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## With the Smartphone as Field Assistant:

Designing, making and testing of *EthnoAlly*, a multimodal tool for conducting serendipitous ethnography in a multisensory world.

### PAPER VERSION

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#### **Abstract**

Tapping into on-going debates regarding the changing meaning of ethnography in a digitizing landscape, the present article explores the use of smartphones and smartphone apps as tools for conducting fieldwork by introducing a digital tool designed specifically for this purpose. Ideated by one of the authors of the paper and tested by the other, *EthnoAlly* has been created to assist anthropologists in conducting participatory multimodal ethnographic research. A personal field ‘ally’ consisting of a smartphone application and a devoted web platform, *EthnoAlly* assists the researcher in the act of taking and organizing multimodal field notes. It also helps in the creation of participatory instances of audio-visual ‘multisensory’ research, allowing in particular for the creation of diaries from a distance, i.e. in situations where the presence of the ethnographer may be impossible or critical. Building upon the integration of a paper and an online version, the article will introduce the impetus behind the design of the tool while also offering insights into its possible present and future uses. Furthermore, it is our aim to stimulate reflections around the use of emerging technologies in the context of ethnographic research.

#### **Keywords**

Digital ethnography, multisensory, multimodality, smartphones, participatory research, phenomenology

#### **Introduction**

Probably for the first time in history, we are faced by audiences and research participants who have access to the same means of representation as researchers do, and who often also share the same set of technological skills. Gone are the days when the ‘wild natives’ opened their eyes in awe in front of the ‘magical powers’ of the (white and male) scientists’ filmmaking and photographing apparatuses. Digital technologies are entering the lives of anthropologists on the field and elsewhere, morphing the ways in which they conduct fieldwork, i.e. ‘how they record, process, analyse and communicate their findings’ (Tratner and Sanjek 2016, ix). Smartphones have indeed contributed to this shift. For those of us living in wired societies they have become an integral part of our everyday routines, affecting our experiences of events, locales, relationships and bearings (Pink and Hjorth 2012; Lapenta 2011, Tacchi et al. 2012, Collins et al 2015). Moreover, as digital and mobile technologies are increasingly embedded on(to) the body, we are today also witnessing an increased entanglement between material bodies and mobile digital technologies (Favero 2016; Ibrahim 2015; Rettberg 2014). Yet what are the implications of this for our ways of conducting fieldwork?

Smartphones are obviously pushing further the process of implosion of the boundary between fieldwork and everyday life, home and away, which has characterized the recent history of anthropology (see Clifford 1983; Hannerz 2003; Marcus 2012). In parallel to the fields moving closer to our homes, the smartphone has made possible what we call “serendipitous ethnographies”, that is, the capture of significant quantities of material even in the most unexpected, mundane moments. As tools for representation are moving closer to our bodies, so is fieldwork crawling closer to our private, everyday life. This paper taps into this terrain, exploring the connection between mobile digital technologies and fieldwork from the point of view of a digital tool. This tool, called *EthnoAlly*, consists of a smartphone application (producing GPS-tagged multimodal material) and an online platform (for archiving, organizing and analyzing such material) that was created in order to exploit the new possibilities materialized by smartphones and digital technologies at large. A tool for making and organizing multimodal fieldnotes, *EthnoAlly* is at once a personal assistant for ethnographers in their exploration of people and places, and a participatory tool researchers can use with their interlocutors. The smartphone application belonging to *EthnoAlly* can be uploaded onto the mobile device of the research participant and, functioning as an extension of the ethnographer, further provides material in the shape of images, text notes, sound files and metadata (geolocate and temporal data) to *EthnoAlly’s* online platform.

Designed by one of the authors of this paper and tested by the second author, *EthnoAlly* responds critically to a world that is digitizing itself at an increasing rate (importantly, also beyond the

capitalist West) and moreover to the shift imposed by “new images” (Mitchell 1994). Further inspired by phenomenological approaches to the lived world, the tool has developed into a multimodal technology capable of grasping the situated, layered and multisensory character of human experience. Despite foregrounding emerging technologies, *EthnoAlly* should, however, not be conceived of as yet another hymn to novelty. Highlighting the importance of focussing on the layered, situated nature of human experience (i.e. small and slow rather than Big Data), the tool has urged us to exploit the integration of new technologies with more ‘old-fashioned’, conventional ethnographic practices.

