

Zines as Traces of Encounters

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Abstract

This zine marks the launch of the ERC project Proteinscapes: The Political Geography of Meat and Dairy. During the launch, I live-drew each conference, summarizing the academic content while also capturing what was not said out loud by the panelists themselves. How does this process unfold?

Sitting discreetly in the corner of the first row, my digital tablet on my knees—pencil in hand—I choose the drawing tool that allows me to write and draw simultaneously. A watercolor ink seemed the most appropriate: quickly handlable for fast note-taking and spontaneous sketches, perfectly suited to a fluid movement following the participant's talk. The key words are efficiency and relatedness. The process might give you a headache, but it is deeply satisfying: I capture the main concepts and arguments of the presentation with one active ear, while simultaneously searching for the most evocative visual forms. I resort to multiple creative strategies—colors, abstractions, shifts in scale, and focal points—to follow what the participant emphasizes beyond the spoken presentation itself. Off-field voices, anthropomorphous scenes and characters—such as a talkative pig—or surreal symbolic assemblages—such as an animal butcher cutting salad—become ways of tracing the explanatory process of the talks while capturing the atmospheres participants convey, filtered through my own perception and artistic interpretation.

Live drawing allows me to attend to what circulates unevenly in academic conferences: hesitations, affective intensities, moments of discomfort, or emphases that escape the transcript. While spoken interventions are shaped by disciplinary norms, time constraints, and hierarchies of expertise, drawing makes room for what remains marginal, ambiguous, or unresolved. Silences, side comments, metaphors, jokes, and embodied gestures—often dismissed as anecdotal—become part of the knowledge event itself. Academic conferences generate more than arguments: they produce atmospheres, alignments, frictions, and moments of collective attunement or dissonance. These dimensions are difficult to record and even harder to transmit beyond the room. Live drawing renders these ephemeral relations visible, offering a situated and partial trace of how knowledge is performed, felt, and negotiated.

These traces were intended to be intelligible and shareable. The zine can be divided, with each autonomous page circulating as a trace of encounter that can be sent back to the participants. Showing the drawn page based on their presentation often opened genuine and enthusiastic conversations about their work, generating reflections on how research might be made more accessible to non-academic publics.

Beyond the conference setting, this zine also served as an opportunity to experiment with creative tools and a sensorial approach that I am incorporating into my ongoing fieldwork. Currently, I am navigating the Azorean dairy landscape, sketching dairy production as an extractive regime that reorganizes female bodies and territories through techniques of control, care, and enclosure (Gaard, 2013). This perspective foregrounds how metabolic optimization reinvents persisting hierarchies: gendered divisions of farm work, the systematic subjugation of dairy cows' bodies, and forms of ecological imperialism rooted in the colonial history of the archipelago's transformation. The attentiveness cultivated through conference drawing directly informs my field drawing practice. In both contexts, drawing trains my capacity to register relations, atmospheres, and power asymmetries as they emerge—whether in academic debate or in everyday encounters with dairy infrastructures, animals, and landscapes—allowing these layered relations to coexist on the page without being reduced to isolated variables.

The precarious and saturated dimensions of animal exploitation are difficult to grasp through textual monographs alone (Lorimer et al., 2019). How, then, can one move beyond the limits and dead ends of writing alone in the field? Visual methods can open ethnographic attentiveness as action-oriented tools to enact multispecies stories as “active technologies of worlding” (Van Dooren et al., 2016). Through the same technique described above, I report my own experience as an ethnographer, transcribing observations through the pen of my paintbrush. This immersive practice becomes a way of processing data, enacting thoughts, feelings, and atmospheres as they emerge from the research process itself.

Painting the dairy cows' gaze confronts me with what Kathryn Gillespie describes as the ethical demand of witnessing: an encounter that refuses mastery and instrumentalization. To meet the animal's gaze is not to speak for her, but to remain with the discomfort of her irreducible otherness, vulnerability, and presence (Gillespie, 2016). Drawing, in this sense, requires ethical openness (Mannay, 2015). It implicates the drawer as both observer and participant, responsible for how relations are rendered and shared. This feminist multispecies position resists the extraction of meaning from animal lives and instead foregrounds attentiveness, accountability, and exposure as methodological commitments. I seek to transmit this sense of relatedness through future zines emerging from my fieldwork.

This zine format, therefore, seeks to evoke: appealing to the senses and imagination to make academic contributions more accessible and engaging beyond academic walls. By combining ethnographic inquiry with visual storytelling, this multimodal approach foregrounds the sensory, precarious, and relational dimensions of more-than-human geography through creative forms of scholarly publishing.

References

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