

Drawing-Writing Culture: The Truth-Fiction Spectrum of an Ethno-Graphic Novel on the Sri Lankan Civil War and Migration

BENJAMIN DIX AND RAMINDER KAUR WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY LINDSAY POLLOCK

With our focus on an “ethno-graphic novel” on the Sri Lankan civil war and the forcible displacement and migration of Tamil survivors, we make two main propositions while reflecting on the “graphic narrative turn” that has emerged in anthropology in recent years. First, we inscribe drawing into the “writing of cultures” where words have held a superior status in ethnographic representations. Rather than seeing drawings as perceptive tools for recording scenes in fieldwork alone, we extend them to a representational practice where they can have a deep, intricate, and equivalent entanglement with words to create synchronous affective intensities among a larger audience. Our second proposal follows Jean Rouch on cinéma vérité to interrogate assumptions about truth and fiction as portrayed by film representations. We propose a theory and practice for graphic novel production that we have termed vérités graphiques (literally, graphic realities). This describes the collaborative and interactive engagement with people’s contributions and views, and their distillation and fictionalization through the ethno-graphic form. We diverge from cinéma vérité, however, by highlighting a truth-fiction spectrum that further challenges the presumed objectivity of what is seen, experienced, co-created, and revealed. [cinéma vérité, drawing, ethnography, graphic narratives and novels, illustrations, Jean Rouch, human rights cultures, migration, Sri Lankan civil war]

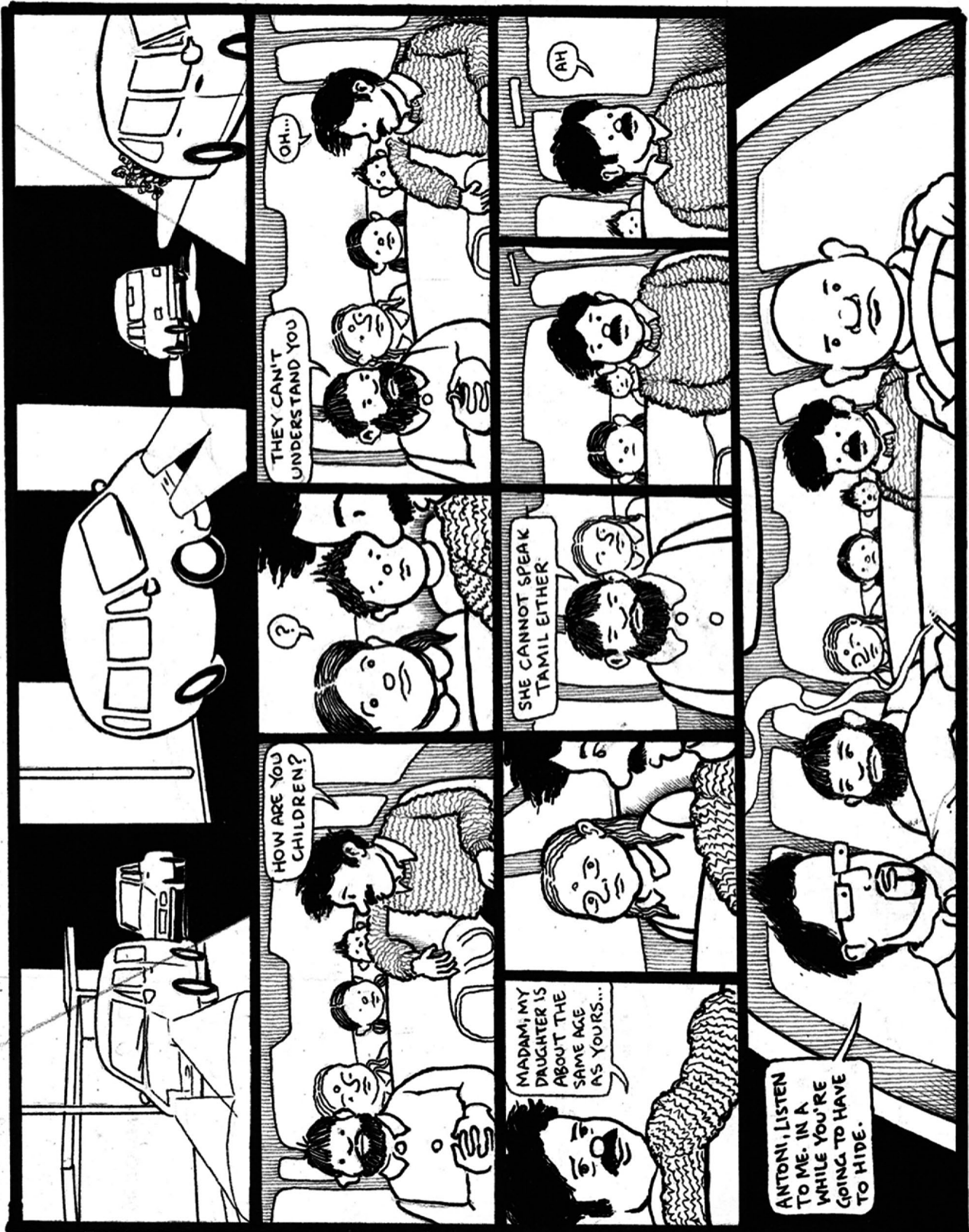
Introduction

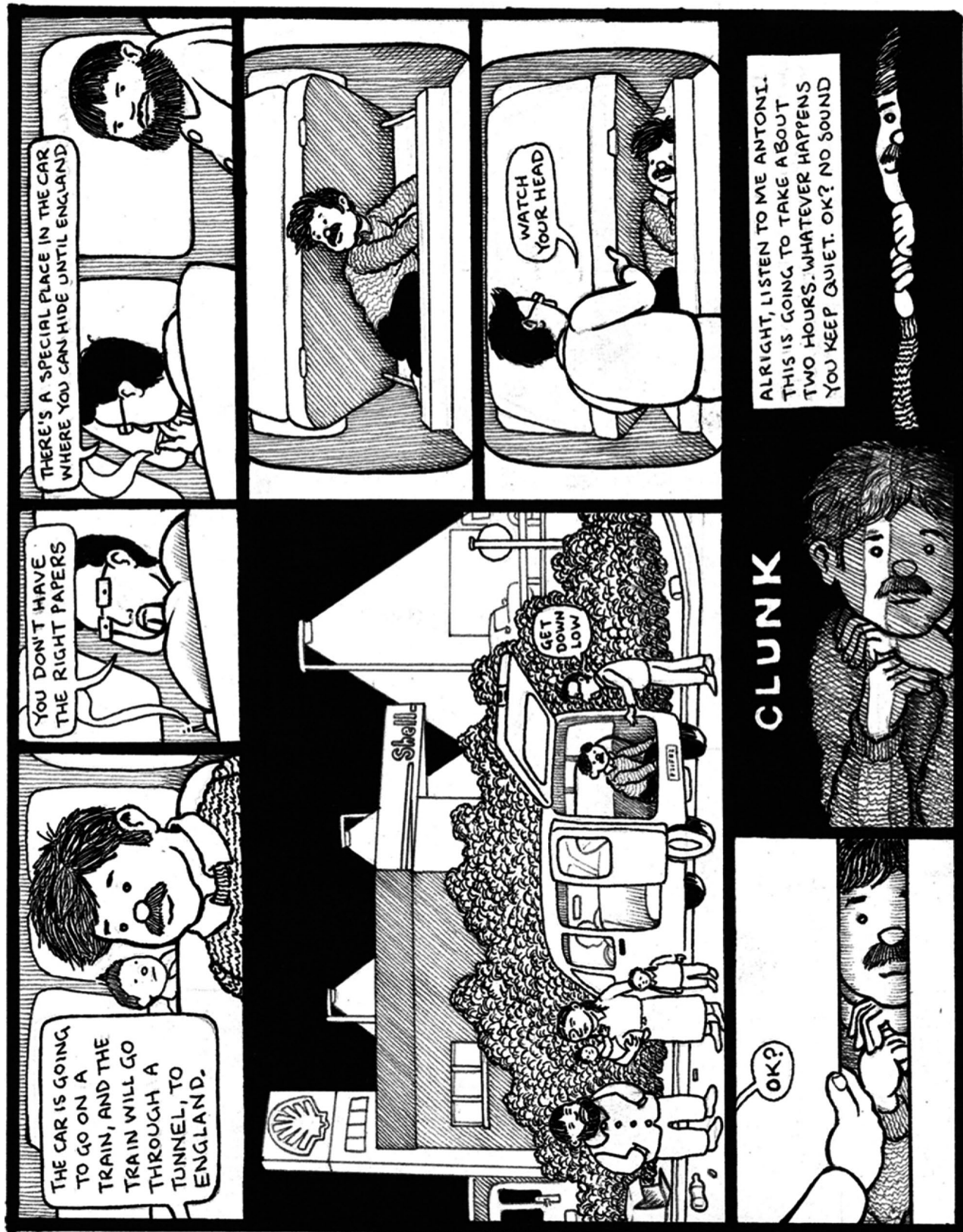
Antoni arrives in an overcast and polluted London having surreptitiously crossed the English Channel in the trunk of a car (Figure 1). He thinks he has reached his “metropolitan grail,” but everything around him makes him feel alone and alienated. After meeting with his friend, he knows that he needs to register with the authorities as an asylum seeker as soon as possible, and that even this would be a bittersweet prospect, for it would mean waiting around for years while he lives on state handouts when he would rather be earning, providing, and contributing. Wracked by traumatic memories of the destruction of his homeland in the Vanni in north east Sri Lanka, the loss of his loved ones in the civil war that ended in 2009, his subsequent detention, torture, and the mental and physical