The present text dialogues with the one that can be found online. Here the reader will be able to find reflections on the core theoretical and methodological contributions offered by *EthnoAlly*. We will elaborate on the ways in which *EthnoAlly* can be used as a tool for defamiliarizing our everyday perceptions of spaces and, secondly, on the extent to which the tool can be employed for students to conduct visual and multisensory ethnographic research. The online version will provide additional technical, practical and methodological insights on how to engage with *EthnoAlly*. We will also look into the extent to which the tool may assist researchers in conducting participatory fieldwork and especially in (remotely) generating multimodal diaries in situations where the presence of the ethnographer may be either impossible or critical.

## **Background**

A core part of the labor of ethnographic fieldwork consists, as we know, in bringing together the various materials collected during a day in the field. This is a daily task, and one that has to be made in a coherent way in order to generate an intelligible archive for further consultation. The ethnographer will in fact have to be able to find their way through this mass of notes much later on, once the direct memory of the events portrayed will have failed them. The crucial importance of notes is in such cases however side-lined by the sheer laboriousness of this activity. This is perhaps especially true for those of us conducting research in semiotically dense environments (such as urban hubs) or in contexts where little time is left during the day for writing down notes and collecting our thoughts (think of ethnographies conducted in hostile environments or in moments of crisis). During fieldwork we often, almost simultaneously, take a photograph, record a conversation and note down a term that has popped up while talking. Once back home we must then laboriously reconstruct the day, reincorporating our notes into a chronologically ordered structure of events. Only so do we manage to produce “thick” (Geertz, 1973) fieldnotes.

Today, mundane consumer technologies can help us in organizing such delicate tasks. Smartphones in particular have become, in a McLuhanian (1994) fashion, a prosthesis of the body of the ethnographer, and hence repositories of different types of fieldnotes. Digital technologies have been increasingly incorporated in the 'method toolbox' of ethnographic fieldwork (see for example Boellstorff et al. 2012; Hine 2015; Horst and Miller 2012; Markham 2013; Murthy 2008; Tratner and Sanjek 2016). Smartphone applications, however, have received relatively little attention (exceptions are Collins et al. 2017; Durlington and Collins 2015; Goggin 2009; Tacchi 2014), which is remarkable considering that such technologies, and particularly GPS-driven apps, have received a great deal of attention outside the field of ethnography. We believe that smartphones (and more particularly mobile applications) provide convenient tools for tackling the "messy" character of fieldnotes. A smartphone is a very handy tool for taking a quick image, recording a sound, storing a particular place on a map, etc. On top of this, Internet platforms offer increasingly powerful tools for visualizing, organizing and archiving such material and hence for helping us structure audio-visual-geolocate information. These tools allow us to use all of the metadata that images and other types of notes carry with them today. The merging of these two tools, i.e. of a smartphone application and a devoted Internet platform, are the impetus for the creation of the tool that is at the center of this paper.

### **Defamiliarizing Space**

Much research on the phenomenology of space (Irving 2011, 2013; Seamon 1980; Wunderlich 2008) highlights the need to find tools for interrupting the taken-for-granted interpretations of the spaces we explore in our everyday lives. This is what the Situationist International did when they staged fights in the middle of a Parisian café, and stimulated people to rethink the nature of the environment they were dwelling in. And this is also what they did with the 'Dérive' (Debord 1958), a practice allowing individuals to rediscover the spaces they occupied by drifting away from the known. A similar phenomenon takes place when you walk around a city for the first time with a small child. The child's tendency to look up in order to attract the attention of grown-ups allows them to see details of for instance ceilings and roofs, i.e. elements of material culture a grown up would habitually barely notice. Their attention has a defamiliarizing potential, one forcing the grown-up to rethink ordinary spaces.

During a 'psychogeography'<sup>ii</sup> walk, Theunissen was exposed to this process of defamiliarization too. In particular she became aware of the role of sound in designing space. Walking around the cathedral during the first of her two psychogeography tests, Theunissen collected random video clips describing the stops she made. When looking at the clips later, Theunissen commented that she had not

been aware of the church bells' capacities to define the boundaries of neighbourhoods<sup>iii</sup>. Contrary to McLuhan's (1967) description of the ear as 'a world of simultaneous relationships' (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, 111), soundscapes appeared to her as spaces that upon further reflection could be clearly detected, identified and studied. Viewing the materials online, Favero and Theunissen started delineating a map of the neighbourhood on the basis of this soundscape. The mirroring of the multisensory into the multimodal character of *EthnoAlly* made evident the entanglements between vision and the other senses in crafting mundane experiences of space. Having developed an attention for sound through the use of videos, Theunissen also started to rethink her taken-for-granted experiences of the visual field. The photo below (Figure 1) was made after Theunissen had just finished her first psychogeography walk, on her way back to the office. Waiting for the elevator in the basement of the university building she suddenly noticed a pair of footprints on the concrete ceiling in the university basement. This photo led us to raise a series of subsequent questions regarding the ways in which the spaces of the university are used, by what actors, through what policing, etc.



