

Crafting the field, crafted by the field: thin and thick encounters in spaces of care for homeless people

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1. Introduction

With this short intervention I seek to contribute to the session, and to respond to its organizers' questions, by providing an empirics-based critique of an alleged methodological thinness. The final purpose is not the rejection of such a thinness but, instead, a reconsideration of the thinness-thickness interplay overall. I do so by drawing from the multi-sited geographical research practice I carried out in 2016 and 2017 during my PhD; a careful attention to the contextual particularities of the different components of this multi-sitedness demonstrates how spatial and methodological differentiations of 'the field' stress the importance not of an ubiquitous, unquestioned thinness but, instead, the importance of a productive and dynamic interplay between thinness and thickness, an interplay sensitive to the specificities, limitations and possibilities of each micro-context wherein the research unfolds. Overall, the thinness-thickness interplay suggests a methodological transparency that is reflective of the geographical heterogeneity inevitably encountered by the researcher. The contribution unfolds as follows: First, I briefly outline the contextual framework of the research. Then, I describe how the multi-sitedness of the field is translated into what can be called the field's «eclectic crafting» by the researcher, so that their practice can afterwards unfold therein. Following, I provide some examples in order to illustrate that the «eclectic crafting» of the field, and its experience, entails both a methodological thinness and thickness. In the concluding part, I argue for a much needed, new methodological imagination that takes the thinness-thickness interplay into serious consideration.

2. The research context: Athens and institutionalized spaces of care

Since 2008, the Greek capital has been at the epicentre of the global financial crisis as the city *par excellence* where the numerous, diversified, and often contradictory consequences have been dramatically reshaping urban space as a whole (Maloutas, 2014). One part of this general reshaping involves the emergence of a new urban class, that is the nouveau poor (Kaika, 2012), with increased visibility especially in the city centre. As a result, together with various spatialities that respond to the crisis overall and to the needs of the nouveau poor in particular, Athens is being transformed into a contested landscape of poverty and homelessness (Arapoglou, Gounis, 2017).

The aim of my doctoral research – 2016-2017 – was to ethnographically explore the micro-geographies of this very landscape of poverty and homelessness, in order to understand in what ways this is «contested». These micro-geographies include spaces that in the international literature are described as «spaces of care» (Conradson, 2003), such as night shelters, drop-in centers, soup kitchens and others. My research illustrates

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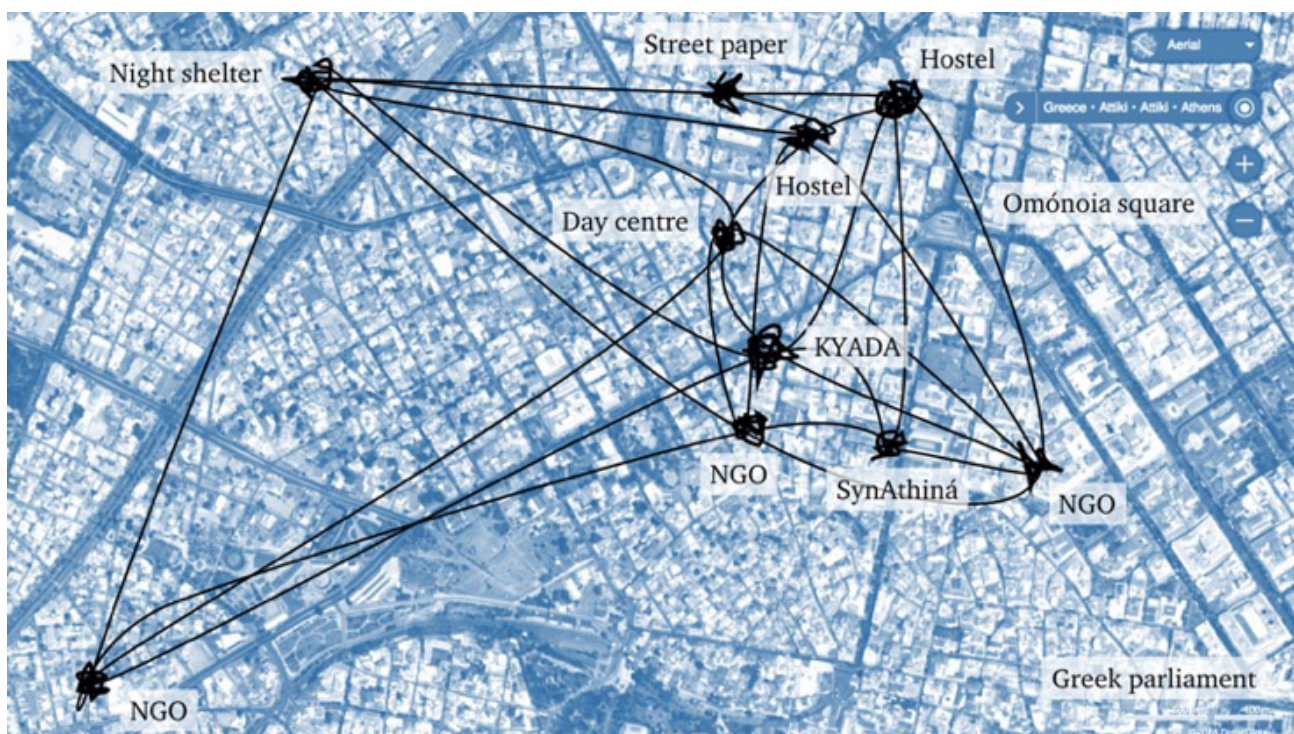
that this landscape becomes contested exactly because care, when approached and analyzed critically and through the practices that it is performed through, is an ambiguous thing that produces complex, often contradictory, socio-spatial relations and subjectivities (see Bourlessas, 2018; 2020).