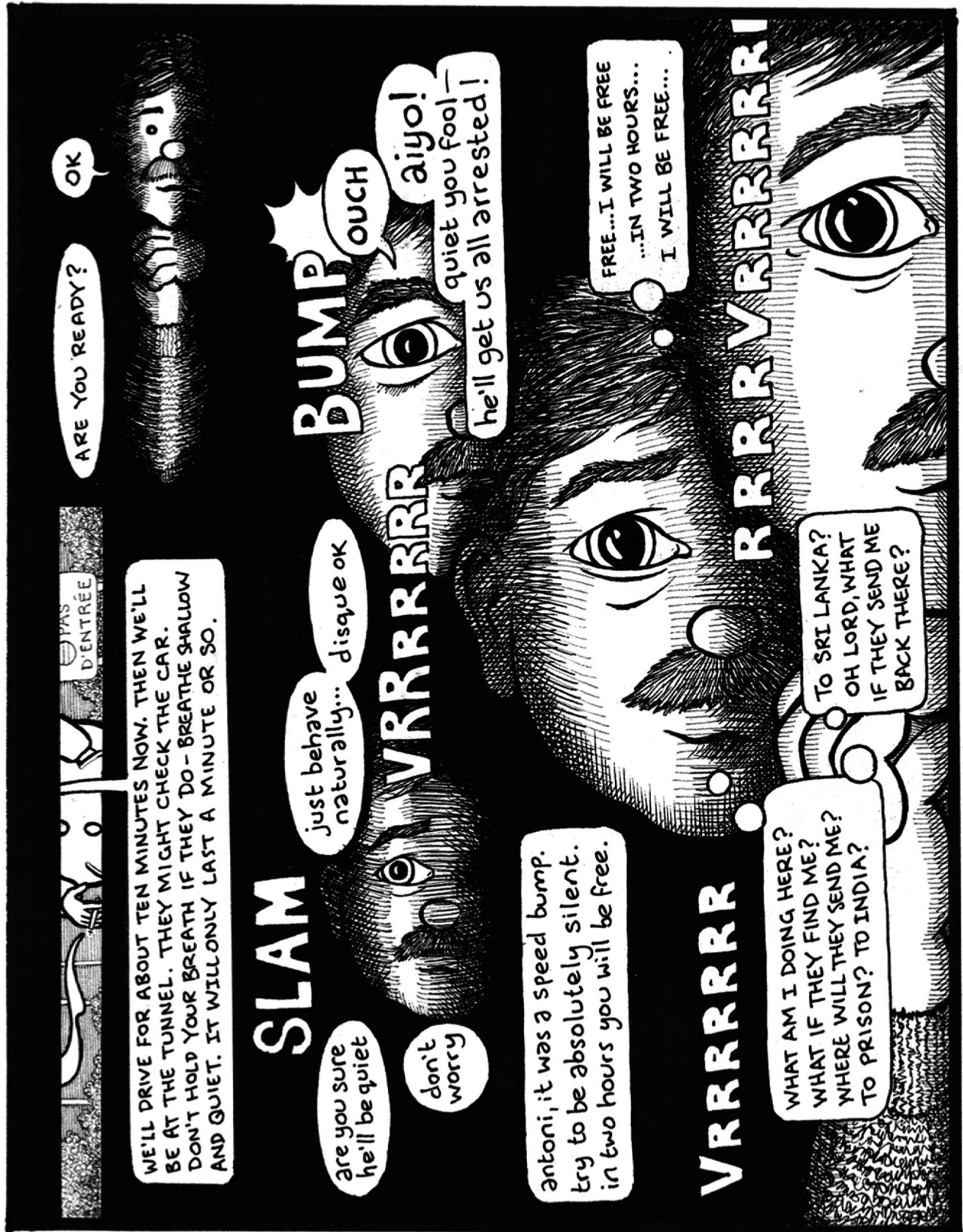
exhaustion of traveling thousands of miles under a fake identity away from surviving members of his family, he sinks into an armchair in a terraced house to reconcile with his new life. So begins Antoni’s existence as a refugee in London in *Memories of the Vanni*.

Telling such stories about the trials and tribulations of migrants and refugees, and their experience of conflict, of violence, of displacement, and as racial others in foreign lands, is well rehearsed in anthropology. What is less common is their telling through sequential imagery, through condensing multiple real-life stories into a visual-verbal narrative that can come alive as a graphic novel.

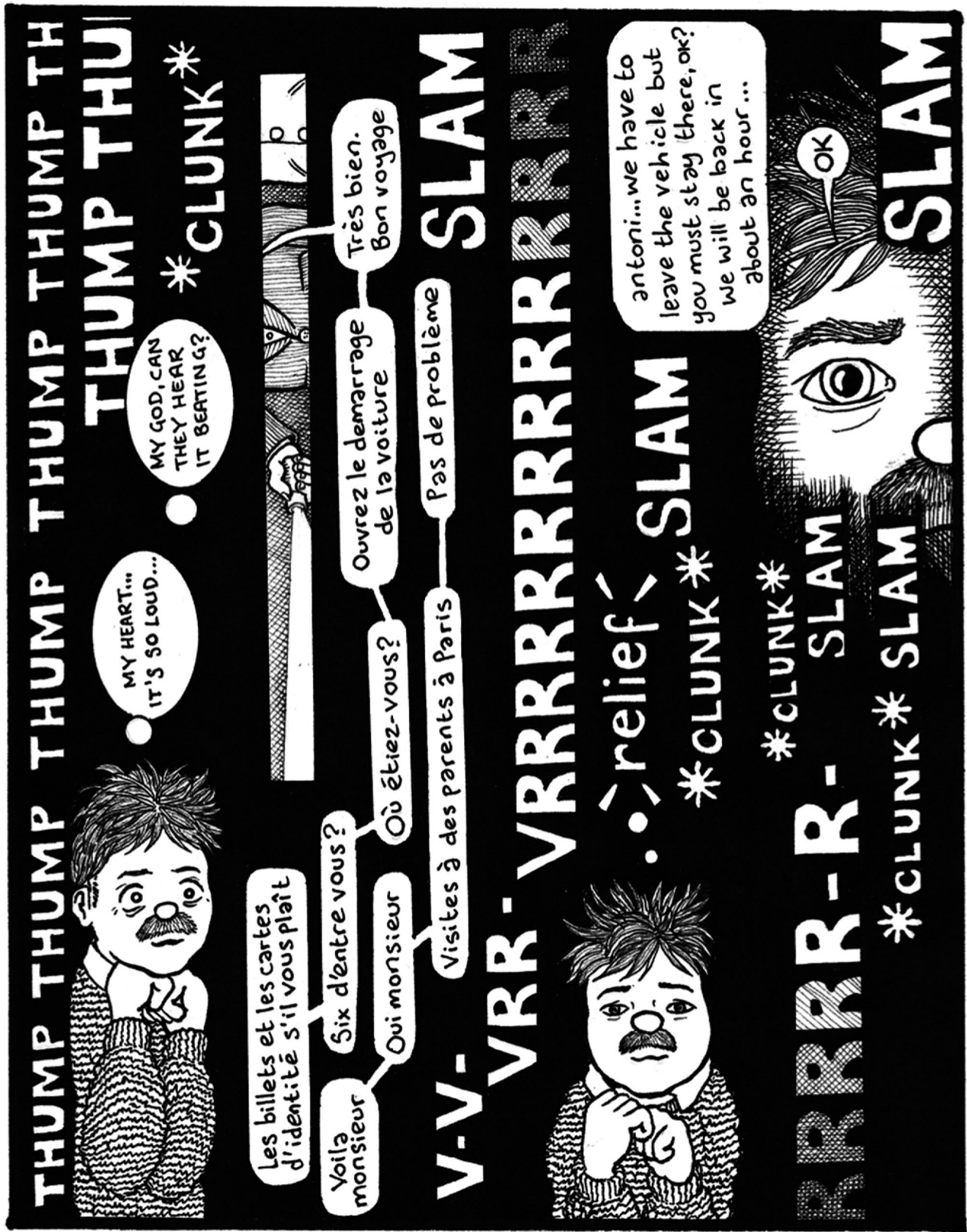
Sketches and illustrations have had a long history in ethnographic fieldwork, but when it came to their representation, they were largely relegated to the assumed superiority of the written text. Literally in the











darkness...



silence...



and memories ... vivid memories like flashes, slashing...



not only in his mind

but in his body too, his back recalling



the cracking, snapping contortion from

, , wrists, tied too tight, behind

the blood retreating, defeated from dead, numb extremities...



and...

silent...

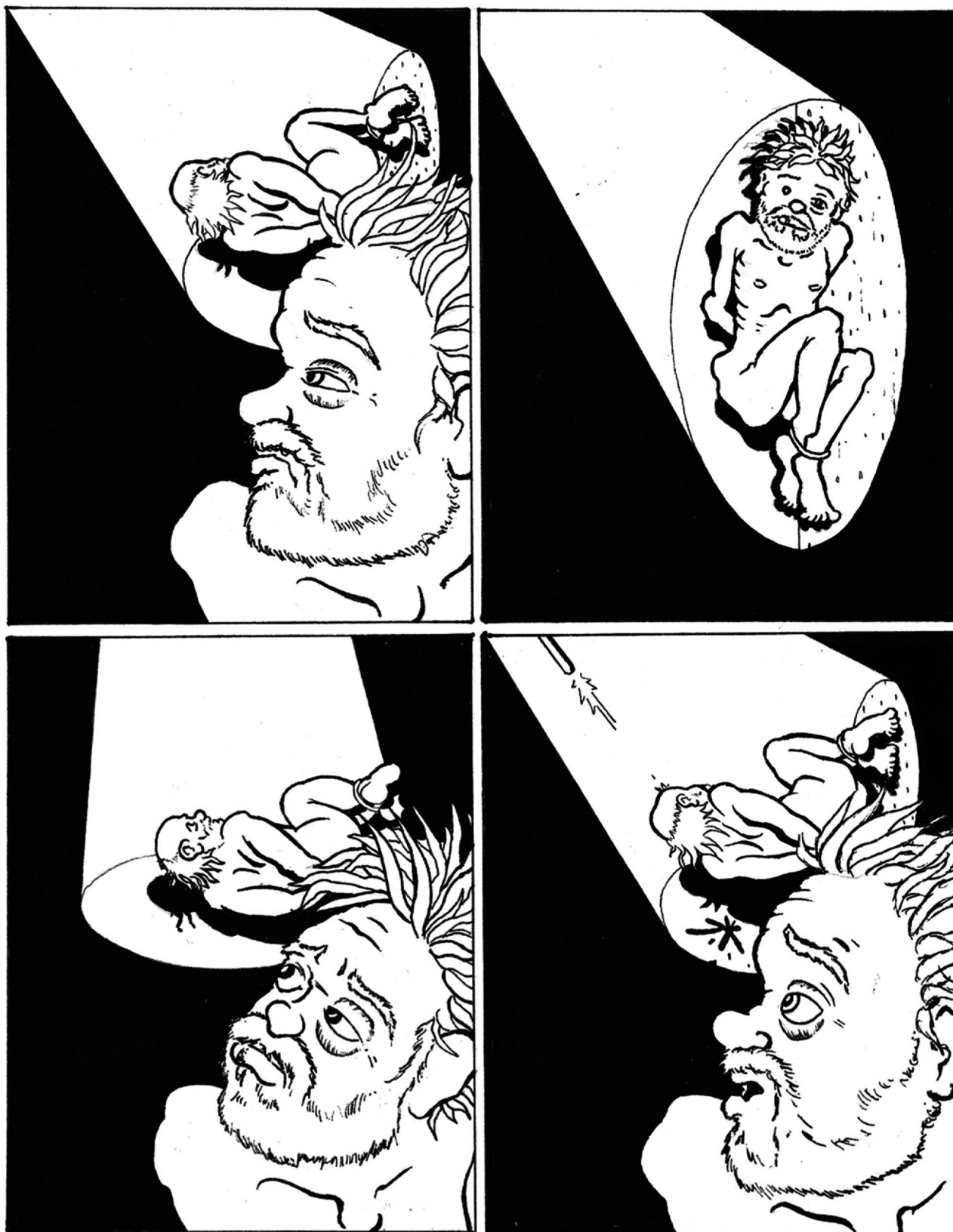
...time, turning to an infinite ocean, formless...