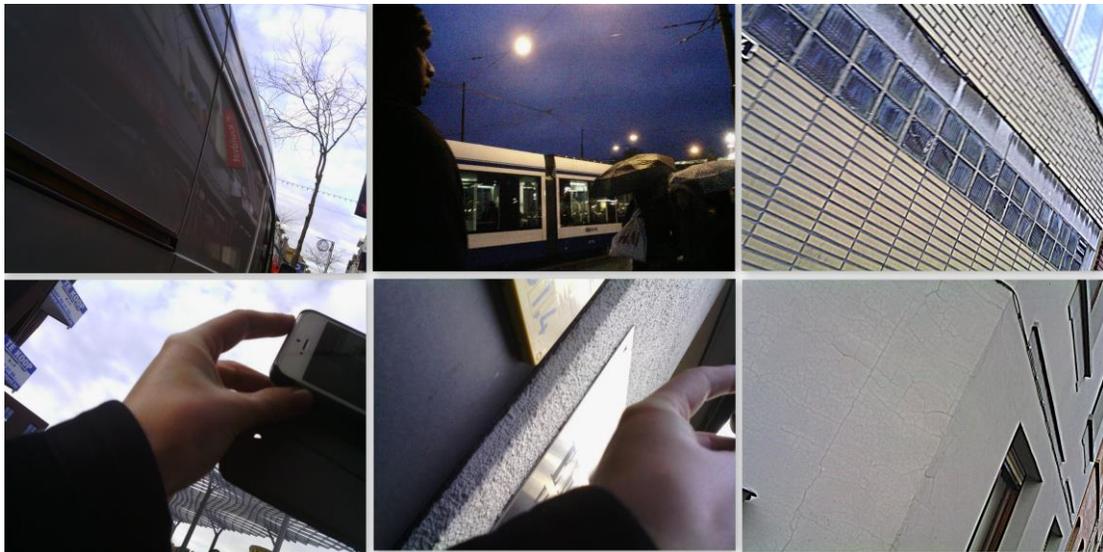
**Figure 1.** Footprints on the ceiling (Photo by Theunissen).

Consistent with Hannerz's notion of "serendipity" (Hannerz 2006), *EthnoAlly* stimulated a critical awareness of the sensory and affective character of our life-worlds<sup>iv</sup>, which may go unnoticed in the everyday contexts of our lives, leaving little space for reflection or for explicit sensory awareness (Seamon 1980, 153). Resonating with McLuhan's (1967) claim that media alter 'the way we perceive the world' (McLuhan and Fiore 1967, 26), *EthnoAlly* seems capable of opening up our senses and making us rethink the nature of the places we visit and move through. It generates instances of what Wunderlich (2008) describes as 'conceptual walking' (Wunderlich 2008, 132-133), i.e. a 'reflective mode' of walking

and a 'creative response to our interpretation of places' that helps us to critically 'build awareness of urban environments' (Ibid: 132). The defamiliarizing effect, we realized, also provides a perfect companion for teaching students to conduct visual ethnography.

### **Learning and Rethinking Visual Ethnography**

At the very beginning of her work with *EthnoAlly*, Theunissen felt that it difficult to get accustomed to the tool. During the first test in Amsterdam, she lost her way. She was so focussed on the app that she stopped paying attention to her immediate surroundings. As a result, we paired the app with a life-logging camera.



**Figure 2.** Lifelogging camera photos.

This was a path-breaking event. Due to the lifelogging camera's repositioning of the body as a viewfinder<sup>v</sup> (Favero 2016) and its timer-based selection of when to capture an image (automatically every thirty seconds), Theunissen was given a chance to refocus on the experience of being in space, letting the camera support her in the collection of visual material. Re-viewing the images taken by the lifelogging camera (see figure 2), Theunissen<sup>vi</sup> was given access to a new set of layers of meaning, allowing her to revisit her conventional ways of seeing, sensing and experiencing familiar and unfamiliar places. In a way this pairing brought her in touch with what Benjamin (1931) called 'the optical unconscious'.

