

Abstract

My contribution will focus on the visual composition of a field diary that I wrote during two and half years of research as a clinical anthropologist within a European project for refugees and asylum seekers. The images, conceived as pieces of a mosaic, tell of the encounters, suggestions and evocative power of the stories heard in the clinic.

The project, already selected in international photography calls, proposes the objective of composing an artistic narrative of doing ethnography. As Anna Grimshaw (Edwards, 2015) uphold, anthropology (and ethnography) can be seen as a project of visual imagination. In this perspective, photographs can be thought of as a translation of an affect, a matrix of the subjectivity of experience.

Thus, the images that composed my field diary are a 'way of seeing', a recording of thought in a synaesthetic manner, as some of the literature on the practices of visual anthropology claims (McDougall, 2006; Marano, 2013). The resulting mosaic presents itself as a possible way of traversing and experiencing 'difficult' terrains such as those of ethnoclinics.

Keywords

Fieldwork; Photography; Ethnography; Medical anthropology; Migration; Anthropology of senses.

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Fieldwork: diary of a clinical anthropologist

This project is the fruit of two and a half years of research as a clinical anthropologist within SPRINT 2 European project, giving psychological support to refugees and asylum seekers in the region of Tuscany, in Italy.

This is a narration I composed retrospectively, after the project had ended. In fact, the narrative as a whole only took shape when I had the opportunity to reflect carefully and objectively on what I had seen and heard in clinical settings.

Taken individually, each of them has an epistemological value that was both the result of fieldwork and following elaboration.

Pictures can be divided into three categories:

- The images I have collected over the years of ethnography, going to reception centres or healthcare centres
- The images I recomposed following some significant interviews, which I kept in my memory and which I considered central in my research
- Aerial images taken from Google Earth

The latter, in particular, mark the rhythm of the narration of the entire ethnographic project. The first two represent the route that migrants from Africa take, for the most part, to reach Italy: the Sahara Desert, taken at the border with Libya, and the Mediterranean Sea. Both images recall the absence of limits and, at the same time, remind us how, in those contexts, border controls represent concrete experiences of violence. The other one depicts the major reception centre in which I have worked: a place of closure, of containment, where borders are, in their most extreme form, legal, physical and psychological barriers.

The rhythm of the narration, punctuated by these three photographs, is then guided by images that recall, in a more or less direct manner, the individual ethnographic cases. Each of them has its own narrative value.

The attention to meanings that emerged from the ethnographic experience guided me in the conscious use of photographs, not trying to adapt them to a possible academic writing but allowing them to exist as the product of an uncompromising way of seeing. As David McDougall (2006) argues, the peculiarity of visual is that it is based mainly on rhetorical representations such as metaphor or synaesthesia, and is well suited to describing emotions, sensations and embodied experiences. This is precisely how I understood my project: overcoming the language barrier in order to embrace embodied experiences of affection with greater fluidity and depth.

This is what Elisabeth Edwards (2015) refers to as the “abundance of photography”: it opens up the possibility of recovering alternative narratives and has an evocative power that allows for different readings of the ethnographic experience. If the image is the evidence of a moment, it can also be produced and negotiated in order to shape new knowledge.

On the other side, the peculiarity of ethnoclinics is that there is no real “participant observation” phase (unless the anthropologist seeks it by asking to spend time with patients in their daily lives). The fieldwork takes place with interviews. In this moment, the reconstruction of memory is done by patients when they sit down and begin to tell their story. In this experience of sharing, “devices are composed that trigger the functioning of a complex and amazing machine, designed to create connections, an art of multiplying universes”, as Tobie Nathan argued.

In this “archaeological” work of evoking memories and spirits, of a “subsoil” also mentioned by Roberto Beneduce, the ethnographic account itself becomes a tool for healing, intertwining with the clinician's knowledge to create connections and escape routes.

Given the heterogeneity and fragility of such a “difficult” terrain as that of the ethnoclinic, my intention is not to faithfully represent the field, as the reportage approach would require. I therefore present a diary, made up of suggestions and abrupt transitions, of visual impressions left on me by the people I met. Although many of the requests made by patients were concrete and referred to situations of immediate need, underlying the conversations were family stories, personal experiences with a powerful spiritual charge, a suffering that I myself concretised, while listening, with mental images. In fact, all the images were born out of my personal need for alternative, non-verbal ethnographic writing.

My proposal therefore presents itself as a different process of doing ethnography, not only in the sense of writing about experience but also of doing and composing it. It is a matter of giving cognitive value to the ethnographic experience, of fuelling reflection both retrospectively and at the very moment when ethnography is being done and experienced.

In conclusion, the visualisation process I produced these images follows the methods of interaction and care that have been developed in ethnoclinics. The use of photographic language in the session allowed the encounter between the patient and the multidisciplinary team to be composed of more than just the linguistic worlds we were facing. The presence of linguistic-cultural mediation, which is invaluable and indispensable in these cases, was accompanied, in certain situations, by the use of images as a non-verbal bridge of communication.

