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EthnoGRAPHIC: An Interview

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Abstract

The interview focuses on the book series EthnoGRAPHIC (University of Toronto Press) and the graphic novel *Lissa. A Story about Medical Promise, Friendship and Revolution*, the first book of the series. Four points arise from the interview with authors Sherine Hamdy and Coleman Nye, and with the filmmaker Francesco Dragone, who documented their research process. First, the problem of funding multimedia and innovative research projects, aimed to find new ways of communicating social research. Second, the question to what extent such projects are recognized and legitimated within the Academia. Third, the audience potentially interested in reading (ethno)graphic novels and, relatedly, their usability in teaching social sciences. Finally, the concerns and practicalities in putting together different narrative forms. This effort of combining several ways of representing social reality, also concerns the organization of the research itself as well as conducting fieldwork and the capability of thinking "graphically" from scratch instead of adapting textual data collected during the research.

Keywords: Graphic Novels; Collaborative Ethnography; Research Process; Medical Anthropology; Teaching Anthropology.

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Eduardo Barberis & Barbara Grüning (Q): *We'd like to know the origin of your project*, Lissa (2017), *and also of the book series* ethnoGRAPHIC. *Which project was born earlier:* Lissa *or the book series?*

Sherine Hamdy (SH): They were actually born simultaneously. I had written a piece, a blog post about how I began using graphic novels for teaching medical anthropology, and the editor at University of Toronto press, Anne Brackenbury, saw that. She gave me a call and she said "You know, I've been thinking about doing a series that brings together anthropology with graphic novels. Would you be interested in something like that?" Coleman [Nye] and I had already been working on a way to bring our research together so that was sort of the first birth of this project. As soon as Coleman finished her dissertation, we started working on the writing part — what we call "the script", that is the dialogue — and then we presented our vision for it at a Graphic Medicine conference in California. We were lucky to get funding for it and then Francesco Dragone, filmmaker, joined the team as our videographer/filmmaker. We got funding to go to Egypt and that's how it started.

Lissa was the first book in the series and then after *Lissa* came out I became the series editor along with Marc Parenteau, who is a comic artist that we met when we first did our presentation on Graphic Medicine, and so he gives us his evaluation on the submissions from the perspective of a visual editor/practitioner. We give feedback on the story together.

Q: *Where did you get funding for a project like* Lissa *?*

SH: A lot of the funding was from where we were at Brown University from the Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs and we also got external funding from the Henry Luce Foundation within a program called "Religion in International Affairs".

Q: *Did you have any specific reference in mind when starting your project? For example Brad Evans in this issue (2021), when he reflects on his* Portraits of Violence *(2016), maintains that it is not possible to work on a graphic novel on violence without knowing* Maus *by Spiegelman (1986). Is there any previous work that grounded yours?*

Coleman Nye (CN): Both of us were teaching medical anthropology classes and both of us have been teaching graphic novels in our medical anthropology classes. We had found them to be beautiful and effective at conveying embodied experiences of illness for patients, communicating the multiple different layers of communication and cultural dynamics at play in clinical encounters. At that time graphic medicine was really taking off: using comics to teach medicine in medical practice and to convey illness experiences. Both of us were really inspired by the works coming out in graphic illness memoirs and graphic medicine.

SH: I think *Maus* and *Persepolis* (Satrapi, 2000) are the two central works that really brought scholarly attention to graphic novels as a way to communicate really difficult topics. Of course, Joe Sacco's works on Palestine, too (2003). Especially *Persepolis* and *Maus* have had a very strong influence in graphic medicine, and I think for Coleman and me, because we were teaching medical anthropology. We were finding that there was so much that was memoir based — which is great because memoirs are personal and very moving — but we thought: how can we bring in our social perspective? How can we make this a larger story about social structure, about structural violence? What would that look like when our only models had been memoirs? So, *Lissa* was kind of a new formulation.

Q: Lissa *is a multimedia project, because it's not just a research and a graphic novel, but a*

film. What kind of audience did you want to reach and engage?

Francesco Dragone (FD): I can speak for the idea of filming the whole process. When I was contacted by Sherine, it was almost like: "We're doing something completely new, we don't know where we're going and so let's try to make an archival effort at least to be able to document this process, so that the rest of the series can rely on this as an opening path." And then the idea shifted a little bit, I believe, becoming almost like a multimedia, multi-layered effort. When we started to film the process, it became apparent that it was important to incorporate some of the graphic novel into the documentary, and on top of that also the archival effort made by the people living the revolution in Egypt. So we went back in time exploring this archival evidence, making it so much more powerful and impactful, having access to something that happened five years before we were actually able to go to Egypt.

