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Grasseni, C.

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# Collaboration, Mediation, and Comparison

Epistemological Tools from Theory-driven Fieldwork Practice

Cristina Grasseni

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## Introduction to the Special Issue

- This special issue explores multimodal work-in-progress results and reflections from two ERC Consolidator projects, namely Francesco Ragazzi’s *The Security Politics of Algorithmic Vision* and *Food Citizens?*. While the *Food Citizens?* team have been working together for over four years (Cristina Grasseni as Principal Investigator, Ola Gracjasz, Maria Vasile and Vincent Walstra as Ph.D. candidates, and Federico De Musso as postdoc)<sup>1</sup>, the *Security Vision*’s co-authors (Francesco Ragazzi as Principal Investigator, Ildikó Plájás as postdoc, and Ruben van de Ven as Ph.D. candidate) write about current methodological deliberations.<sup>2</sup> When we met in June 2021, we realized that what we had in common was the ambition to use collaborative methodologies in the field in a comparative perspective. Consequently, this special issue focuses on the meaning and variety of mutual engagements (both with field actors and fellow fieldworkers), in conjunction with the workings of mediation (Grasseni and Gieser 2019) and (digital) affordances (Grasseni and Walter 2014, De Musso this issue). A total of five articles authored by both teams, completed by Paolo Favero’s invited afterword, will allow us to

bring to light some key aspects of the epistemology and practice of collaboration, mediation and comparison.

- 2 This introduction outlines first the methodological premises of the *Food Citizens?* project, before connecting them to our colleagues' work. For the *Food Citizens?* project, I highlight in particular three epistemological tools that we distilled from theory-driven fieldwork practice, namely the case study grid, the mental map and the 'taking-stock' narrative approach. The latter defines the project's investment in theory-driven fieldwork practice and collective reflection. While working with case studies and mental maps is well known to several disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, their recursive and progressive systematization into a grid of cases and in narrated mental maps took on an intrinsic role in this project. Firstly, the project is characterized by the strategic choice of breaking up longitudinal fieldwork to periodically gather and 'take stock' of the field as a team, and secondly, by the technique of 'fabulation', namely collectively articulating in words, maps and texts the results and impressions narrated from the field. These two steps set the ground for the epistemological collaborations that were needed to digitally 'mediate' the individual researchers' trajectories and field explorations into one collective artefact - namely the project's i-doc, which realizes the project's ethnographic comparison (see De Musso, this issue).
- 3 Next, the article from the *Security Vision* project tells the interdisciplinary story of their collaborative mapping project, taking stock from the first steps of Ragazzi, Plájás and van de Ven (a political sociologist, a visual anthropologist and STS (Science and Technology Studies) scholar, and a digital artist respectively) in their research on algorithmic vision(s) for the field of security. They investigate the generative friction among methods, fields and actors in orienting their curiosities, deliberations and choices according to the (often tacit) epistemological premises that are grounded in different theoretical and methodological traditions. Articulating these premises and positioning was key to shaping their visual storytelling.
- 4 Common to the two projects is the consciousness that the final artefacts 'erase the muddling' (Turnbull, 2003) of the work in progress, the negotiations, the work-arounds and the occasional stalls. Likewise, the final artefacts are mostly user-oriented in their design, but contain the collaborations that have made them possible through the work of mediation (where mediation means the making of media, but also the synergies or tensions among team members as well as between researchers and interlocutors in the field). The following works intend to open up the black box of fieldwork - to the extent that that is possible through post-hoc analysis - and uncover the traces of the steps taken to let the final products emerge from practice (digital maps, i-docs, but also dissertations and articles). These highly curated sets of relations, polished arguments, and translated sets of meanings and categories have in fact taken shape through their own circulation, performance and appropriation among the members of each team (and among the two teams on two occasions).<sup>3</sup>