If there can be a second phase, after the writing of the field diary, it is certainly the one I am now presenting, which may open up new perspectives and interpretations.



Photo 1 The sea at night. Large part of patients talks about sea like something dangerous and scaring, where good spirits aren't able to help. I choose to take a picture of the sea at night from the narration of a patient, who recomposed his journey with a vivid memory of fear and darkness. "My father said that spirits can't help me in the sea. I was alone, unprotected, in a black desert".
Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli, 2022.

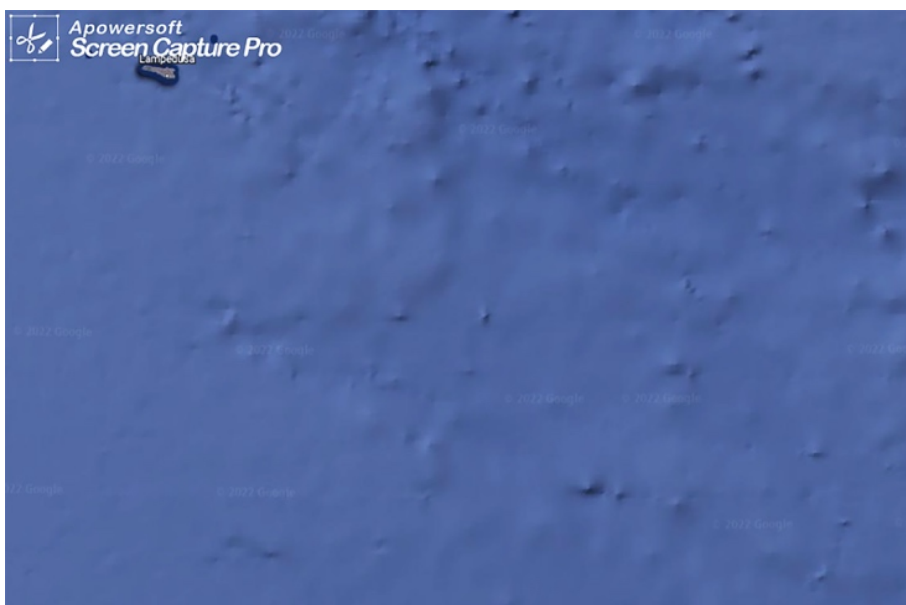


Photo 2 Mediterranean Sea from Google Earth. The picture is taken halfway between Libyan and Italian territorial waters. This is one of the most dangerous places of the journey to Europe. June 2023



Photo 3 What remains of an ending year's party. This room was converted into a place of worship for guests of a reception centre. When I found it, it was abandoned and it gave me a great sense of lost hope: the reception centre was considered, from the most part of people who lived inside, damned. It was as if all the prayers had been trapped in that room. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli, January 2022



Photo 4 S's tomb. This picture was shared with the etnoclinic equipe to present the terrible situation of the tomb of a man died in a reception centre. This case was very important for the taking charge of five Nigerian patients who knew the deceased and did not even know where he was buried. (Cfr. Dainelli, Pasquinelli, 2025) Photo by unknown author, March 2022.

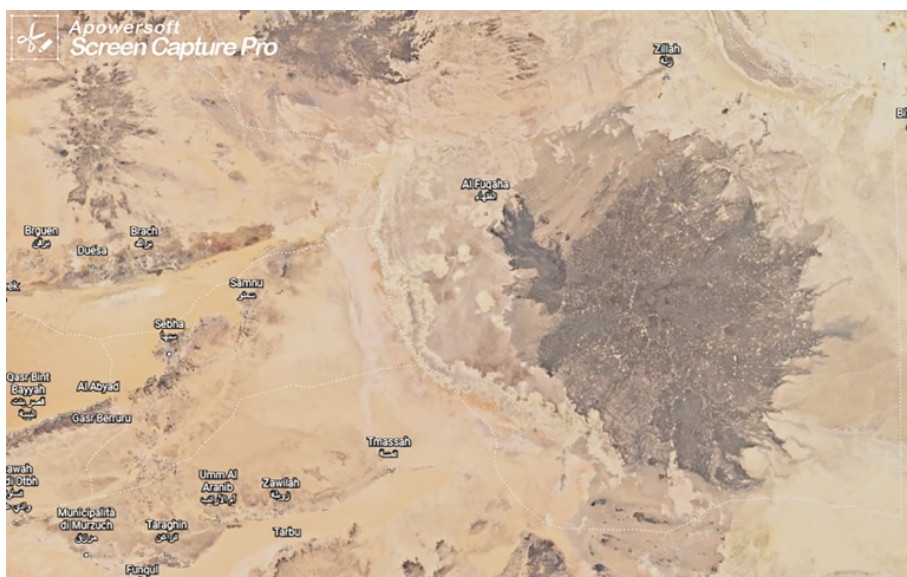


Photo 5 The Sahara Desert, on the border with Libya. This is a place, like the Mediterranean Sea, where the absence of limits is in stark contrast to state policies of repression and violence. Google Earth. June 2023



Photo 6 Wall writing in Livorno, near a mental health centre. Most patients miss home and family and this is perceived as one of the elements of malaise. The sense of loss exacerbates, in many cases, the psychological distress of patients. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli, April 2022.