The introduction of Theunissen to visual research was, therefore, supported by an attention to incorporating the “new” with the “old”. The use of emerging technologies had, in Favero’s view, to be supported by established ethnographic methods. Grounding the above-mentioned experiments with readings on ethnography, observation practices and interviewing techniques, they tried to generate a set of dialogues across digital and non-digital methods. They looked, for instance, into various types of mapping and contrasted the use of geotagged data with what Seamon (1980) for instance called “place-ballets”. They applied elicitation techniques (Collier and Collier 1986) onto the varying materials generated with the app (photos, sounds, videos, maps) and addressed different types of interviews that can be conducted when using *EthnoAlly* as a participatory tool. Finally, they enacted a series of repeated interviews and observations focussing particularly on glitches and misunderstandings.

To give some concrete examples, in the first two participatory tests Theunissen interviewed her interlocutors on the basis of the material produced during a 45-minute walk. This led to the identification of some interesting areas to explore, such as the relationship between time and memory (does time experimentally move more slowly when we experience strong emotions?); the choices of formats (when do we use horizontal versus vertical formats? still versus moving?); the relationship between the visual and the aural (when do we need sound?), and between visuals and words (text, captions). We have conducted a number of other participatory and multisensory experiments of this sort that are further discussed in the online version.

## **Conclusions**

Digital technologies can provide the researcher with (new) tools for exploring and participating in field sites (Cruz and Ardèvol 2013; Murthy 2008; Postill and Pink 2012). Using *EthnoAlly* as a tool for conducting ethnographic experiments has allowed us to reflect on some of the challenges of digital ethnography in actual lived space. The present tool can be a useful partner in organizing fieldwork activities, particularly of bringing together data gathered by ethnographers with those generated by participants themselves. Furthermore, *EthnoAlly* has the potential to defamiliarize our perceptions hence functioning also as a precious tool in teaching students to learn to see, sense and observe.

*EthnoAlly* responds to a world that is digitizing itself at an increasing rate, also beyond the boundaries of the capitalist West. As pointed out above, this tool moves in a directly opposite direction to the ideology of Big Data (Broadbent 2012). Rather than aiming at generating a large quantity of material, our aim is to dig deep in the material produced by a small sample of research participants hence producing a wide variety of perspectives on the same topic; small and slow data as a matter of

fact (Banks 2014). Building upon an on-going dialogue between the online and the offline, the digital and the material, researcher-driven and participant-driven materials, the tool may function as a bridge between different research modalities. As a tool capable of grasping the situated and layered multisensory character of our experiences, we should make clear that *EthnoAlly* does not aim to join the choir of celebrations of the new as a way to overcome the old that often accompanies the introduction of new digital practices. Instead, we call for an ethnographic methodology combining the old with the new, the established with the emergent.

With the Smartphone as Field Assistant:

Designing, making and testing of *EthnoAlly*<sup>vii</sup>, a multimodal tool for conducting serendipitous ethnography in a multisensory world.

### **Web text**

“One can now picture a future investigator in his laboratory.

His hands are free, and he is not anchored.

As he moves about and observes, he photographs and comments.

Time is automatically recorded to tie the two records together.

If he goes into the field, he may be connected by radio to his recorder.

As he ponders over his notes in the evening,

he again talks his comments into the record.

His typed record, as well as his photographs,

may both be in miniature, so that he projects them for examination.”

Vanevar Bush, “As we may Think”, 1945

## **Introduction**

As discussed in the paper version, *EthnoAlly* responds to the growing need for integrating digital tools (that are increasingly becoming ubiquitous in the lives of many citizens of the wired world) in the act of conducting ethnographic research. Born through the collaboration between an anthropologist and an engineer (Paolo Favero and Alfonso Bahillo) and developed with the help of a broader team including a PhD candidate in Visual and Digital cultures (Eva Theunissen) and a visual artist (Ali Zaidi) *EthnoAlly* is a research tool designed specifically for the purpose of helping anthropologists (and other categories of social scientists) conducting sensory, participatory and multimodal ethnographic research.