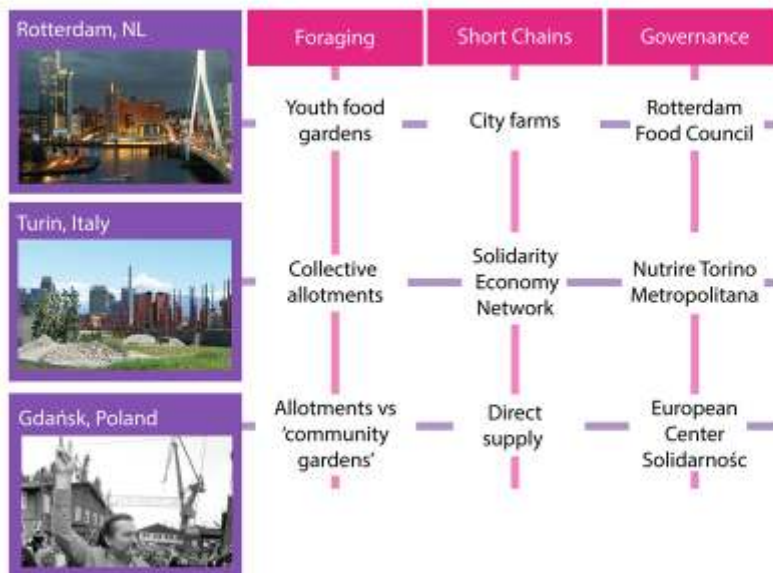
## A Theory-driven Field Analysis

- 5 The *Food Citizens?* project starts with the realization that, if we consider the imagery depicting the global food system today, there's very little space in it for nuance, context, and for the sociocultural dimension - namely for agency, conflict, for

relationships among humans and between humans and non-humans. The intuition behind the project is that by re-introducing the collective and social element in urban food procurement practices, we would be investigating more than food procurement per se, but also styles of participation. This is because - even just across Europe - collective food procurement goes beyond sustainability fixes and techno-scientific imaginaries of future foods, and inevitably remind us of a diversity of histories, styles of governance, ways of getting by and economic standards, relevant societal debates, and modes of participation. Representative of this diversity are the three European cities chosen for our ethnographic comparison, namely Gdańsk, Rotterdam and Turin. This diversity of viewpoints across Europe defined a first dimension of analysis in this project.

- 6 In the project, ‘collective food procurement’ defines engagement in production, distribution and consumption of food at multiple levels: self-production and foraging (for example, in food gardens), short food chains (for example, through food cooperatives) and local food governance (for example, through food policy councils, but also through social networks or NGOs). This distinction among three types (or scales) of collective food procurement networks defines a second dimension of analysis. We did not begin with top-down definitions, but rather we operationalised this micro-meso-macro grid of analysis with a view to exploring case studies in the field. Building on a critical reading of the current literature on ‘alternative food networks’ and ‘food citizenship’,<sup>4</sup> I structured an initial matrix based on locations in the three cities and scale (or type) of collective food procurement networks, with which to identify potential case studies.

Figure 1. Planned case studies (2016)



Grid of qualitative cases from the original project (2016).

GIF animation by Federico De Musso.

7 This is the matrix of cases as it appeared at the beginning of the project. The main intuition of this structure was that the two axes of analysis - by city and by scale of action (from self-provision, to short chains, to governance and mediation - even if only at the municipal level) would overlap one over the other, so that the grid would be dynamic (as the animation intuitively suggests). To consider this overlap among porous boundaries would ensure that connections are sought and investigated not only across scales in one city, but potentially *among* the three cities. For example, supra-local networks are inspired by international scholarly and professional literature about ‘best practices’ on urban food policy. Contacts, conversations and contaminations across similar practices in various field sites, and occasionally reciprocal visits among stakeholders, were in fact documented before our investigation started, some happened spontaneously during fieldwork, and some were facilitated by our meetings and workshops being held in different locations, including Gdańsk and Turin<sup>5</sup>. Initially this grid of potential case studies listed contacts and sites personally known to the principal investigator or suggested by our advisory board, then the Ph.D. candidates added and changed the sites as they progressed in their respective fieldwork, each taking a personal angle in terms of emerging themes for their dissertations. We thus changed locations and contacts in this matrix many times over, progressively working it out into a finer-grain grid, of which you can find an illustration below.