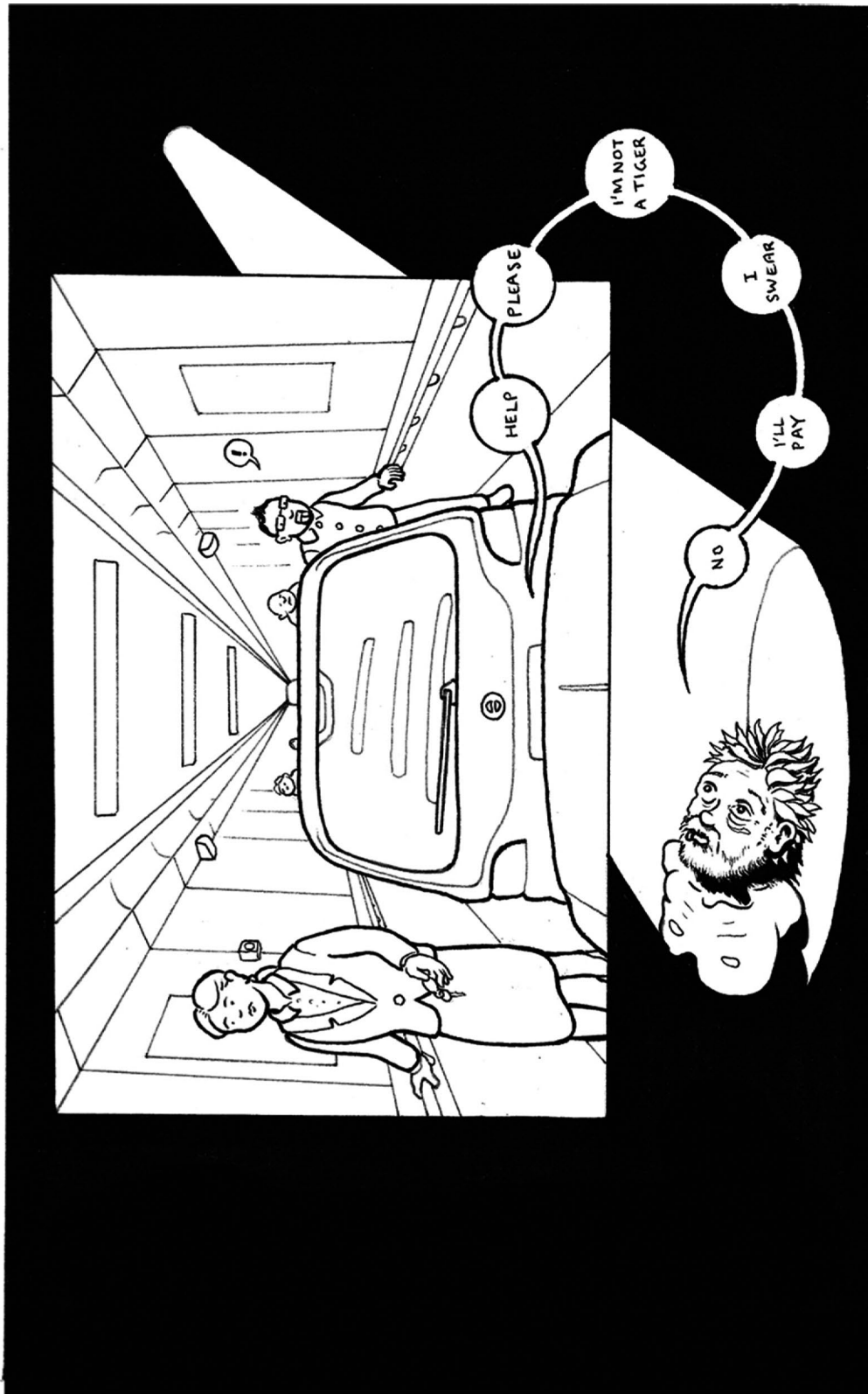


...and dark

until...



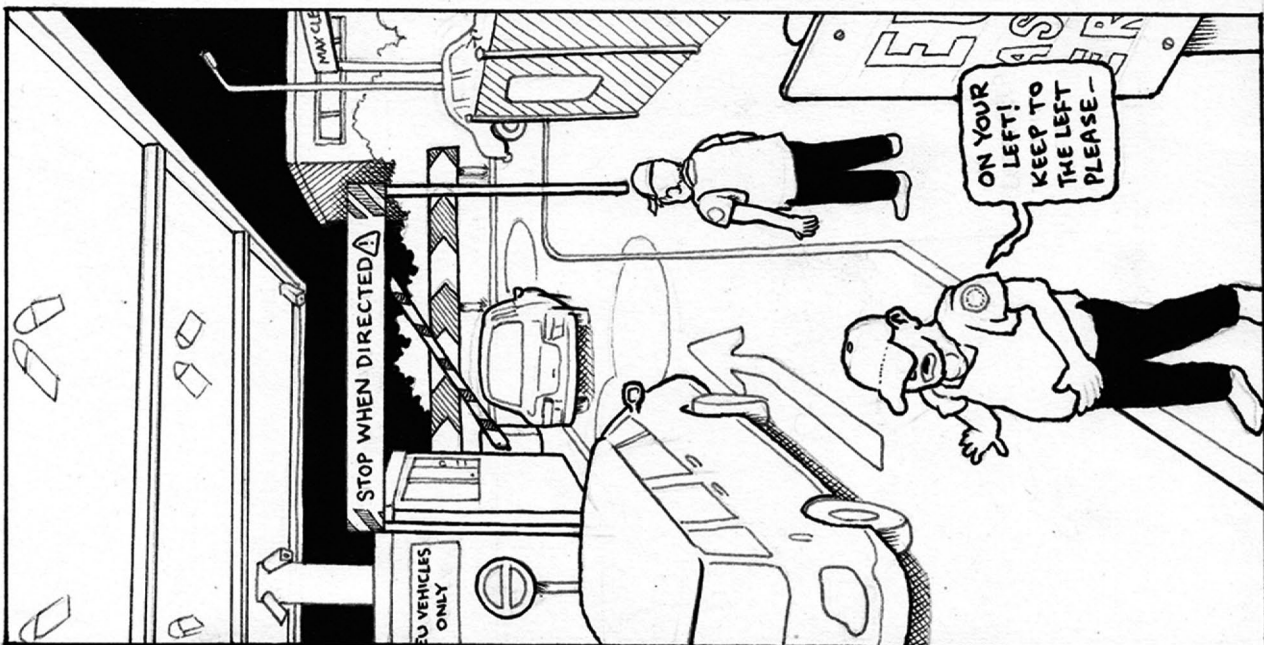
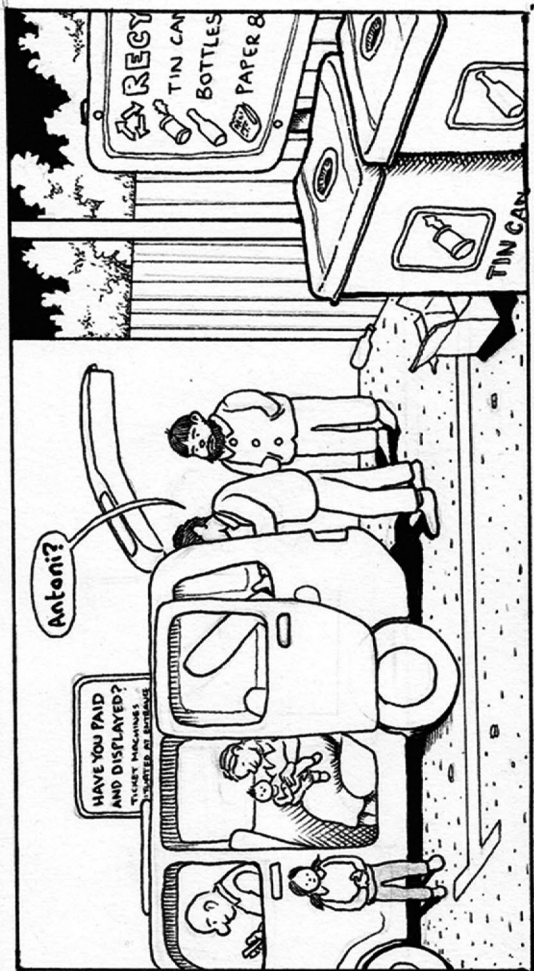




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Antoni, SHUT UP, just SHUT UP
We are almost there but you
HAVE to BE QUIET now — OK?







margins, they were cast off as a peripheral activity not worthy of academic contemplation (Ramos 2004). Manual drawings have suffered a double degradation in that they were more often than not seen as secondary to the immediacy and accuracy of recording technologies as with photography and audiovisual media (Causey 2017, 31–38) that themselves have dominated the focus of visual anthropology.