## **Presenting the tool**

*EthnoAlly* consists of an application (that can be downloaded on smartphones – for the moment iOS, but as this article is getting published an Android version is about to be launched) (INSERT LINK 1: image) and a web page (INSERT LINK 2: image), where the materials can be stored and viewed. The original testing ground was the field of tourism, a context that, we believed, lends itself particularly well to this kind of experimentation[1]. However, as we started actively designing the application, we realized that adapting the tool to the specificities of one specific research setting might limit its applicability to ethnographic research at large. We therefore decided to focus exclusively on the specific needs of ethnographers, morphing the tool into a proper field assistant for researchers and their field interlocutors. The present prototype is designed to fit:

- ✓ The ethnographers - who receive full access to all the functionalities and in particular to the web platform, on which materials can be visualized, archived and analyzed.

- ✓ The research participants - who get full access to the app (and can use it as a personal diary) but will only access one or two types of visualizations on the web such as a video clip of their own day or an interactive map.

*EthnoAlly* presents itself through a simple and user-friendly app interface combining geolocate information with the conventional multimedia functionalities that are present in most smartphones.

These include:

- ✓ GPS-based geo-tracking. Activating this function the researcher will be able to track their movements in space, including their speed, the length of their stops, etc. Such info will be visualized on the homepage through detailed maps<sup>viii</sup>.
- ✓ Image-making functions. The app will be able to access the photo-camera of the researchers' smartphones and make their still and moving images available to them on the web-based platform.
- ✓ Textual notes. With the help of a pad accessible from within the app, the user will be able to take typewritten notes. These notes too will be geotagged and spatialized on the maps.
- ✓ Audio notes. The user will be allowed to take voice memos. These will also be geotagged and made available for the researcher on the homepage.
- ✓ We have just finalized a drawing function that allows the researcher to make visual notes on top of photographs or on a blank document. Furthermore, we have inserted a voice-to-text transcription tool.

In parallel to all this, *EthnoAlly* is also a participatory research tool. The ethnographers can upload the app onto their research participants' smartphones to use as a diary of their day. They will be able to access the same smartphone interface, but they will not be able to access the web platform.

The material generated by the research participant will be uploaded onto the cloud that the researchers can access on *EthnoAlly's* web platform. This is the second and central feature of *EthnoAlly*. While there are a number of applications that allow users to produce and geotag a variety of audio-visual impressions, our tool allows greater methodological depth (see for more details below). *EthnoAlly* synchronizes all the materials collected within the app on a devoted online platform. Images (still and moving), aural and written notes along with the traces of movements conducted by the user can be visualized on the webpage. On the web page the researcher will hence be able to collect, archive, organize and analyze these data. The inclusion of digital tools in fieldwork may indeed relieve some of the issues associated with the complex and messy task of making, organizing and making sense of fieldnotes.

On the web page the researcher can explore the materials by accessing either a map or an archive, in different ways through their metadata (time, space, user name) or by browsing inserted keywords. Each of these four search strategies will then also allow for more detailed search strategies.

When focussing on a specific user (INSERT LINK 3: image), the researcher will find clickable folders and materials revealing visual, aural and geolocate information. We have presently developed two interfaces for consulting the material. The 'show on map' interface offers an overview of the route a participant has walked, including the materials that were made on particular points on the track (INSERT LINK 4: image). These materials can be viewed more into depth by clicking on the respective symbols.

The 'Video mode' figure interface (INSERT LINK 5 and 14: image) allows the researcher to browse the material by playing the video or by moving the cursor below from left to right<sup>ix</sup>. The web page is designed to allow the researcher to sit in front of the screen with the research participants and to assist in eliciting further information from them, and hence for conducting what could be labelled as 'multimodal elicitation'. Beyond the 'Video mode' and 'Show on map' interface, we are examining other possibilities regarding how to visualize the materials through different formats. This has prompted us to explore a range of questions, such as: which search strategies should be included on *EthnoAlly's* online platform for the researcher to be able to explore the material in the most convenient and intelligible manner? What are the best ways to export the materials in other (and perhaps also printable) forms?

### **Using the Tool**

Having given the background to the tool let us now proceed to offer some insights into its various possible incorporations into the ethnographic field. Since Theunissen joined the project in Fall 2015 we started testing the tool in a variety of different contexts. We began by simply using it in a random fashion, keeping the application running in our pockets when cycling to work or testing it while going for a walk in the park; we then moved on to a more systematic set of experiments. We created a number of drills (seven to be exact) each addressing a different type of ethnographic engagement. The first four focussed on the use of *EthnoAlly* as a personal field assistant, the others centered on using *EthnoAlly* as a participatory tool.