Figure 2. Case studies conducted in Turin

Levels of analysis	TURIN cases	Sites / Places	Events / Networks	People	Audiovisual data
Urban Foraging (producing)	Allotments, including spontaneous gardens	Urban gardens (allotments)	On-garden activities, guided tours in spontaneous allotments	Gardeners	Interviews, video elicitations, videos and photos
	Social gardens, such as Orti Generali (see article in this special issue)	Urban gardens (social and community gardens)	Permaculture course, bee-keeping, collective works, volunteers' meetings, sheep-keeping, visits	Gardeners, volunteers, students, farmer	Interviews, cultural map, video elicitation, videos and photos, project documentation
Urban Foraging (gleaning)	Grassroots free food distribution	Markets, storage sites, self-managed collective spaces (e.g. communal kitchens), streets and dorms	Food (waste) collection, cooking, distribution, food package preparation, public demonstrations, assemblies	Gleaners, activists' collectives	Interviews, videos and photos, communication material
	Institutional free food distribution carried out by non-profit organizations	Markets, storage sites, collective spaces (e.g. municipal community centres)	Food (waste) collection, cooking sessions, food package preparation	Workers of the non-profit sector, volunteers, food recipients	Interviews, group interview, cultural maps, video elicitation, videos and photos, articles, internal documentation
Short Food Chains (connecting producers and consumers)	Entrepreneurial (digital) platforms for (local) food procurement	Online and shops	Shops visits, food distribution	Shop managers, volunteers	Interviews, cultural map, videos and photos
	Neighborhood (open air) fresh food markets	Markets	Everyday life at the market, collection and redistribution of food (waste)	Market vendors, market-goers, food (waste) redistribution workers and volunteers	Interviews, videos and photos, documentation on markets and their history
	Craft, entrepreneurial markets	Food hall	Visits	Market vendors	Interviews, photos
Food Governance	Networks of food procurement through a collective (such as G.A.S., Solidarity Purchase Groups)	Collective spaces (for meetings etc.), farms, street stands	Farm visits, food collection and distribution, assemblies	Critical consumers, activists, farmers	Interviews, group interviews, cultural map, internal documentation, articles
	Networks lobbying for food policy at city level, citizens collectives studying urban transformations	Meetings	Food waste camp, program evaluation sessions, public meetings	Academics, public servants, workers of the non-profit sector, activists	Interviews, cultural map, photos, public documentation such as policy analyses and articles
	Food education, enrollment, training by non-profit organizations	Communal kitchens, collective spaces (for rehearsal etc.), theatre room	Cooking classes, plays rehearsal and performances	Chefs, theatre actors, workers and volunteers of the non-profit sector	Interviews, group interview, video elicitation, videos and photos, project documentation

This is the anonymized version of Turin's case studies, with fieldwork sites and type of data  
Data collected by Maria Vasile.

8 Participant observation was carried out in several field sites across the three cities with about 185 interviews and more than 40 interactive sessions among the group interviews, focus groups, map-drawing, and photo- and video-elicitation.<sup>6</sup> Scholars and civil servants, practitioners and representatives of local associations were informed about the project and supported it by facilitating access to the field and introducing the Ph.D. candidates to cities they were entirely new to.<sup>7</sup>

- 9 These tables held a performative value, which consisted in recursively and progressively redefining the porous borders of ‘fuzzy’ categories (such as ‘urban foraging’) by looking at which significant dynamics could be described by that category on the ground, and then by making further distinctions and connections on the basis of the findings (for example between ‘gleaning’ and ‘self-production’). The grid organized these ‘fuzzy categories’ in the same way for all researchers, namely across the three cities. This allowed us to explore the conceptual tension within the categories, by juxtaposition and contrast. For example, while the ‘Food not Bombs’ groups were to be found in all cities, the ‘networks of food procurement through a collective’ varied widely, from food cooperatives to solidarity purchase groups, and each had their own rationale depending on context.
- 10 The project’s ‘fuzzy categories’ thus accrued layers of concrete meanings as a result of description, during the process of narration through which the researchers recounted their field encounters to the rest of the team. This was done through fortnightly field reports while in the field, and through team sessions to ‘take stock’ once back from the field. Our descriptions and reciprocal interrogations on concrete and local case studies such as allotment gardens, spontaneous gardens and grassroots and institutional forms of free food (re)distribution eventually gave field-specific meanings and registered diverse practices of ‘self-production’ and ‘gleaning’.