In the current era, however, growing interest has been developing in the potential to conduct and represent ethnographic fieldwork through drawings (e.g. Afonso 2004; Ballard 2013; Causey 2017; Colloredo-Mansfield 1993; Hamdy and Nye 2017; Hendrickson 2008; Johnson, Pfister, and Vindrola-Padros 2012; Kuschnir 2011; Ramos 2004; Taussig 2011; Van Wolputte 2017) and, more recently, with respect to painting (Bray 2015). Anthropologists, among other scholars, have begun to highlight their capacity for slow, sensitive, and sentient roles in perceiving and analyzing the field. They enable another means with which to explore the subjective and partial accounts of fieldwork as part of the process of thinking through what is observed and felt. This has, to some extent, leveled out the power dynamics between researcher and researched, particularly when the latter is able to see the sketches and is invited to comment, approve or even contribute to the artworks.

The case here goes beyond the idea of the “artist-ethnographer” in the field (Causey 2017, 10) to incorporate a more collaborative mode of production and representation as is apparent in some of the graphic novels that have been produced based on long-term ethnography.¹ The illustrations are not just the outcome of observations and reflections in the field so as to enable the researcher “to perceive more or see more deeply” (Causey 2017: 38), but have another register of communication where they have the potential to enable others to perceive more or see more deeply (see Bray 2015; Hendrickson 2008).

In reflecting on this “graphic narrative turn,” we advance two main propositions. First, we inscribe drawing into the “writing of cultures” (see Marcus 2012). But in this case, rather than drawing as a perceptive tool for recording scenes in fieldwork alone, we extend it to a representational practice where image and word can have a deep, intricate, and equivalent entanglement with each other (Castillo Deball and Wagner 2012; Ingold 2011; Newmann 1998). They are

not merely illustrations or explanations for one another but can have synchronous affective intensities.

This leads to our second proposal: with such a two-way method concerned with ethnographic impressions and interactive representations, we interrogate assumptions about truth and fiction in what we describe as the “ethno-graphic novel.” This is less the ethnographic novel as with Tobias Hecht’s (2006) retrospective fiction based on fieldwork among homeless youth in northeast Brazil, but where fictionalized sequences of words and images tell tales siphoned from the material gathered during ethnography.² As communication and feedback from research participants are integral to its dialogical development, we will revisit arguments about the partiality and historicity of texts as collated in the seminal edition, *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), to an earlier period in anthropology from the 1950s when ethnographic filmmakers were making similar critiques of the hegemony and indeed fallacy of objective representations. The ethno-graphic novel becomes one other outlet for anthropological research to add to the more experimental forms that have appeared over the last few decades seeking to provide a more subjective, self-reflexive, and interactive method for the anthropological endeavor. Following the filmmaker Jean Rouch on *cinéma vérité*, we propose a theory and practice called *vérités graphiques* (literally, graphic realities). This representational practice encompasses collaborative and interactive engagement with participants’ contributions and views, and their distillation and fictionalization through sequential art. As we demonstrate below, it both borrows from Rouch and departs from him along a truth-fiction spectrum that further interrogates the presumed objectivity of what is seen, experienced, co-created, and revealed.

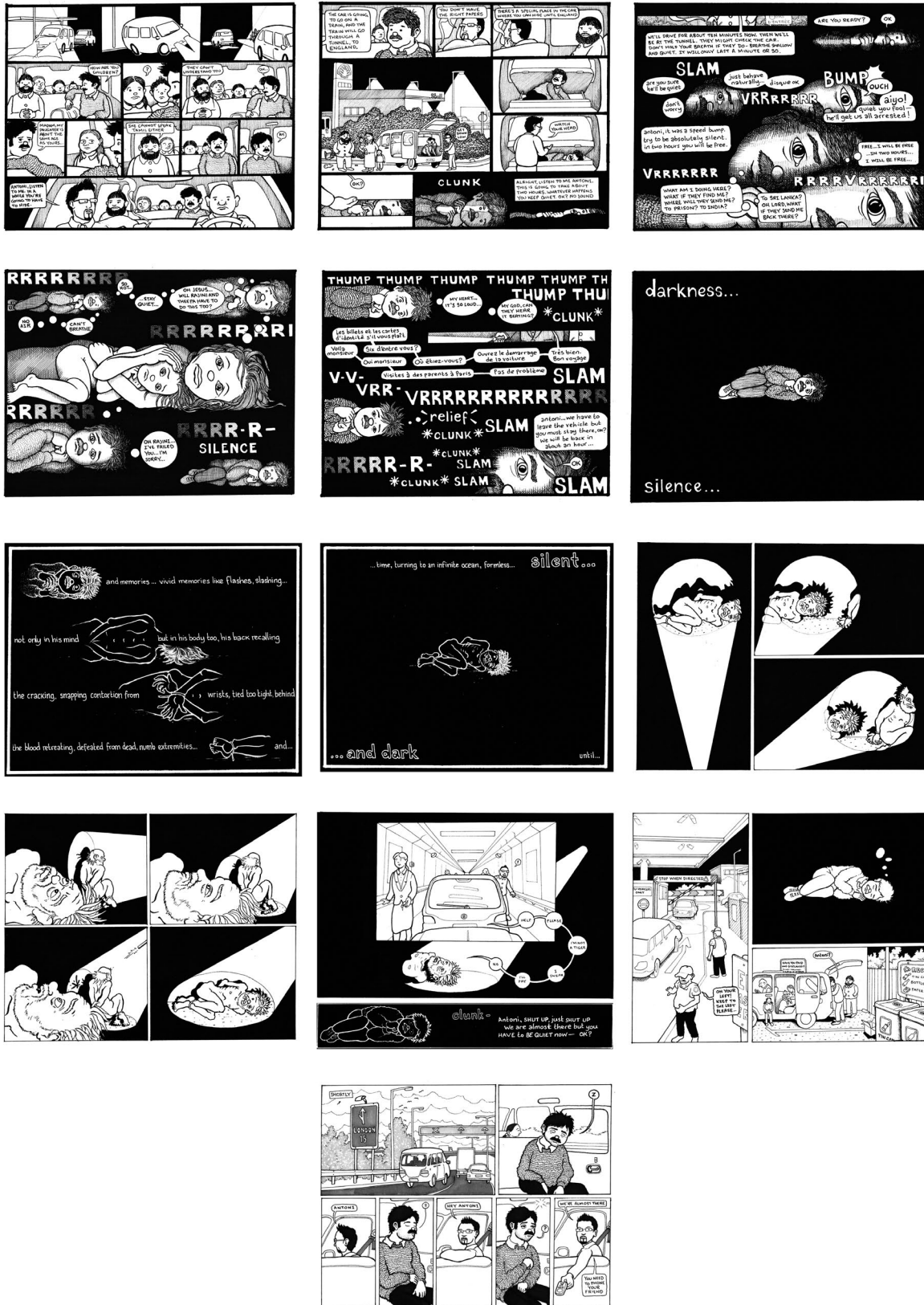
“Imageword” Anthropology and the Ethno-Graphic Novel

As a form of line-making or a “parliament of lines,” in Tim Ingold terms (2011, 5), the ethno-graphic novel adds another strand to “graphic anthropology.” The representational practice goes beyond the uses of drawing in fieldwork alone to explore how it might be combined

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with story-making to create a document in which the visual is then in active and sequential engagement with the verbal. Accompanying text might be distilled or even abandoned to the primacy of the image in the making of the ethno-graphic novel.³ There is then a movement from the dependency of text to create *context for imagery* to text as an *integral part* of or even incidental to imagery.

Due to the fusion of visuals and text, the graphic novel creates a relatively new medium for literacy (Bucher and Manning 2004). As David Carrier notes with respect to comic books, there is a “verbal-visual interdependence” in sequential art (2000, 26). Words and images are “read” in simultaneity. Thierry Groensteen prefers to see the relationship in terms of metaphors of multiplicity: one where the story does not read continuously as one might find in a textual book, but space and time become discontinuous and irreducible to a linear reading. This, he argues, is the “foundation of the medium” (Groensteen 2007, 9), a foundation that is steeped in diversity rather than grounded in coherence.

Such observations apply as much to the “image-words” (Fleckenstein 2003) of graphic novels as they do to the larger genre of comic books (Kaur and Egbal 2018). Donna E. Alvermann, Jennifer S. Moon, and Margaret C. Hagood (2000) argue that because we are living in a multimedia world, we need to learn new ways of doing things, and this is particularly true with regard to media literacy. The graphic novel rises to that challenge (Schwarz 2002; Weiner 2003; Wolk 2007). It enables a means to highlight the potentials of verbalized illustrations to not only describe people’s experiences and recollections, but also to reflect on and depict difficult areas of research as one might find in the midst of violence, torture, trauma, and dealing with state bureaucracies as a detainee or an asylum seeker without compromising any particular person’s identity or safety. Ethno-racial particularities are schematized with the bareness of line-based drawings. The technique can anonymize them and their experiences, and simultaneously humanize them as “selves” acting somewhat to counter the exotification of ethno-racial difference. The accessibility of sequential art means that they can spark conversations, comments, and suggestions for other ideas from a range of people, including research participants (Atkins 2013, 14). Even though not without limitations, image-word anthropology such as this can serve multiple purposes: it can become a tool to pursue fieldwork, explore difficult and sensitive areas of research, provide a relatively accessible multilayered platform for participants’ feedback, and become a means of com-

municating ethnographically informed practice and knowledge to wider audiences.

More broadly, graphic novels have become a popular medium of literature for political and conflict-related narratives over the past 30 years. Notable examples include *Maus* by Art Spiegelman (1986, 1992), a satire of Nazi rule and racial oppression; *Palestine* by Joe Sacco (1993) on the political turbulence in the region in the 1990s; and *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi (2003) about living in a postrevolutionary and oppressive Iranian context along with the war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988. By comparison, the *ethno-graphic* novel considered here is fictional but reliant upon ethnographic fieldwork combined with several research participants’ feedback on the sketches in progress. It is about visualizing stories based on long-term, qualitative, and interactive fieldwork rather than from the storyteller’s or artist’s imagination alone. It involves transmitting a spinal narrative developed from the many narratives of ethnography. It is often collaborative between producers and research participants. If the ethnographer himself or herself is not the illustrator, it entails working closely with an illustrator in order to execute the story for wider dissemination. In an ideal world, this illustrator would come from the context in question. In the real world, this venture is not always possible—a point made even more piquant when considering what might be called “contexts in crisis,” as with instances when the struggle for survival becomes more pressing for the subjects of the research.