Nevertheless, what is relevant here is the fact that the researched spaces of care are neither neutral or inactive spatial entities nor detached from the organizations responsible for their management, ideological and material maintenance. Instead, these organizations, throughout their discourses and practices, transform the spaces of care into spatial contexts that actively affect not only the caring practices, relations and subjectivities found therein but also, and most importantly for this contribution, the research itself. I have in detail scrutinized the particularities of these spatial contexts in relation to the conducted research elsewhere (Bourlessas, 2021). Nevertheless, what I seek to do hereby is to reframe these particularities in terms of thinness and thickness so as to provide a simple yet productive reflection on the absolutely relevant questions posed by the session's organizers.

3. Multi-sited research in spaces of care or «crafting the field» through multi-sitedness

The above map illustrates the spaces of care involved in my research. As a whole, and together with the interconnections, interdependencies and continuous movements amongst them, they shape Athens' «machinic archipelago» of care and service provision (Bourlessas, 2018). In methodological terms, and despite their theorization as a «machinic archipelago» – which goes beyond the scope of this contribution and session –, these different spatialities suggest a re-scaling of Marcus' famous «multi-sited» research; precisely from a global to a local-urban scale. What this rescaling of multi-sitedness allows is an elaborate methodological sensibility to the contextual particularities of each spatial context; or, in other words, a methodological *micro*-sensibility that is essential to geographical research if one of the latter's aims is to reveal and analyse spatial difference and heterogeneity.

Nevertheless, and despite the illustrative utility of this map that locates the places of the research field within urban space, what is necessary is a translation of this map into *another*, which goes beyond a simplistic, howev-



er relational, spatiality to illustrate the methodological limitations and possibilities of the field overall: that is, a translation of the spatial multi-sidedness into a methodological multi-sidedness; or the geographical field into a methodological field. This exercise will eventually allow for reflections on the thickness-thinness interplay. The particularities encountered in each of the spaces of care highlighted, already from the very beginning of my immersion in the field, that the latter had to be reshaped so as to conduct an effective and scientifically valid geographical research. The research field had to be *crafted* according to the particularities of each different micro-context. The use of the word ‘crafting’ has a twofold aim: to work as a metaphor that highlights the dramatic transformations of the field from the side of the researcher; and to emphasize the corporeal aspects involved in this remaking of the field first in actively shaping the field and then in being involved in the research in visceral manners. For the crafting of the field involves also the crafting of the researcher themselves. I call «eclectic crafting» the process of re-assembling the different components of multi-sidedness in ways that not only reflect the methodological possibilities and limitations of each component but also in ways that dictate the ways of doing research itself. The result of my field’s eclectic crafting is the map above or, as already mentioned, this map is the translation of the geographical into a methodological field. Therefore, eclectic crafting reads the *spatial* differences of multi-sidedness as *methodological* differences, and it practically leads the research endeavour in these terms.