The purpose of the first two tests was to use the application to visualize and describe a defined neighbourhood, one with which Theunissen was not familiar (Amsterdam), the other one with which she was highly familiar (Kiel, Antwerp). These two drills helped Theunissen record her tracks, make photographs and videos and record sound notes in order to describe the sensorial characteristics of these places. The third and fourth tests were based on Favero's previous experiences of integrating GPS

trackers in the ethnographic practice (see Favero 2014). We designed two ‘psychogeography’ walks<sup>x</sup>. Using Google Maps, we printed a map of the centre of Antwerp and then drew a circle around the cathedral (INSERT LINK 6: image and sound clip). With a defined starting point, Theunissen followed this circle as closely as possible looking for ‘focal points’ such as textures, walls, graffiti, litter, conversations, people, rhythms, analogies, resemblances and mood (INSERT LINK 7: image). The purpose of these two ‘psychogeography’ walks was to employ *EthnoAlly* to explore the material, visual and sensorial character of the space touched upon (see also LINK 8, 9 and 10: videos).

Test number five, six and seven were focused on having the participants using the smartphone application. For the first two tests Theunissen asked participants to wander for forty-five minutes starting from a location in Antwerp they together had decided upon. No strictly defined task was identified in advance. The participants were given only a few basic instructions on *EthnoAlly*’s functionalities and were told that they should try to make pictures and/or videos during their walk but that the exact use and circumstances of taking pictures, making videos and creating sounds or text notes was ultimately up to them. One participant was not familiar with smartphones and applications, the other a fervent iPhone user (INSERT LINK 11: images of the participant’s ‘culinary tour’). The third and last of these tests could seem to constitute an instance of digitally supported “walking ethnography” (see for example Pink 2007; Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Irving 2011, 2013). Theunissen went with her participant to a place in Antwerp that they (the participant) somehow found significant. During the tour Theunissen let the participant linger on their memories of the place in order to discover something of their ‘lifeworld’ (Merleau-Ponty 2012). The participant would also instruct Theunissen in making photographs and videos of the place.

Once this material was collected, the authors of this article sat together and explored the various insights they had gathered. They singled out a set of topics that were highlighted by the use of

the app. They also identified the value of *EthnoAlly* as a companion for conducting visual and multisensory ethnography. In the coming sections will offer some examples relating to this.

### Walking Ethnographies

During the walking ethnography test with one participant (Annick), Theunissen witnessed how a visit to a church became a kind of “can opener” (Collier and Collier 1986, 23) for unleashing memories about childhood. Annick spontaneously began to re-enact certain Catholic church-going memories, such as the purification ritual with holy water at the entrance into the church (INSERT LINK 12). As Farnell (1999) has noted, ‘walking through familiar landscapes can evoke physical memories of former acts that have eluded verbal memory’ (Farnell 1999, 354). Even though Annick never visited this specific church as a child, this place triggered reflections regarding on the past. Revealing the centrality of the body as a repository of knowledge (cf. Bourdieu 1990), this experience provided Theunissen with “clues” (Ginsburg 2000) directing her attention to issues that would probably not have emerged during an interview session. This event testifies to the importance of participant observation and in particular to the capacity of visual observations to grant access to memories and emotions, i.e. to those layers of human experience that may not be part of social actor’s narrations of the self but that may materialize in space or be triggered by specific locations and bodily feeling. It also shows how the act of “walking with” (Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Irving 2011, 2013; Pink 2007) enables us to ‘empathetically comprehend the experiences of those represented’ (Pink 2007: 247). The smartphone and *EthnoAlly* helped Theunissen in mediating and managing this process, providing her with a tool for grasping serendipitously a moment that would perhaps have been difficult to capture, for reasons of discretion, with the help of a larger camera. By using the app, and delegating to it the responsibility of stitching

together the photographs, videos, notes and geospatial data produced during that specific interaction, Theunissen was also able to focus more on her interlocutor and the emotions that the participant was sharing with her.