Multiple Journeys

Memories of the Vanni tackles sensitive and personal experiences of conflict, torture, loss, displacement, cultural identity, transnational migration, and the British asylum procedures in a narrative form based on a fictionalized family. Simultaneously, the fictional becomes another way of exploring sociopolitical realities (see Ingold and Hallam 2007; Rouch 2003a; Taussig 2011). In the course of developing it, multiple methodologies were deployed. Some of the “stories” were collated through Benjamin Dix’s fieldwork using journal entries and photography in the Vanni when he was working as a United Nations operative in Sri Lanka from 2004 to 2008. Other narratives were collected from later fieldwork with focus groups and semi-structured, structured, and repeat interviews between 2012 and 2014 in London, Zurich, and Chennai in south India after Tamil refugees had migrated from Sri Lanka. This entailed listening to survivors’ experiences in a combination of English and Tamil. On top of three focus groups each with 10–33

participants, 20 other male and female asylum seekers were interviewed based in the three cities. Their ages ranged from their mid-twenties to their mid-thirties.

The interviews were conducted less to know *about* people and their lives but, in an adaptation of Trinh T. Minh-Ha's terms to "speak nearby" (cited in Chen 1992, 82), the objective was to "represent nearby." There was little intention to intrude or collate extensive data about people's lives, particularly for subjects that they felt reserved or awkward about discussing. Rather, the intention was to provide a safe space where they could talk comfortably about any aspect of their emotional and physical journeys and experiences.

In conjunction with the illustrator, Lindsay Pollock, some of the collated narratives were condensed into a fictionalized storyboard for the ethno-graphic novel. Since access to the Vanni was not possible due to security concerns from 2008, Pollock drew upon Dix's photographs and accounts of his time on the island. Some of the more violent sections of the war in the work were drawn from the media and in particular the documentary film *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* (2013, dir. Callum Macrae), which itself contains mobile phone footage supplied by those who went through the civil war, and which Pollock had studied scene by scene. An additional visit to Tamil Nadu in south India in 2012 enabled a closer appreciation of people living in a similar tropical and coastal environment through a combined approach of interviews, drawings, and photography. Wherever possible, Pollock's sketches were shown to research participants in person or via Skype so that their feedback could be included in the developing graphic narratives. Research participants' approval was particularly important owing to the sensitive material covered that encompassed their experiences of violence. As we shall see below, for some participants, the ethno-graphic novel became both a creative and therapeutic outlet.

Numerous characterizations and sequences were worked out over a period of two years that had to be whittled down to a simple yet compelling story of people affected by the turmoil. The final arc of the main narrative centered on Antoni and his family during the culminating months of military incursions and shelling of the Vanni in 2009. It was bookended with a focus on his migration to, and life in, a foreign land as an asylum seeker.

Truth-Fiction in Action

Through flashbacks in the ethno-graphic novel, we learn that Antoni is from a small fishing village on the east coast of the Vanni. His household unit consists of six members: Antoni and his wife, Rajini; their chil-



FIGURE 2. Fictionalized family. Clockwise from top left: Priya, Antoni, Rajini, Theepa, Michael, Appama, plus Roxy, the dog.

dren, Michael and Theepa; Antoni's mother, Appama; and Rajini's younger sister, Priya (Figure 2).

Antoni is a down-to-earth Christian family man. He earns enough money from fishing to feed his family and extra income from selling any superfluous fish in the market in Kilinochchi town. Rajini is from a higher-caste Hindu background from the city of Jaffna and had moved to the fishing village after marrying Antoni. Largely owing to her schooling, she is a source of strength and support, and often makes the more logical decisions. Priya came from Jaffna to help Antoni's family after the devastating tsunami of 2004. Antoni's mother, Appama, is widowed from the riots in 1983 between Sinhalese and Tamil communities in the south of the island, known as Black July when thousands of Tamil people were killed during the commotion (see Ratnapalan 2014; Thiranagama 2013). After the civil war comes to a brutal end, Antoni ends up in Britain as an asylum seeker, with his wife, Rajini, and one child, Theepa, remaining as refugees in Chennai, India.

Through Antoni's recollections to his lawyer (Figure 3), the sequential art follows his family through a series of forced displacements in the Vanni, as the Sri Lankan army clears village after village through aerial bombardment and artillery attacks, and the Tamil communities are herded into an ever-shrinking space controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE, otherwise



FIGURE 3. Illustration of Antoni talking to his asylum lawyer in London and reflecting back on his life in the Vanni in north east Sri Lanka.

known as the Tamil Tigers). The tail end of the civil war in 2008 and 2009 saw intensive attacks on civilians and makeshift hospitals marked with the International Red Cross, along with the death and disappearance of an estimated figure between 75,000 and 146,679 people (Harrison 2012; International Crisis Group [ICG] 2010, 6). Rather than stay on under the rule of Mahinda Rajapaksa's hawkish government, the United People's Freedom Alliance (2005–15), many survivors who were in a position to do so migrated overseas, particularly to India, Australia, Canada, and countries in Europe.

Antoni's journey from Sri Lanka to Britain via Chennai, is based on the experiences of three London-based research contributors who came to join earlier Tamil migrants, some of which are illustrated in the opening panels of this article. All three had to leave the younger and weaker members of their families behind after they made the decision to travel over the continents to seek asylum in Europe, hoping to bring them later. The men made the journey with smugglers who charged anywhere from £12,000 (approximately \$15,000) to £20,000 (\$25,000) per person for documentation and



FIGURE 4. Illustration of Antoni talking to surviving members of his family via Skype—his wife, Rajini, and daughter, Theepa—who are refugees in Chennai, south India.

travel arrangements. As another of the research participants, Daniel, recalled in his interview in 2013:

My uncle in Canada paid for the trip and now I have to work to pay him back. I also have to send money for my Amma [mother] and Appa [father] in Sri Lanka and my wife and children in Chennai. This is now the real stress to my life. I am getting small money every week and just waiting and waiting for the decision to be made if I get asylum here. Then I will have to find good job to pay all the things [sic].

The large sum paid to smugglers needs to be returned to relatives and money lenders after arrival at their destination, yet they are not entitled to work. People like Antoni, therefore, would find themselves in great financial debt on arrival that further adds to their sense of alienation and duress when in Britain.

Conversations between those left in India were an essential lifeline even though the distance and difficulties of navigating financial burdens and state regulations often led to more despair once the conversation



FIGURE 5. Illustration of Antoni experiencing the isolation of London after a Skype conversation with his family.

was over. A research contributor, whom we have called Kandiah, recalled in his interview:

I speak to my wife on Skype every day. It's so good to see her and to see my children. We are always discussing the situation [his asylum in UK and their security in Chennai]. It's really hard to always talk about the hardships but I cannot remember when we had happy times to speak. ... That is sad, isn't it? I need to talk with my family every day but I feel so bad afterwards. That's when I feel really sad and alone.

Kandiah's contradictory feelings are evoked in the ethno-graphic novel through the stark contrast between, on the one hand, the conviviality afforded by Antoni's Skype conversation with his wife and child in Chennai and, on the other, the dreary starkness of a cold and foreign environment characterized by endless bureaucracy, the inability to work, and the isolation of living alone in state-sponsored accommodation while waiting for news about his asylum claim (Figures 4 and 5).

Notoriously, the final months of the civil war in Sri Lanka were marked by the designation of a series



FIGURE 6. Sketch of Antoni finding his mother after an air attack in the Vanni in 2009.

of three “no fire zones”: first a 35.5 km² zone on January 21, 2009, and second a 14 km² strip on an eastern isthmus on February 12, 2009 (United Nations Secretary General [UNSG] 2011). The isthmus was later divided again by more shelling such that survivors on one side had to surrender themselves to the Sri Lankan army, and tens of thousands of others on the other side were compressed into a final “no fire zone” of 2 km² on May 8, 2009 (UNSG 2011), centering on Mullivaikkal. People headed toward the designated “no fire zone” hoping for some sense of calm, but they effectively ended up in a trap only to be bombarded again from air, sea, and land in this supposed sanctuary (ICG 2010).

The ethno-graphic narrative highlights the material and physical loss that people experienced during the upheaval. These episodes were sourced from participants retelling their experiences of what seemed like endless shelling as they tried to escape the ring of encircling terror. Raja in his interview recalled a poignant incident

about having to abandon his dying mother when they were trying to run away from the shelling:

Everyone was walking to Puthukkudiyiruppu [PTK]. We were too tired from the walking and not eating. Amma was walking too slowly so we put her on the cart so she could rest. We were all walking with the cart but my smallest daughter got something in her foot and we stopped. I saw she had cut it and my wife took time to bandage it. When we walking again the cart was far in front. We were trying to catch it when it [explosion] happened. I remember the big sound and then quiet. My wife and me were on our backs and shouting for our daughter but my ears were too loud inside after the blast. We found her, but I was running to my Amma but there was crowd and everybody was shouting. But I remember I found her. ... I saw her and I felt so bad 'cos I felt unwell. I carried her body but my wife was shouting