Both on the map and in the research practice, the methodological differences are expressed through three different areas, which divide the field respectively: core field – central area –, intermediate field – first zone around the centre –, and lateral field – outer zone –. In practice, the re-assembling of places carried out through the eclectic crafting means a new positioning: from the geographical map onto the different zones of the methodological map, based on the research possibilities and limitations of each of these places. For example, in the core field are spaces of care that have allowed for direct and regular involvement in their practices. The night shelter and the day center, each of them organized and managed by a different NGO, were places of complete ethnographic immersion as their functional frameworks would allow me to get involved as a volunteer. Doing research as a volunteer-researcher (see Bourlessas, 2019) meant that I was able to conduct long-term participant observation even on a daily basis when possible; to develop relations of trust and mutual understanding not only with research participants but equally with staff members; to proceed with sufficient confidence to in-depth interviews, which could be adapted to the personalities, emotions and

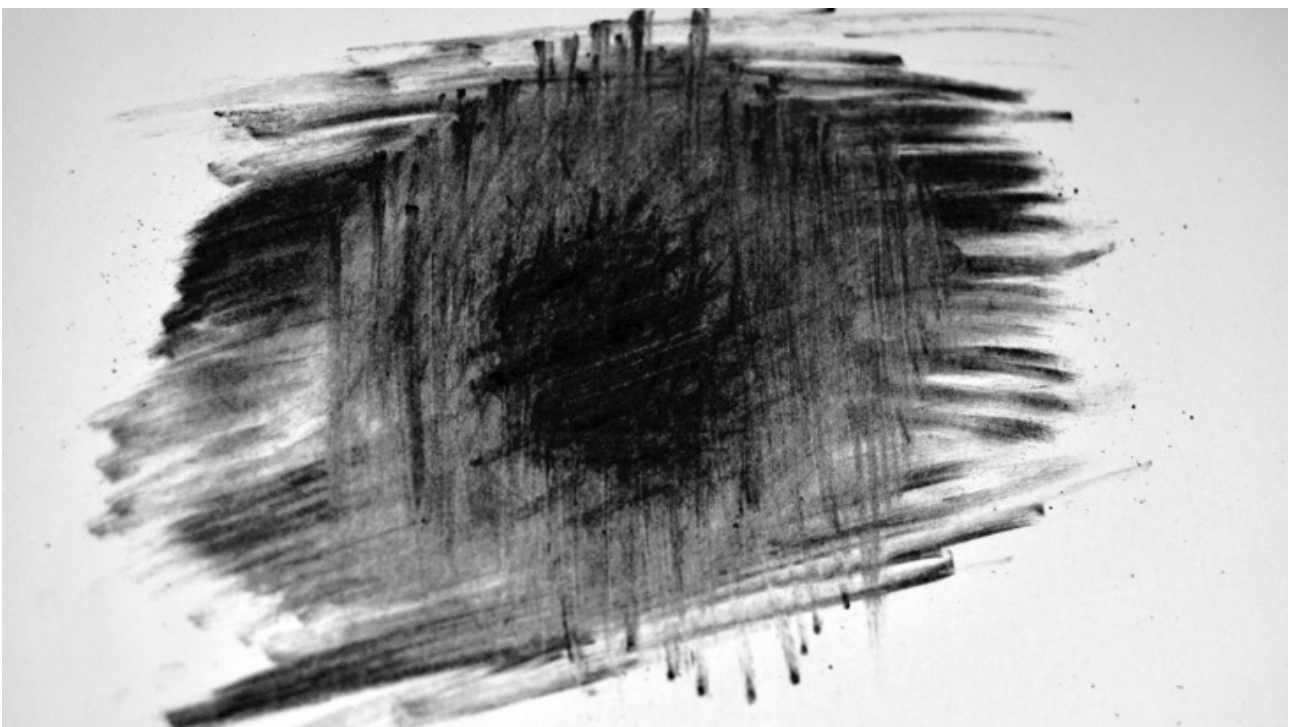


Figure 2. The field crafted eclectically: core field, intermediate field, lateral field. Source: Author’s sketch.