The experience just described reproduced, interestingly, a key event that had led Favero to design the tool in the first place. The idea for an app capable of assisting the ethnography came to him a couple of years ago when he visited with his father a small village located in the Alps, in the North West of Italy. This was the ancestral place of his grandmother's family and also the temporary home for his father and his family when, in 1944, towards the end of WWII they were forced to leave their town because of the bombings of the allied forces. This village became their rescue from the cruelties of the war and Favero's father had some very dense memories of his time there (even though he was at the time just a 13 year-old boy). Reaching the place Favero's father and himself stopped at the only bar in the village and then took a walk in its centre. As they were walking his father started sharing with him stories regarding his time there. Pointing at various houses and street corners he would show him where the Nazis used to sleep as they were raiding the valleys; he took him to the beginning of the path into the forest that he would walk every second morning for getting milk from the pastures; he showed him the corner in the yard where their Jewish neighbours were eating when the Nazis came to arrest them, etc. As Favero's father started telling stories he decided to activate the voice recorder on his iPhone (with his father's permission). Favero also took several snapshots of the places his father would point out to him. Indeed he did not record any notes but used his voice as a kind of track repeating key names in order to remember them later on. At some point during this promenade Favero decided also to activate a movement tracker (*Runtastic*, a runners' app) in order to keep a memory of their route, which was progressively getting more complicated. But all of these technologies together made him lose his father and the intensity of the conversation. What if a single tool could actually coordinate that work so that

the recorder of stories could stay with the storyteller? So that the ethnographers could allow themselves, to paraphrase MacDougall, to enter 'into someone else's story' (MacDougall 1994, 35)? This is how *EthnoAlly* was born, with the ambition of helping the ethnographer in the task of getting into and feeling (and then later on analyzing) other people's stories.

As the above 'Walking Ethnography' test illustrates, the adoption of *EthnoAlly* in the field has the potential of directing the attention of the researchers towards layers of meaning that would probably not have emerged during a structured or semi-structured face-to-face interview. Such experiments in fact provide insight into 'embodied knowledge' (Bourdieu 1990) that emerges at the intersection of material places, bodily/sensory experiences and narration.

#### Exploring the Fleeting and Inaccessible

As the above examples may have already shown, *EthnoAlly* functions not only as a personal diary for the ethnographer but also as a participatory tool. We believe that such potential can also be employed in a number of new territories beyond conventional one-on-one or group situations, and in contexts that can at times be difficult to access for the ethnographer. We are presently exploring possible expansions in territories that would benefit from the collaboration with scholars from a variety of different fields (mainly from the medical and behavioural sciences). To mention a few examples, *EthnoAlly* could facilitate the work of those ethnographers engaging with people living with medical conditions associated with stigma (such as HIV and/or AIDS). In such contexts, the regular presence of an ethnographer may indeed jeopardize the privacy of the interlocutor attracting the curiosity of by-passers or other individuals encountered in everyday life. Our digital tool may help bypassing this ethical predicament. It can facilitate for instance the collection of ethnographic information, in the shape of a geo-located multimodal diary, which may at a later stage be explored together with the creators of the

materials. Along a parallel track, we are also envisioning the possibility of engaging with this tool for the study of events such as panic attacks<sup>xi</sup>. Occurring at the most unexpected moments in the life of an individual, panic attacks are indeed difficult for qualitative researchers to observe and would almost require a 24/7 presence. In this case *EthnoAlly* may provide the researcher with a kind of proxy to this experience, allowing a research participant to upload a visual diary that can be remotely explored in real time by the researcher. Research participants and researchers may also engage in a direct conversation at that particular moment by using the smartphone's conventional communication tools. We are presently insisting upon finding new synergies for small-scale projects capable of testing the tool in contexts where the presence of an ethnographer may be either impossible or expose marginalized subjects to risky situations. We are further expanding our explorations of the use of the sensors embedded in smartphones for monitoring such processes (for more reflections on this see also Favero 2014). The use of sweat, heart and blood pressure sensors may help reveal significant moments in the context of some of these experiences whose cultural meaning could be explored by the researcher at a later stage with the help of what we could call 'multimodal elicitation techniques'. Sitting together with the research participant the ethnographers can explore the charts and other materials generated by the combination of these tools and then discuss them together with the person in question identifying critical moments, turning points etc. We believe that *EthnoAlly* can offer ethnographers new insights on the topics and situations describe above. The combination of the use of emerging technologies with established ethnographic tools (such as elicitation techniques) can indeed provide us access to the affective and embodied dimensions of experiences that we conventionally address only through (and reduce to) narration.