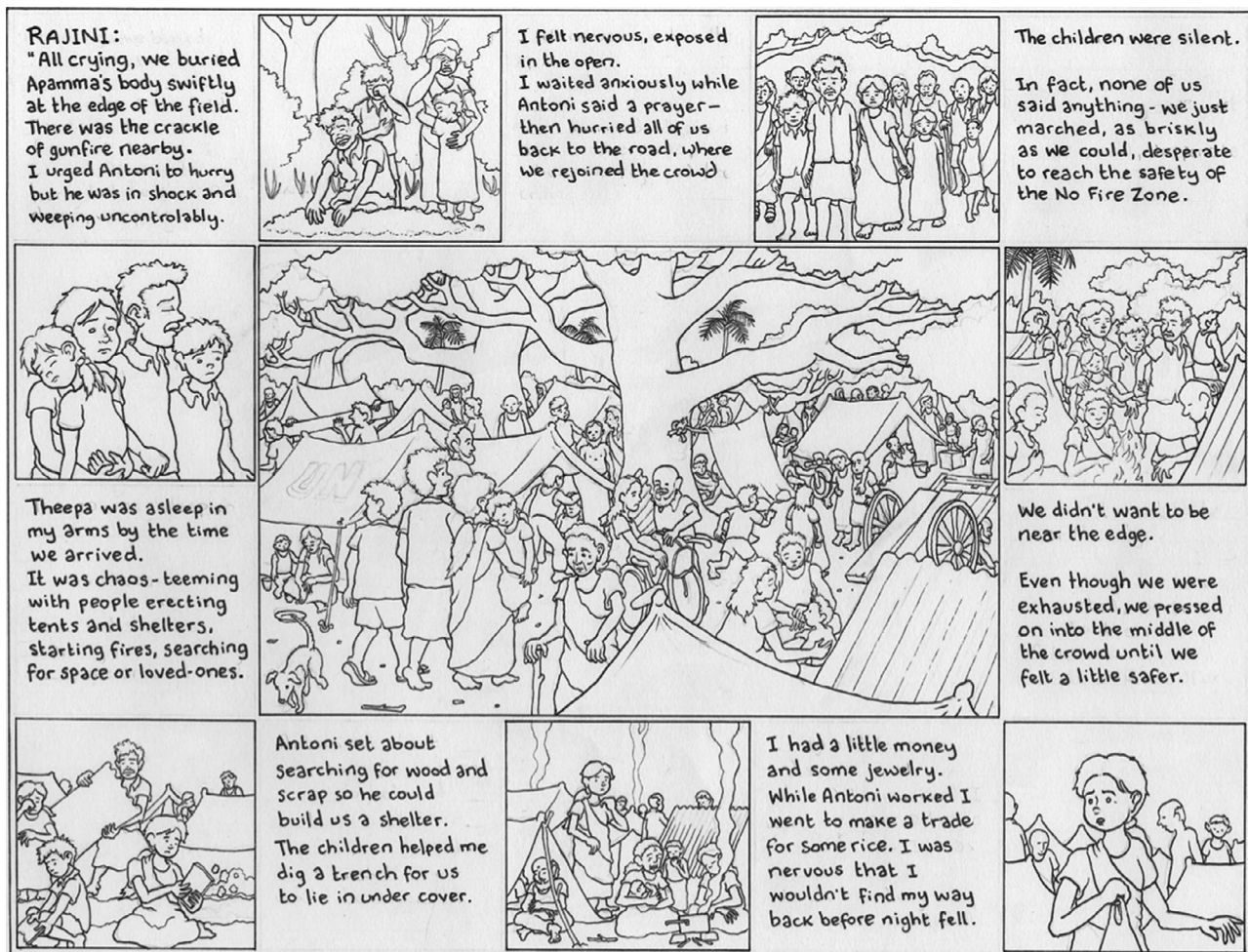


FIGURE 7. Illustration of Antoni's family on the long walk to the "no fire zone," as told by Rajini.

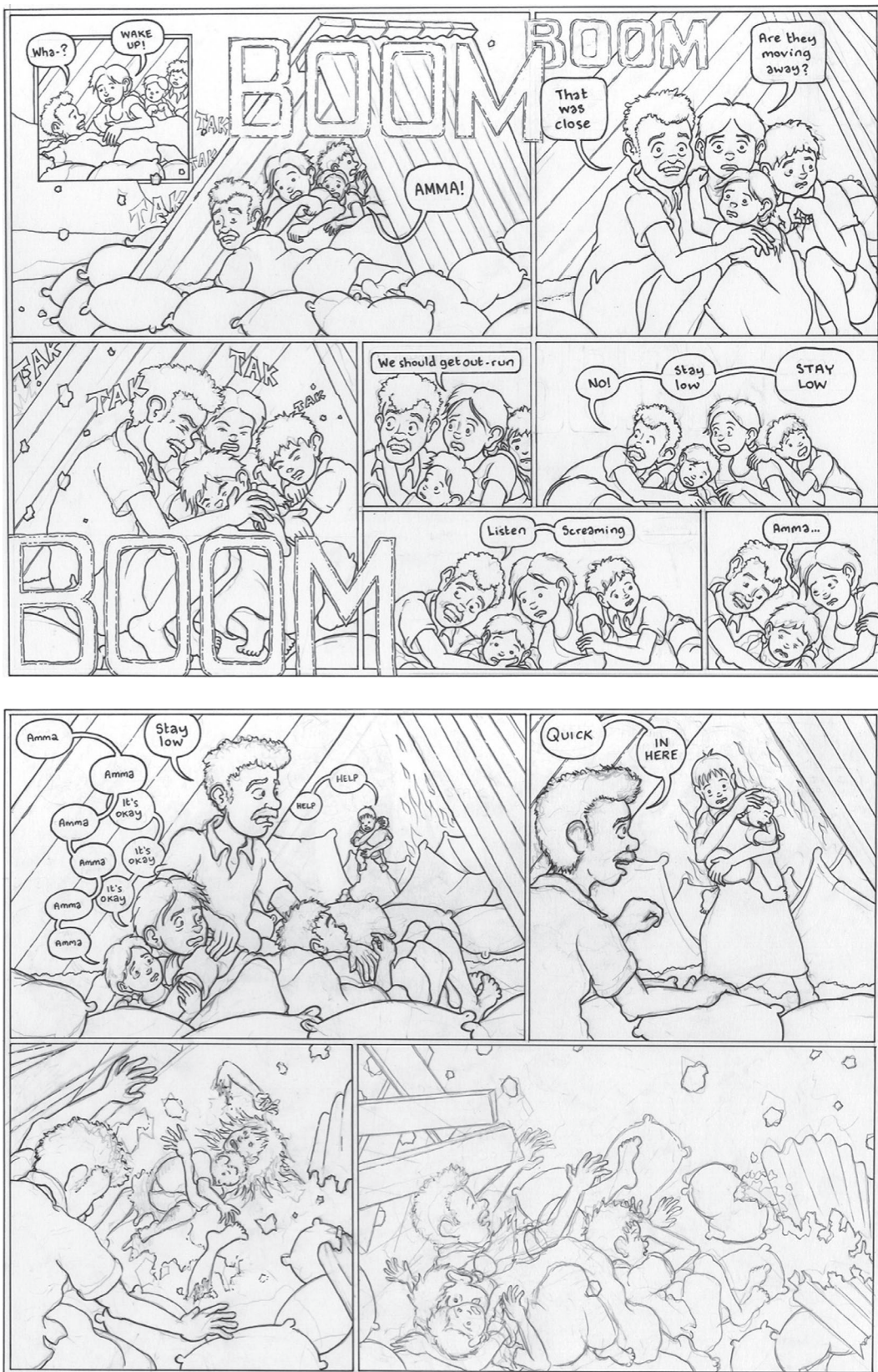
at me to run as more shells can come. ... I had to leave her there by the road [sic].

The double blow of losing his mother and the fact that he could not even arrange a proper burial was too much to bear. Raja's contribution was carried into the story when depicting chaos in the aftermath of bombarded bodies among whom Antoni finds his mother (Figures 6 and 7). Mortified, Antoni picks her up and walks into the fields with her languid body. Rajini runs after him, imploring him to leave her so as to escape the blight of more shelling. As revealed by several participants, a common tactic for the Sri Lankan army was to bomb one place and then return soon after to bomb it again as people came to tend to the bodies and help any survivors. After a very quick burial, Antoni reluctantly leaves his mother. He continues to silently grieve as he is haunted by his memories. Even when the remaining family reach the government-designated "no fire

zone," Antoni remains aloof from everyone else, staring blankly into the fire that they had built to keep warm outside their makeshift tent. Eventually, Antoni falls into a restive sleep, "sleep-that-wasn't-really-sleep," only to be woken up to even more shelling from the sky in/on what they had been led to believe was a humanitarian sanctuary.

Another research participant, Chandan, vividly recalled the relentless bombardment:

The shelling happened at night time a lot. We were always sleeping close as there was little room inside and it was raining outside. When the shelling started, we would all cry and hold us together. We felt safer if we together. Every night I thinking this is last night. But every morning we start again. I got very old in those months. Even now I remember every night when I am in bed. I cannot forget that time [sic].



FIGURES 8 AND 9. Illustrations of bombardment in a government-designated "no fire zone" in Sri Lanka, 2009.



FIGURE 10. Illustration of Indran and his errant son.

