musical performance foster such an all-encompassing notion which rather than stressing the musical work emphasize social relationships, respectively “what people do” (Small 1998: 8). This approach resonates with the term “performativity” on which Performance Studies is grounded (cf. Madrid 2009). Here, the shift has more explicitly been explored to theorize larger issues which extend to the ordinary and identity (de-)construction (cf. Jackson 2004: 182-3).

The above outlined example demonstrates how the exceptional setting of Capoeira had made me much more aware of the internal self-knowledge processes. Surely, these processes don’t stop in daily life, though there, they may not always be perceived as part of a “performance”. Rather, one could refer to different “degrees of performativity” such as the Cultural Historian Peter Burke suggests (Burke 02/12/2009). The created bias of performance/non-performance can thereby be avoided. In addition, it sheds light on the individual or contextual formation of identity. For example, in the case of Capoeira, the reader accompanied my learning process in which I eventually drew parallels to other situations of emotional weight. Such narrative reflections not only reveal the knowledge-generative nature of performance situations (cf. Blau 2009), but they also point to the transcending role of the researcher. As the ethnomusicologist Michelle Kisliuk has already expressed it when referring to the equally misleading term of fieldwork in that it is “intensified life, but part of a life-flow all the same, and it is inseparable from who we are” (Kisliuk 2008: 184).

CONCLUSION

With respect to performance situations, I presented two examples of fieldwork data in order to accompany their transformation into ethnographic writing and interpretation. Methodologically, I based myself on interview accounts of qualitative research. Nevertheless, while applying the indicated analysis of discourse (cf. Jäger 2001), I couldn’t ignore some discrepancies between verbal accounts and observation. In the first example of Brazilian performers in Lisbon, I resolved to distinguish different levels of speaking: the musical ideal and the considerations of performance-reality. In an urban and local setting where the income of live performances is not always sufficient, a performer’s “musical personae” (Auslander 2006) on stage may well be different from their own artistic

vision. Interestingly, by taking a longer time period into account – I mean repeated performance – these ambiguities have become more and more indistinct. The Brazilian performers seemed to increasingly live up to their musical ideals. This was also true for me in Capoeira, where I eventually encountered the vividness of a mere sentence. I find this outcome even more astonishing, as I interpreted the data against the background of two different epistemological models.



Fig. 3 – Jamesson da Silva (present teacher of the local group) and the author play Capoeira in front of curious residents and passing tourists in Warnemuende, Rostock, Germany (16/08/2008).

In the first example, I assumed a reality which would allow an objective access (see my observations), but at the same time acknowledges the constructivist contribution of the individuals (see the inclusion of their verbal accounts). This model of reality presents an in-between-solution of realistic and relativistic ethnographical concepts (see also Emerson 2001a; 2001b). In the second example, I highlighted my own experience as a Capoeira practitioner. Here, one could say it was grounded on a more phenomenological background which has also come to be explicitly applied in ethnomusicological (auto-)ethnographies (e. g. Downey 2005, Grey 2007; Wong 2008). By referring to an emotional, respectively embodied experience, the ethnographic account included the personal more strongly than in the first example. Thereby the question of what a performance constitutes came under much more severe scrutiny. On a theoretical level, the dichotomy of performance/non-performance was balanced by perceiving different “degrees of performativity” (Burke 02/12/2009). This assumption may not exclusively be used

for an auto-ethnographic recount. It may possibly be a lens through which the musicians of the first example can be seen through as well, namely as interviewees and as performers of a “musical personae”.

As a consequence of the interrelated outcomes of these two epistemological models, I would like to encourage a flexible handling of ethnographic writing styles. That is, they need to not come out of personal preference but be adapted to the available fieldwork data. Additionally, I recommend a close look at this transformative process which occurs between data gathering and writing. If there is something that shakes the perception or breaks the rule of logical understanding, it may be worth of being part of the ethnography itself. The focus on conceptual earthquakes may eventually lead to an analytical transparency which helps to gain decisive insights. This vein of writing I would call “performing ethnography”.

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