expectations of the participants; to play in active, corporeal role in the practices unfolding there. Such a full immersion would then be perfectly reflected in the collected research material and its analysis: field notes have been extremely rich and detailed, contacts with research participants the least mediated possible, recordings of interviews long and with an unexpected plurality of information, research ethics based on mutual exchange transparency. Indeed, research material constructed in the core field has been «thick» (Geertz, 1994) and so has been its reconstruction into critical human geographic analysis – and description – of the spaces at stake. Then, in the intermediate field are positioned spaces of care wherein immersion was relatively limited, regulated or mediated, mostly because of the institutional framework of each of them. To give an example, access to municipal hostels, relocated in the intermediate field, was permitted but at the same time highly regulated: research participants would be selected by the social workers of the municipality, interviews would be conducted necessarily inside the structures – thus potentially under surveillance –, time both for getting familiarized with the place and the people and for conducting interviews has been limited. All these factors unavoidably resulted in a research material that is not as thick as that collected through the full immersion within the core field; yet, the regular visits provided important knowledge for the entire research, although based mostly on different tools – e.g. on interviews rather than participant observation –. Nevertheless, it is important to stress that even the partiality and regulation experienced in these specific spaces of care anyways add a lot to the understanding of the spaces and their philosophies as local contexts; for the methodological limitations they have posed have been paradoxically productive for the research overall and for charting the particularities of homeless geographies of the city.

Finally, in the lateral field of the methodological map are positioned spatialities whose role, albeit playing a significant part in the lifeworlds of the people and places of interest, was limited in my actual research. These are places that emerged during fieldwork through their connections to other places or specific events that lead me there; or they are places that homeless people indicated to me when discussing specific research questions. Visits to the lateral field have been fragmented and primarily complementary to those in the core and intermediate fields. For instance, one single visit at the City's Cleaning Department added valuable information regarding the material homeless geographies that one section of my thesis was exploring, but would not provide sufficient material to construct an entire place-centred narrative of it. Both in terms of collected material, then, and in terms of description, the lateral field is characterized by a methodological thinness.

4. Neither *just* thickness nor *just* thinness: for a new methodological imagination

The brief empirical sketching of the eclectic crafting of the field allows for a productive reflection on the thinness-thickness interplay, as I will try to do in this concluding section. The call for this session has been based on Jackson's book «Thin Description. Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem» (Jackson, 2013). In this work, and in line with others having expressed similar concerns – (e.g. Brekhus e altri, 2005), Jackson criticizes the anthropological illusion of thinking of «thick description» as thicker than it actually is. Thus, taking into consideration the current global spatio-temporal condition, he reconsiders Geertz's (1973) famous concept to argue, instead, for a «flat ethnography» determined by a «thin-slicing» (2013, p. 17). Starting from the above thesis, I suggest that this very thin-slicing, however necessary, is neither equable nor predefined but, instead, sensitive to the particularities encountered in different areas of the research field and thus adaptable to them.

More precisely, what is important in these criticisms is the fact that they highlight how the so-called «thick description» does not only depend on *description*, that is the productive and theoretically elaborate processing of collected ethnographic data, but equally on the *collection and construction* itself of ethnographic data. In this way, they bring to the fore the significance of methodological and contextual limitations of a research project (see specifically Brekhus e altri, 2005). Yet, instead of universalizing thinness by rejecting thickness by default, what is necessary in geographical research is to develop a methodological sensibility to the interplay between thinness and thickness. For a blind, uncritical acceptance of thinness would risk to flatten geography methodologically, in perfect line with ontologies that overly flatten the discipline overall (Marston e altri, 2005), a tendency with many aspects to be criticised (Collinge, 2006).

Eventually, taking these perspectives further, the eclectic crafting of the field, together with the specificities exemplified by the multi-sitedness of my research, highlights a relational view on thinness and thickness, a view that points towards a new methodological imagination: the field is not a horizontal surface, a plane, which is either totally thin or totally thick. On the contrary, this methodological imagination allows us to see the verticality of the field, that is, its section after the field has been eclectically crafted: a section that shows exactly where the field is thicker and where it is thinner. In fact, this relational view avoids the re-production of a simplistic dualism that is often implied in analyses that argue completely either for thinness or for thickness in social research more generally: for example, that thinness is rigidly linked to mobility whereas fixity to thickness. To conclude, and in line with Freeman's (2014) observations on the hermeneutical aesthetics of thick description, the thinness-thickness constant interplay should construct a methodological hermeneutics in order to reveal the conditions under which geographical understanding takes place. A total flattening or thickening of the geographical field would erase the spatial heterogeneity through which research takes place, and which shapes our knowledge. Overall, what an equal attention to both thinness and thickness, as well as to a careful eclectic crafting of the field, offers is respect to not only the discipline of geography itself but also to the inevitable heterogeneity of our lifeworlds.

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