To answer the question about the audience, I would say that the first thing that came to mind was getting closer to the readers, because the film is another layer of the story but, most of all what I got in the last couple of years by people that saw the documentary alongside the book was actually to engage in a different level of conversation with the students. The young characters are the first layer of interaction, just because they recognize each other when they see other kids going through school and exploring a different world. So Sarula [Bao, illustrator] and Caroline [Brewer, illustrator], which are the other two protagonists of the documentary together with Sherine and Coleman, are there and it's very neat to see that almost Anna and Layla [*Lissa*'s fictional protagonists] — even though they don't exist — are also the protagonists of the documentary. They kind of joined forces all of a sudden.

SH: And I have to say that it was all Francesco, that was all his amazing idea to think: "How can I document fictional characters?" Because we really did feel like when we were in Egypt, that they were with us, like we were seeing everything through their lenses. We knew their story so well and I think that was one of the most brilliant parts of the documentary, the way he was able to bring that feeling.

Q: *As for the book series, is there a specific audience/readership you had in mind, or is it more project-specific?*

SH: Anne Brackenbury again, who was the editor at Toronto University Press and came up with the idea for the series, had been running a Teaching Anthropology blog. So I think it was always an idea for the classroom — how to teach anthropology for students at undergraduate or maybe at a graduate level.

CN: Anne Brackenbury's daughter is a high school student, and she ended up reading *Lissa* as well and enjoyed it. So, I think one of the cool things about the graphic novel format is that it's really visually accessible. Because we wrote it also in the format of a novel it's also just a compelling story and so even my stepdad read it. My stepdad knows nothing about anthropological theory... he just appreciated that it was a powerful story, and he learned a lot about medical inequalities. I think the beautiful thing is that there are multiple layers that you can read into the graphic novel: there's the story, there's lots of information you can take away from the story that can appeal to all readers, with different ages and backgrounds.

But then I think there's something else, where you have a grasp of anthropological theory: there are different insights that you can bring with you: for example, here is how political violence or structural violence is lived. You can see anthropological concepts actually illustrated, coming to life.

Also, for the artists' side there's all this symbolism in the book: what is the role of the cats, for example? What is the role of the eye?

So, there are lots of different layers because of the combination of image and text that can make it differently accessible for a wide range of audiences.

SH: Because it brings people in at so many different levels, I think that was part of why for us filming was also very crucial. I recently taught it in a medical anthropology class and I showed the film. Students said to me: "I read the book and I enjoyed it — I liked it and I understood it but it wasn't until I saw the film that I thought — 'Wow! You did so much work!' "

CN: For students, watching the film lets them realize that Sarula and Caroline [*Lissa*'s illustrators] were also undergraduate students at the time. They like to watch people who are basically their peers going on this trip and doing anthropology for the first time, and then translating that into visual language. I think it's exciting and inspiring for students to see people their age doing this incredible work.

Q: *When we talk about graphic novels, we talk about a content that has to be translated in comics language, and this implies also a question of style, of aesthetic features. How much such design features are important for you — but also for the readership — to provide an interpretation of different meanings of social and graphic research?*

SH: It's important, but at the time we had already picked the artists before we had any idea of what the pictures would look like! We were somehow locked in, and then we were pleasantly surprised because we liked their artwork.

But since then, in my role as series editor, I've gotten a lot of submissions and now I appreciate how important the aesthetic dimension is, because I get submissions where I just immediately like or don't like the art. Sometimes the style really turns me off, and I don't even know necessarily the words to describe it. Then Marc Parenteau, the visual editor, helps me — for example: "It's because these dark lines are very aggressive and don't match the story". In understanding which style is good there's a lot of art, and we were lucky that our artists were very well trained in their illustration program — to learn how to match their style with the mood, the tempo and all of these different things.

CN: You can really see that in Francesco's documentary as well. You can see us all sitting in a hotel room in Cairo and having this conversation. There's Sarula asking questions like: "Well, what is your character like?", and we discuss different ways to think about characters' personality, or "How would you visually represent that or visually convey that?". For example, she pointed out that there's a lot of graphic violence that we might want to simplify and make a little bit more cartoony, because it could be too explicit if you visually depict graphic violence.