Photo 7 Floor of a reception centre leading to the interview room. In moments of confrontation with the clinician, I often found myself staring at this floor. The thoughts and images of the sessions flowed with the steps and the tiles. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli, March 2023.



Photo 8 E.'s family picture. He shared with us this image in order to talk with us about his old and new family in Ghana. The archive image constitutes a valuable element both on a clinical level, for the affective value it constitutes, and on a photographic level as direct testimony and shared memory. Unknown author, July 2022.



Photo 9 Cat in a reception centre. Walking inside it, we noticed the massive presence of cats. One of the guests of this reception centre said: "A place with a lot of cats is not a good omen" (F. July 2022). Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli, January 2023.



Photo 10 An egg on the floor of a reception centre. After seeing a lot of eggs like this one, the SPRINT 2 equipe asked to a patient why there were all these eggs on the floor. She said: "People in the reception centre throw eggs to cast curses" (F, July 2022). Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli. September 2022.



Photo 11 An empty womb. A lot of women try to get pregnant during their stay in the centres. Due to their psychological and health status, it often happens that the desired child does not arrive. Here, the emptiness of the uterus corresponds to an important loss of meaning and a perception of stasis that leads many patients to anxious and depressive states. April 2023.

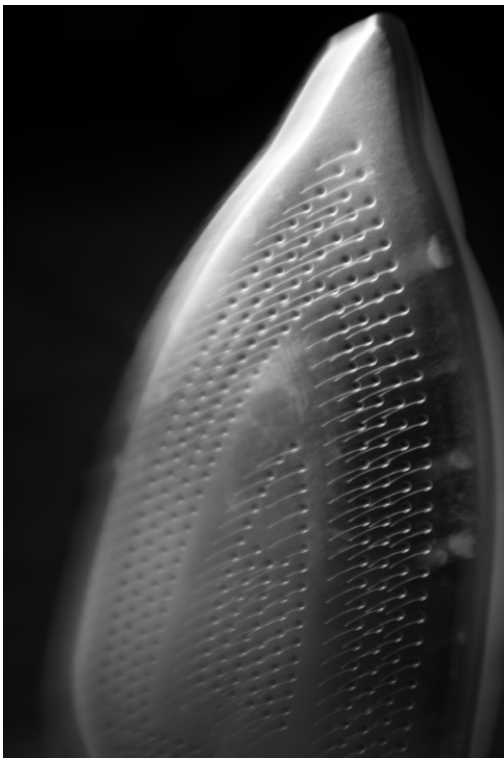


Photo 12 During an interview a woman talked with the SPRINT2 equipe about the violences she suffered in Nigeria. She talked about her uncle who had beaten her with an iron. Given the violence and impact of the narrated experience, I decided to depict the object used to injure the woman in an image. This, as well as other images I have presented, are a personal way of extolling experiences and mental images of strong impact. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli. May 2022.



Photo 13 Welcome of Afghan people in a reception centre, during an ending year party. This period was characterised by frequent group sessions with Afghan women and men who needed important support during their stay in Italy. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli. December 2021.



Photo 14 "I found myself wandering around a field and didn't know how I got there". (G. April 2022). Again, I decided to reconstruct the sense of disorientation and loss of reference reported in the session by the patient, who presented a strong sense of anxiety related to her psychophysical situation. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli. May 2022.



Photo 15 Steps on a beach near a reception centre. At that time, I had a strong need to isolate myself in order to reflect on the cases I was following and to settle some mental images I was carrying around from the clinic. I was often in seaside areas and the winter beaches were a suitable place for this type of reflection. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli. October 2021.



Photo 16 "I dreamt of a horse and a donkey. The horse represents good news, the donkey represents bad news" (M., October 2022). This image is a clear example of how I tried to render in photography not only the clinic stories, but also the dreams that, in this case, had a strong impact on the patient's treatment. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli. August 2023.



Photo 17 Aerial view of a reception centre in the province of Livorno. Unlike the other images taken from Google Earth, this one represents one of the control and containment sites set up by the state system to regulate migrants. In this case, the centre was set up in an old residence. Google Earth. June 2023



Photo 18 The road to the reception centres in Livorno, visions flashing by along with my reflections on what I had heard in the session. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli. November 2021.



Photo 19 Ukrainian guest at a reception centre. She tattooed Ukrainian land on her arm, with a heart where she comes from. The sense of nostalgia for the past of prosperity and peace, towards one's home and lost family, alternated in the session with the uncertainties of the future, given by not knowing when the war would end. Photo by Maria Elisa Dainelli. July 2023.

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