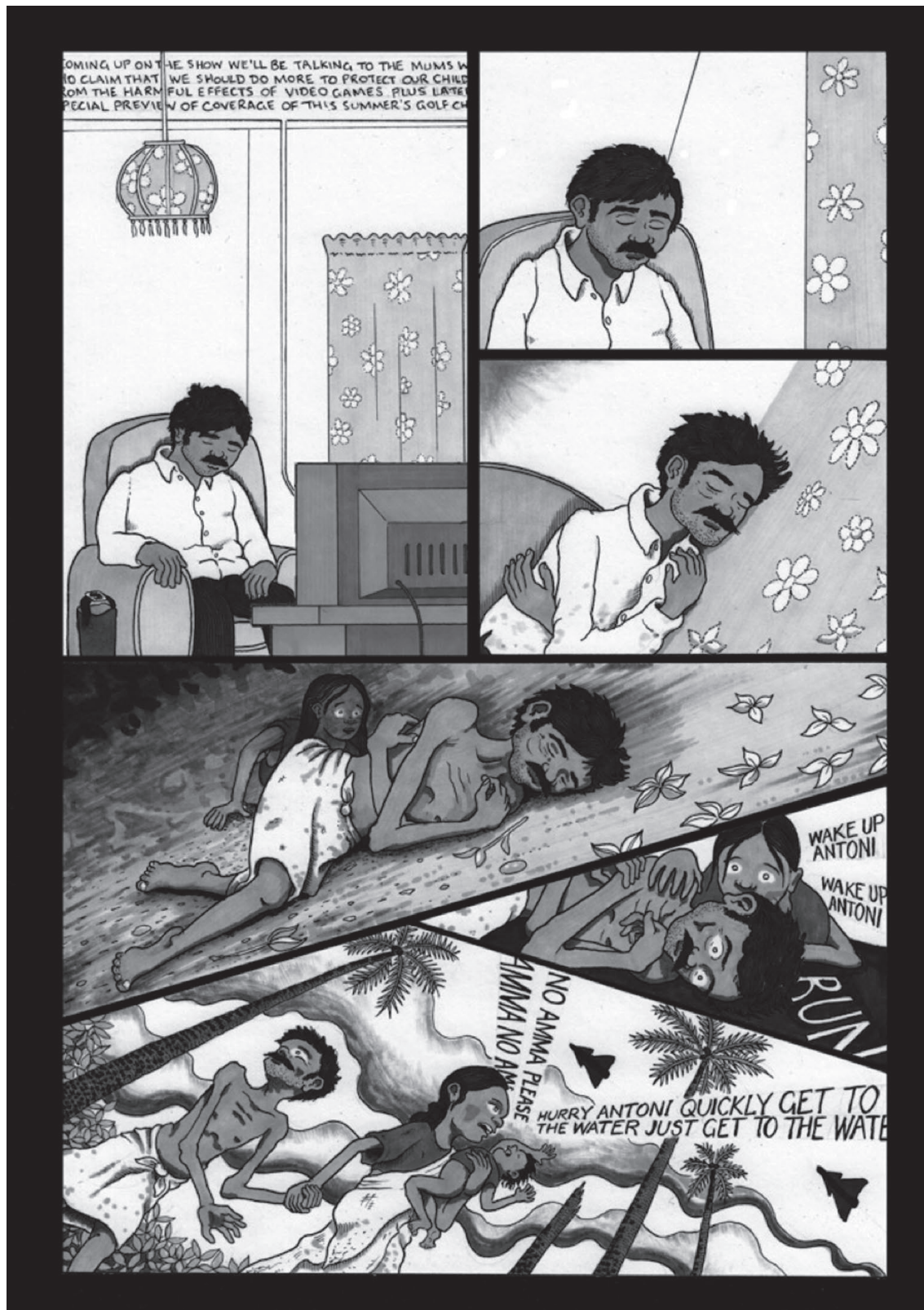
Chandan's recollections filter into the ethno-graphic novel where people are huddled together amidst the terror that surrounds them, their eyes almost coming out of their sockets, and/while holding on to each other for dear life with no protection other than each other's arms and a flimsy make-do tent (Figures 8 and 9). It is at this point that Antoni's family are hit by shrapnel from a bomb in the "no fire zone"—a term that is ironic were it not so dreadful. Most of them survive under the rubble, but later, we learn that their young son, Michael, is no more.

Another research participant, Seeniar, recalled living with the perennial fear of his family coming to harm:

Paresh [his eldest son] always wanted to explore, he was always like that. When we first got to that place ["no fire zone"], we were all so scared,

but after time Paresh got used to the shelling, he would walk off, he was 16. I used to get upset at him 'cos we needed to be together if anyone got hurt. One time I got angry with him, I hit him hard. He didn't talk to me for a week. I don't think I hurt him but he was hurt inside. I've seen what those shells do. I not forget that [sic].

Often, children would be difficult to keep together in one safe place. Unable to adjust to the intensifying civil war, they would regularly wander off when bombing seemed to have stopped—a parental anxiety that is picked up with the story of Indran in the novel. After Indran scolds his roving son, the boy then stops talking to him. Indran justifies his actions to himself: "I think he is ashamed of himself. Better he be angry and ashamed than dead" (Figure 10). This line in the sequence was an extension of what Seeniar had reit-





FIGURES 11 AND 12. Illustrations of Antoni's nightmare trying to avoid shelling and drowning in a lagoon, and Priya being abducted by a soldier.

erated: his comment was embellished to represent the internally conflicted emotions people under siege had to contend with, some of which could not be verbalized but, nevertheless, could not be forgotten. Elsewhere in the novel, Indran reflects: "At some point, I stopped keeping track of hours, days or weeks. ... Deep exhaustion settled over everybody. Hunger gnawed our stomachs. We became thin." This is not a direct representation of a comment by any of the participants. Instead, poetic license was taken to conjure up their war-shattered experiences in order to provide nuance and more depth to characters. This was done several times to fill in the "empty gaps" of a storyline but without wanting to diverge in spirit and sentiment from participants' contributions.

Capture of survivors by the Sri Lankan army after the conflict was concluded in May 2009 promised no respite from further terror and violence. Aarathi recalled at length her long journey from the final "no fire zone" to the government's "rehabilitation camps" for survivors:

The next morning, an army soldier came and we were all asked to follow him. We were made to walk through a lake. The water was up to my neck and it was extremely difficult to move in the water. There was a lady with two children. The children were small and unable to swim or walk. I held one on my shoulders and the lady held the other on hers. There were big tree trunks and branches coming out of the water and the army soldiers would put wooden planks over them and stand on them in order to monitor us all. Having crossed the lake we continued to walk for a long while. I began to realise that I could smell a very strong smell in that area in respect of the dead bodies. An army soldier stopped us all and a couple of women were taken from our group.

Such recollections are drawn upon for the knife-like memories seeping through Antoni's nightmare in his metropolitan flat. The jagged, triangulated panels of this sequence conjure up their disorientation and suffering (Figures 11 and 12). In this "living nightmare," Antoni is so tired and traumatized by the death of his mother that he is unable to move. He is virtually dragged along by Rajini, who is holding their yelling child, Theepa, in her other arm. Rajini tells him to take his daughter as they get into the lagoon, for swimming with her would prove to be too much for her to manage. Around them they see floating dead bodies and a man who appears to be drowning caught out by a particularly deep part of

the lagoon. All Antoni can say to Theepa as he carries her across the lagoon is to close her eyes while himself looking back to see how the others are coping. When they get to dry land, a man grabs Priya by the head. It is a soldier who forcefully takes her away. Rajini cries after her while Antoni tries to run the other way pulling his wife along, worried that she too could be taken away. Priya is abducted by soldiers who suspect her of being a Tamil Tiger insurgent, and therefore, in their minds, deserving of whatever mental and physical violation they cared to think of.

The events as they are laid out in the ethno-graphic novel converge various narrative threads, observations, and sentiments that were conveyed during the interviews and focus groups. They also serve to illustrate the displaced and condensed effect of harrowing memories where different episodes blur into one hazy and anxious muddle. This is made clear in the novel where, in contrast to Antoni's nightmare, Priya was pulled away by government soldiers when they were walking past a barbed wire fence well after they had all crossed the lagoon (Figure 13).

Ethno-Graphic Elicitation

A key potential in working with this visual-verbal medium was that sketches for *Memories of the Vanni* could be shown to research participants with relative ease to gauge their views and opinions (see Taylor 1994). Not unlike photo-elicitation (Harper 2002; Larson 1988), the sketches acted like triggers to talk about aspects of participants' experiences, but in this case, also how to improve them. Some participants embellished and even seemed to take ownership of characters and storylines. Upon seeing some of the fictionalized sketches, Seeniar immediately recognized that they were drawn from his interview, and elaborated:

This shows how it was in those times on the beach but what you have not shown is the water in those bunkers. That was the hardest time for us as we could not sit down. We would stand for many hours in those bunkers with the water up our legs. We all got bad feet from that time. You need to show the water.

His instructions were well heeded. Seeniar added visceral responses by pointing out details such as the constant itchiness that they had to endure while their feet and calves were immersed in water as bombs fell around them. As he talked, he got up and physically jumped



FIGURE 13. Sketch of a Tamil woman being taken aside by the Sri Lankan army at the end of Sri Lanka's civil war, as shown to research contributor.

from one foot to another, likening the sporadic itching on his lower legs and feet to a darting lizard: "one foot off the hot sand, then the other one down. This is what we did when we were in the water in the bunker." The panels evoked what Laura Marks (2000) calls a "haptic visuality"—a visuality that functions like the sense of touch by triggering embodied memories. It was after Seenar's recollections of the time spent in the bunkers that Pollock redrew the illustrations in order to conjure up the experience of being stuck in dank, mosquito-ridden water for hours on end while people's feet in the bunkers itched like hell, as if the raining bombs around them had shrunk, transmogrified, and entered inside their bloodstream. There was no respite anywhere (Figures 14 and 15).

On seeing the sketches, Nanditi recalled the mental and physical violations she endured in Manek Farms, inappropriately described as "rehabilitation camps." Despite her personal ordeals, she responded encouragingly, particu-

larly to the scenes surrounding the abduction of Priya as she walked past Sri Lankan soldiers. Nanditi stated:

I really saw my story in these pages when the girl is caught. You have drawn it perfectly. It is very hard to see these comics of that time as I suffered too much after that. I've not seen cartoon like this before, showing the real life. I feel it is true way to show my story to people. I am happy 'cos you don't see my face and name is changed so it's not me, but it is me and my story.

With this "cartoon" showing "real life," Nanditi projected herself into the fictionalized character even though only a part of her actual experience had been represented. The moment of Priya's abduction itself became a prompt for the repeated sexual assaults and torture that Nanditi had to endure over four months after the civil war was concluded in May 2009. With

When we hear
an explosion,
we run for the
bunker. We
are under the
ground in
seconds.

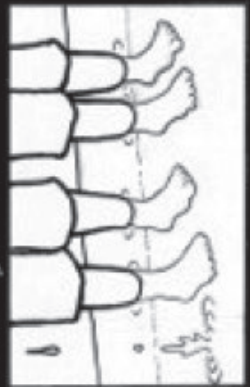


I try to keep the bunker dry...



But it has been raining every day and water
floods in, making a deep, cold puddle.

We stand in knee-high water
waiting for silence above. We
are down there sometimes
four or five hours at a time.
Puri and Arashi have both
developed itchy rashes on
their legs. They want to
take their chances up
above ground.



But I've seen what
those bombs can do.