SH: in that scene of the documentary, when the illustrators are explaining to us this point, they said: we have to know what the whole arc of the character is before we design the character.

So, for example, in reference to the story of Anna: she was burdened as a child with this very heavy load — her mother's illness and then her mother's death — and she was put in an adult role so early. The way that Sarula shows that is by making her hands and her feet too big for her body — that's the way she used to show this adult role that she's been thrust into at too young an age.

Q: *We'd like to explore a bit more the relation between the cartoonist and the social scientist. Collecting the different experiences on making social science graphic novels, we saw an array of different levels of autonomy and coordination between illustrators and researchers, and different degrees of awareness about each other's job. How did it work for you in the making of* Lissa *— in the production process, so to say?*

CN: When we started, we were really separated. Sherine and I wrote the story and then

we gave the first draft to Sarula and Caroline and they started to thumbnail, that is to draw tiny sketches of each of the pages. Then, we looked at the pages together and started to have conversations around it.

Nevertheless, it wasn't really until we got to Cairo and all of us were together where we really started to work together to translate across our different disciplines. For example, they had to teach us what visual language means and how you can convey ideas via symbolism — and then we had to show them how we do our work. In this respect, Sherine did incredible work, for instance bringing us into interviews with doctors who had been on the ground providing care to injured protesters. Here the illustrators started to see the anthropological process with us, and to learn firsthand from people who had been there. They also met local Egyptian cartoon artists, spent more time looking at Egyptian graffiti and so they became part of the anthropological process with us.

So, we collaboratively went through the script together to really think through the kind of visual narrative that we wanted to tell, the important components of the story. Francesco did a beautiful job documenting this process as well

FD: From my perspective we understood while we were in Cairo the importance... for example Coleman was referring to the places, walking through the actual neighborhood so... That made a lot of sense, because when you need to place a character in a space it's impossible to imagine that just through photos, or a narrative told by someone. You need to experience that and so being there. Not only do you know the pollution in the air in Cairo, the situation, the pressure, the military and all that, but also seeing one neighborhood against another neighborhood, you know, one is more refined and rich and clean and the other one where everyone else is just living. So, these contrasts really came to life for Sarula and Caroline and for all of us while we were in Cairo. So, it was like a fundamental piece.

Q: *It was a kind of knowledge transmission that you need to have through experiences, but at the same time you need to know how a social scientist or an anthropologist thinks and how "graphic novels' language functions", so to say.*

SH: Exactly, and when I was in Beirut — I think for a conference — and I was telling Lina Ghaibeh, who's a well-known comic artist, and she's the chair of graphic design at the American University of Beirut... so I was telling her and her husband, who is also a very famous cartoonist, about our idea, and they said: "What! You are working with American students on a story that takes place in Egypt!??" and we said: "Yeah!" and they said: "But what about all the visual references?" and I said: "Oh well we know those, we're watching movies" and they said: "No, no, no! You have to take them to Egypt!". I didn't think it would be feasible before, because we had a short timeline and we didn't have the money, but it all worked out in the end, and we really needed to have gone! I know that a number of anthropologists are working now in their fieldsites with artists, but we didn't do that: we had completed our research before doing the graphic novel, and then we built the graphic novel based upon the insights from our research, and then wrote a story to piece it together. But I like that a number of anthropologists now are starting from the ground up, where they're undertaking research from the beginning in collaboration with local artists to try to undertake the research collaboratively, with the aim of making a graphic novel, and I think that looks very different if you start from that stage.

Q: *Turning back to the book series, how does the programming work? Do you receive submissions, or do you invite people to submit? Is there a market interest? And how much are scholars interested in publishing a graphic novel — in the frame of this "publish or perish" game, that may*

rank publishing a graphic novel quite low in academia.