#### Crowd-Sourcing Ethnography

During a workshop held in Melbourne at RMIT in 2016 Favero was given the opportunity to explore the potentiality of *EthnoAlly* to generate large databases resulting out of group explorations of the same topic and or areas. Expanding upon his previous experiences of organizing ethnographic group missions employing different tools and techniques of audio-visual recording (see Favero 2017) Favero asked on this occasion, the participants to this one-day workshop devoted to *EthnoAlly*, to engage with the tool during a walk around the RMIT neighbourhood. Upon return from their walk the group would sit down downloading the materials and sharing them with each other by looking at the path each participant conducted on the *EthnoAlly* homepage. Reviewing these materials, the participants could gather a quick sense of the richness and diversity of stories and angles grasped by the group as a whole. A short walk could reveal the diversified and layered character of the neighbourhood under scrutiny and also show the extent to which visual and sensory observations responded to the participants' own inclinations. While a number of the materials gathered highlighted in fact matters of politics, others looked more into form, or materiality, etc. Attention to matters of form and materiality was also acknowledged during Theunissen's walks (INSERT LINK 13).

Favero found one set of materials particularly revealing, as it heightened the tool's capacity to generate, in a rather short sight, material useful for igniting group discussions.

The curator of a well known local museum had, in a ten-minute walk, managed to collect evidence about the symbolic significance for aboriginal Australians of the neighbourhood in which the RMIT offices had been build (INSERT LINK 14). Sitting there among the participants, facing the screen where Favero projected the material in video mode, this participant commented on the walk she had just done. Using videos, photos and the map itself, she literally took us by the hand into the various confrontations that make up the history of Australia's tense relations to its indigenous populations and into the

struggles that had taken place in this particular neighbourhood. She gave meaning to those visual and aural signs that Favero had not noticed during his own walks in the same neighbourhood, and provided useful material for addressing the topic in the broader group of participants.

Spinning further on the above, and envisioning also the above-mentioned incorporation of sensors, we are envisioning that *EthnoAlly* could also be adopted for monitoring other experiences that are conventionally out of reach for ethnographers. We could generate crowd-sourced databases of ethnographic material regarding for instances earthquakes or other natural disasters, follow individuals during rescue operations, mountaineers during dangerous climbs etc. If carefully incorporated into established methodologies, digital tools promise therefore to open up a terrain of insights previously available to us only in their aftermath and hence in the presence of already consolidated narrations and rationalizations. *EthnoAlly* can bring us in the here and then of human experiences and open up insights into the fleeting, the momentary, the affective, the bodily and un-verbalized.

*EthnoAlly* will in the near future be incorporated in MIT 's DocuBase (<http://docubase.mit.edu>).

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Alfonso ([alfonso.bahillo@deusto.es](mailto:alfonso.bahillo@deusto.es)) or Eva ([eva.theunissen@uantwerpen.be](mailto:eva.theunissen@uantwerpen.be)).

For extra material, see also LINK 15 (Walking Timelapse).

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## End Notes

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## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> *EthnoAlly* was conceived of by Favero and designed in collaboration with Alfonso Bahillo Martinez (University of Deusto), who also handled its technical realization/development. The tool has been designed in collaboration with Theunissen (who curated its UX and conducted the first ethnographic experiments on the field) and Ali Zaidi who curated its UX (user experience) and aesthetic features. *EthnoAlly* was made possible by a grant awarded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO).

<sup>ii</sup> We are grateful to Andrew Irving who inspired Favero to use this particular mapping during a lab held at the 2014 EASA conference in Ljubljana.

<sup>iii</sup> See online paper for the accompanying soundscape (LINK 6: map and sound clip)

<sup>iv</sup> For more about this, see online version.

<sup>v</sup> See extra material (Link 15: Walking Timelapse)

<sup>vi</sup> With a background in Philosophy and an MA in Film Studies and Visual Culture Theunissen was actually entering the terrain of visual ethnography for the first time with the help of *EthnoAlly*

<sup>vii</sup> The first prototype of the *EthnoAlly* was hence developed within the framework of a research proposal entitled "The Media Tourist" and dealing with tourist practices in ICT-mediated environments (that is in contexts with a high density of exposure to information and communication technologies) and sponsored by the framework of the

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FWO (the Research Foundation Flanders). The idea was to create a tool able to be used by both researchers in the field of tourism as well as by tourists.

<sup>viii</sup> The app is meant to work in both online and offline mode hence allowing users to work with it even in the absence of a WiFi or 3G signal.

<sup>ix</sup> This mode is one of the key arenas of our attention and we hope to refine and develop it further in the future, as it is a format that may be particularly attractive to use in an interview setting.

<sup>x</sup> We are grateful to Andrew Irving who inspired Favero to use this particular mapping during a lab held at the 2014 EASA conference in Ljubljana.

<sup>xi</sup> One app addressing panic attacks was recently launched by a young designer, see reference list (Dunn, 2016)