FIGURES 14 AND 15. Illustrations of Indran and his family standing for hours on end in a sodden bunker to avoid air shelling.

a cash payment from her uncle, she was released from the camp and fled Sri Lanka. Now based in London, and having been granted asylum, she was deeply appreciative of the visual-verbal platform where her remembered experiences were anonymized, fictionalized, yet made incredibly powerful and empowering. As she remarked, they were not *about her* but definitely *her story*.

Another research participant, Dominic, added something that was not anticipated at all. When he saw the sketches, he said: "Actually I have not seen it like this cartoon before and I like it. We can see inside the war, not where the camera is [sic]." Dominic's suggestion was that the drawing was actually more revealing than the photo-realism associated with a camera (see Sontag 1977)—that is, through drawings, we could "see inside the war," not just have surface *pictures of the war*. No doubt, this point owed to an ethnographic familiarity with their lives, the creative and collaborative possibilities for exploring difficult territories, and the affective intensities that image-words could (re)create among the research participants.

Vérités Graphiques

In his interview, Joseph compared the violence and torture that he went through with his current status of waiting for asylum in Britain along the following terms:

There are many chapters to this story. For me the most frustrating was when I arrived here in England. The war in Sri Lanka was terrible, but the waiting in England and scared of returning to Sri Lanka is a nightmare. Every Friday I have to sign to receive my asylum money. I cannot survive without that money. But some of my friends were taken at that signing place and sent back to Sri Lanka. If I go back Sri Lanka I will be killed 'cos I've told all my story here against the government [Sri Lanka] and what they did to me [torture]. They will kill me for sure. We all face this problem here 'cos we are scared to tell the real story in case we are sent back and the government finds out [sic].

Joseph's contribution is significant not least for the fact that he himself described his experiences as a story with many chapters. His deep reservations about being identified are all too evident. Moving beyond ethnofiction in which the protagonists re-create and play out their lives and aspirations for all to see (Augé 1999; Sjöberg 2008), in this case, there is a pressing need to veil them. This veiling is both in the form of what we have called *distillate fiction*—stories distilled from their "stories"—and through the line and shadow

drawings in the ethno-graphic novel. Once stripped of particular features, the illustrations have the effect of anonymizing yet empowering participants who could recognize aspects of their lives. As Nanditi said above, she felt it was the "true way to show my story to people." As a distillate or reconstructed realism, truth was less about getting to authenticity but appreciating the possibilities to imagine and re-create *a sense of authenticity*.

The methodological process of integrating feedback into the making of media and questioning the presumed objectivity of realism recalls Rouch's practice of shared anthropology (*anthropologie partagée*) and *cinéma vérité* (literally, truthful cinema). Rouch's aim was not to become scientifically more objective in recording what he observed or researched, but rather to acknowledge his and others' intersubjectivities to create a cinema that was simultaneously "truth" and "fiction" (Henley 2009; Stoller 1992). Rouch deconstructed the filmic medium as a claim to objective representation and allowed the agency of those filmed to play a more formative part in the final film. In this interactive space, anthropological knowledge was developed from a more personal, collaborative, and horizontal perspective framed by shared experiences.

While Rouch developed the idea of *cinéma vérité* to depart from realist documentary film and openly court the dialogic and catalytic effects of film in its making (Henley 2009; Rouch 2003b; Stoller 1992), here we have presented a similar technique of what might be termed *vérités graphiques*, or "graphic truths." The ethno-graphic novel is not intended to represent "reality" in an objective sense. On the one hand, the truth or representation is based on the filtering of events and experiences through individual testimonials and the creative license deployed in working in the graphic medium. On the other, it enables participants and viewer-readers to "see the truth" in the schematized and fictionalized representations. The way truth is deployed here is not to refer to a particular series of events, but a generic series of events created through the affective intensities and investments in the medium. Truth here also implies an empathetic ethic that does not objectify or sensationalize specific individuals and their experiences.

The main narrative sits somewhere between fiction and nonfiction while also interrogating the premises of these seemingly oppositional areas, as we now demonstrate with recourse to Rouch's film *Chronique d'un Été* (*Chronicle of a Summer*, 1961). If we were to replay a classic scene in the film, Rouch sits around a table with the sociologist Edgar Morin and a diverse group of students discussing topics such as colonialism, racism, and

the Algerian war of independence. Rouch at one point directs Landry's attention to some numbers on Marceline's arms. He asks him and another man of African descent, Raymond, why they think the tattoo is there. They respond in a bewildered state, Raymond assuming perhaps that the numerals might be her telephone number. Marceline dispels the idea and reveals that they were in fact the numbers she was tattooed with when she was incarcerated as a Jew in the concentration camp at Auschwitz during World War II. The deflection effectively moves the discussion on discrimination based on skin color to that of ethno-religious identity. Stunned silence follows, as if a raw note of truth has been exposed, one that could not have happened without the provocation of the filmmaker-ethnographer. Where we depart from Rouch is to note that such moments of revelation are themselves problematic and fractured. Such instances of truth revelation through *cinéma vérité* need further interrogation.

Oral testimonies have been generally understood as a means with which to allow "survivors to speak for themselves" (Hartman 1996, 192), but numerous research demonstrates that testimony is in fact a co-production or co-construction of a dialogical encounter (see Clark 2005; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Greenspan and Bolkosky 2006; Jackson 2002; Portelli 1981). The basis of "truth-telling" that Rouch tries to catalyze or provoke through film itself becomes a fractured premise that *vérités graphiques* acknowledges and *cinéma vérité* does not to the same extent. This dissolution and oscillation between testimony and novel we have termed the *truth-fiction spectrum*. The process enables a shift from an "objective" and positivist approach—aimed basically at "representing" the cultural "Other"—to encompassing more subjective stories on a more horizontal alliance without a fixation on truth revelation through a directorial lens. The aim here is not so much to hit at or expose hard truths through this approach. Rather, it is to compose condensed stories from a distillate of memories of violence and displacement that research contributors recognize as true for the fact that they are simultaneously empowering and anonymizing, their story yet not their story.

Our approach also shows a debt to feminist studies. Liz Stanley and Sue Wise continue the critique of objective knowledge by proposing "feminist fractured foundationalism" (2005, 2) as a means with which to undermine the assumed objectivity of social life and facts. With fractured foundationalism, we are able to appreciate the positional and social constructedness of narratives about events from a variety of perspectives as well as accept that even foundational frames or testimonial truths need to be unpacked.

In this refractive light, we can see that Rouch's intervention in the café scene around the table goes a considerable way in creating an ultimate truth even while he might rail against it with his aspirations for *cinéma vérité*. As Trinh T. Minh-ha wrote about this filmic practice: "though the filmmaker's perception may readily be admitted as being unavoidably personal, the objectiveness of the reality of what is seen and represented remains unchallenged" (2012, 35; see Galman 2009, 214). Taking her critique on board, we proceed on the basis not of a truth-fiction dialectic between constitutive end points, but a truth-fiction spectrum where each element is fractured and momentarily dissolves into each other like the fluidity of liquid light. This is not a case of quarrying a deeper truth through media interactions with the subjects of research, but appreciating multi-layered truths created by the input and investments of the subject-participants of research at various stages of development of the ethno-graphic novel. Effectively, it conjures up, in Trinh's terms, a representational practice that speaks *nearby* and not *about*.

Engaging and Engaged Platforms

The research participants' contributions may be edited and/or embellished in the ethno-graphic novel, but there remain several potentials with *vérités graphiques*. Aside from the ability to retain the anonymity and therefore the protection of research participants, it was possible to highlight the compelling recollections of their experiences where viewer-readers could also "see" and empathize with representations of their stories. It enabled possibilities for a collaborative approach with participants who could interpret the sequential art and offer further feedback and advice on its content and development. The visual-verbal medium permitted entry points to areas that were difficult to access or recall. It also enabled the potential to foster a sympathetic imagination across visible, social, and other demarcations that can create new meanings—a horizontal way of seeing, feeling, and thinking about one's relationship with oneself, with others, and with the wider public (see De Mel 2013, Salgado 2007).

Drawing upon Michael Galchinsky's (2012) observations on graphic novels in general, *vérités graphiques* as a processual and interactive representational practice can add to the formation of a compelling and engaging "human rights culture." While we question Galchinsky's holistic conception of culture in this term (see Clifford 1988), we note that ethno-graphically informed stories on topics to do with vio-

lence, oppression, forcible displacement, and asylum seeking can play a significant role in creative advocacy. Simultaneously truth and fiction, more awareness can be raised through affective registers that also impart further insights and understanding. *Memories of the Vanni* provides another way of appreciating and understanding experiences of Sri Lanka's civil war, ethno-racial rivalries, internal and transnational displacement, war crimes, unlawful detention and torture, and the protracted plight of asylum seekers in nation-states that are increasingly turning against migrants and minorities. We end with the views of a conflict survivor who now lives in Britain that made the project all the more worthwhile: "I am happy to see an emotional yet honest publication that gives an insight into Vanni. Thank you for such a meaningful and in-depth creation."

Notes

- ¹ See, for instance, Galman (2009) and Hamdy and Nye (2016, 2017). The former involved research participants in U.S. teacher education centers who contributed drawings that were then analyzed by the researcher. The latter involved a collaborative team that produced a graphic novel based on fieldwork in Egypt and the United States.
- ² See also other novels written by anthropologists, such as Gardner (1996) and Varzi (2015), and earlier fictionalized works such as Bohannon aka Bowen (1964).
- ³ On other anthropologically informed graphic novels, see Nicola Streeten's work that is largely based on her own experiences, <http://home.btconnect.com/nicolastreeten/indexns12.htm>; Graphic Medicine's series to widely communicate medical issues, <http://www.graphicmedicine.org/book-series/>; the blogs on graphic adventures in anthropology, <http://www.utpteachingculture.com/tag/graphic-adventures-in-anthropology/>, the series with the University of Toronto Press, *ethnoGRAPHIC*; the PhD dissertation and graphic novel by Michael Atkins (2013) on gay cultures in Manchester; the "anthrocomics" produced by Aleksandra Bartoszko, Anne Birgitte Leseth, and Marcin Pnomarew at Oslo University College, <https://anthrocomics.wordpress.com/>, and the work at the Centre for Imaginative Ethnography and articles available online: <http://imaginativeethnography.org/imaginings/comics/making-graphic-novels-as-a-creative-practice-in-anthropology/>.

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