SH: We do get a lot of submissions. When I give talks about *Lissa*, I always encourage people to think about, to think of their work in that way, but all of our submissions have been unsolicited. The second graphic novel after *Lissa* is called *Gringo Love*(Carrier-Moisan & Santos, 2020) and it's about sex workers in Brazil. Actually, before that, Lochlann Jain, a professor at Stanford, produced one called *Things that Art* (2019), which is not really a comic in the sense of a story told through panels, but more of a juxtaposition of images with text. And then the next one we have, I'm very excited about, it's called *Light in Dark Times* (Waterston & Holland, 2020), a very cool story. Alisse Waterston was the president of the American Anthropology Association and she was giving her inaugural lecture, and it was right after the election of Trump, and so she was talking about how to find light in these times that look so stark. And there was an anthropologist in the audience, Charlotte Corden, who happens to be a good artist, and she was just doodling while Alisse was giving her lecture. Then she went up to her hotel room and just stayed up all night drawing, and the next morning she met Alisse and said: "I have to show you what I've been doing!" And that was the birth of that project and they completed it really fast! I was impressed.

And just to the "publish or perish" point... it definitely puts people in a difficult position, I think, especially for young scholars because there's just a big question mark off what is the weight and what is the value of a graphic novel in academic metrics and so... if we get submissions from young scholars early in their careers, they often have big ambitions, and they don't have a good idea of what it takes to get there. So, I think it's easier for senior established scholars to be able to pull something like this off, but you know I hope we continue to get submissions from everybody.

Q: *This is very interesting. I think the point is to what extent this kind of work is considered, so to say, "scientific". Maybe younger people fear that if they do something like that, their work is not scientific enough for the disciplinary community, for example. I don't know if you have this impression, if some of your colleagues are not interested in doing something like that, because it cannot be considered scientific, because it's in a different language.*

SH: Yeah precisely, that's the big concern. There are a lot of funding issues, I think, connected to that as well, like it's very hard to get funding for artists in the social sciences. So, the ways in which grant structures, also don't necessarily make it easy to produce graphic works or collaborative projects between artists and ethnographers.

CN: I think it depends on programs, too. I have a student right now who's defending her dissertation and the entire dissertation is a comic. But I don't know what's gonna happen in the academic job market for her, but I'm feeling hopeful. I think we are seeing a shift now in the social sciences and humanities toward more multimodal forms of scholarship, so I'm hopeful!

Q: *The articles in our section show that something is moving around — ERCComics,* Sociorama *— most are very recent publications, popularizing social sciences. What do you think about this market?*

SH: I just want to say, but not to discredit any work, but I think it feels very different when you have a completed work and then it's translated by professional artists. It's a completely different feel than having the artists who from the beginning document what they're learning, and I think, when you look at some of the *bandes dessinées* in *Sociorama*, that it feels like a translation to me, it's a different process.

Q: *So, do you think that the value-added of your work is basically that you have you to work together. Thus, the point is not only popularizing, but also constructing something with a goal.*

CN: We think it's really helpful for anthropologists — as we did venturing and having worked with this PhD student, who's making a comic. I think there's something pedagogical, for social scientists as well, to learn how to think visually and to really approach the comics form itself as an invitation to show rather than tell, like all the potentials that are embedded in the page. I think it's really exciting and I think it opens up a whole range of different possibilities for how we can draw connections and we can think. So, I just think that there's a lot we can learn from artists about how to convey ideas outside of text, it's exciting!

FD: it's difficult to explain but I felt like the anthropologists and the artists established a common table to open a conversation. So, it's really like not simplifying the knowledge of the ethnographic methods and the ethnographic research that has been done, but making it more accessible to a broader audience. So that's what happened there, in my opinion.

CN: We have different two-page spreads in the book , which are two full-page illustrations side by side, and we talk about how we're able to convey a whole bunch of interconnections globally between health and politics and economics and environment with no text, with all visual language and the kinds of connections that you can draw that would take many pages in an ethnographic monograph! and then you also give your readers an opportunity to fill in the gaps and for them to kind of meet you and do their own analytical work which I also think is a really generous reading practice.

Q: *Which difficulties do you see in continuing your projects, and also which are your hopes about?*

SH: I think finding funding has been the biggest difficulty. These projects also take much more time, I think, because of the multiple components, and so the publishing timelines are not always amenable to the kind of timeline that it takes to produce a good work. Plus the cost is higher.

CN: I think we live in an exciting moment, though. I'm junior faculty, and I don't have tenure yet, but I do feel very supported by my department for *Lissa*. I think because the academic series is at University of Toronto Press, it is validated within larger academic circles as scholarship. So, I feel confident that *Lissa* counts toward tenure and I think the more projects that we have like this, you know, the more we're going to produce the conditions to make it easier for junior faculty to do this kind of work, and to shift some of the expectations around what academic publishing can look like.

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