## Comparing by Context: An Abductive Approach

- 11 The article by Plájás, Ragazzi and van de Ven (this issue) ‘On Generative Frictions in Mapping Computer Vision Technologies in the Field of Security’ reflects on the interdisciplinary collaboration of three team members who come themselves from interdisciplinary backgrounds: a political scientist and filmmaker with a visual anthropologist and STS scholar and a programmer and media artist. It states how their project was intent on ‘accepting the diversity in the ontological, epistemic and methodological assumptions that come with different practices of map-making (or path-finding)’. The result was to ‘pluralize the map making: each of the mappings addressing the question of “what is security vision?” on its own terms’. Part of this diversity was also represented in the *Food Citizens?* project, as some researchers made more use than others of, for example, photography as a heuristic tool in the field or focus group as a maieutic way to interrogate meanings with research interlocutors. However, in our project the overall idea was to go into the field with an open mind for cases, but a single anthropological framework, as this would facilitate comparison.
- 12 This objective was partly operationalized by the matrix of cases introduced above, partly by a shared audiovisual training and research protocol, and partly from having cultivated a common language, through readings and seminars, during the first two years of the project.<sup>8</sup> This common vocabulary and syntax, so to speak, would allow us to come back from the field and literally *talk to one another* about relevant similarities and differences, distinctions and connections, interrogating the field comparatively without stopping at ethnographic difference (‘in my case it’s different’). ‘Taking stock’ as a recursive, collaborative and generative process was embedded from the start into the project, as part of its methodological framework, in order to first plan and anticipate fieldwork, then to adapt and revise case studies, and finally to write up and visualize them. In sum, through articulation and narration, foresight and looking back,

we approached field and categories in a recursive, circular way, as much as possible *with method*.

- 13 The *Food Citizens?* project proposed a theory-driven ethnographic comparison. I use Patrizia Messina's work in political science (Messina, 2001) and take inspiration from her comparative analysis of differently 'coloured' political subcultures in two Italian regions ('white' for Christian conservative Veneto, 'red' for socialist-oriented Emilia-Romagna). Messina shows how in these neighbouring contexts, the tacit rules of the political game, for what regards the relationship between local administrators and local entrepreneurs in planning the development of their regions, are different. One's expectations as to the ways in which citizens' associations and entrepreneurs participate in governance and decision making differ from one extreme of *laissez faire* to one of co-optation and negotiation. Her 'comparison by context' is an inspirational notion to articulate the epistemology of our approach, which is critical of universal models for collective food procurement (for example, through 'sustainable' or 'participatory' urban food systems) and of normative notions of 'food citizenship' in general, unveiling the impossibility of developing such models in an abstract, context-less way. The project's aim was to render context-appropriate portraits of European cities where food procurement and active citizenship come into conversation, but are grounded in different contexts and meanings.
- 14 Transposing this to our objects of analysis: the definition itself and the scope of food governance, or of short chains, or indeed of community gardens, changes in the different contexts. This is why we worked with fluid categories to interrogate the ethnographic field, as our work was to delineate the porous boundaries between categories while using them to probe the field. Consequently, there is a third conceptual dimension to our analysis: while the researchers' ethnographic attention would be guided by three levels (micro, meso and macro) in three sites (the cities of Gdańsk, Rotterdam and Turin), the ethnographic comparison would be guided additionally by four categories, or socio-cultural dimensions of analysis. 'Solidarity', 'diversity', 'skill', and 'scale' are the chosen entry points – namely angles or viewpoints from which to ask the project's questions, for example: which skills do people involved in collective food procurement acquire or lack? How do they operate across and within diverse communities? Do their networks scale 'up' or 'out', and how? How do they interpret and articulate solidarity? In sum, our empirical investigation of three types (or levels) of collective food procurement in three cities was driven by a conceptual investigation, which connects and interrogates the sites and levels of analysis with theoretical categories. These were, too, distilled and derived from scholarship on alternative food networks and food citizenship, based on their recurrence in the relevant literature by scholars and professionals. Again, the epistemological intuition which premised this project was not to define categories of solidarity, diversity, skill and scale other than through a battery of questions (listed in our shared research protocol across the three cities<sup>9</sup>). We would define the actual meaning of these categories through field results, comparatively.
- 15 While the project's investigation is field-driven, we were proceeding neither by empirical generalization nor by categorical definitions, but rather in an abductive way: interpreting and framing the clues and leads from the field with categories which drove the investigation, and which we then recursively refined and redefined to fit the empirical evidence (Saunders, 2008: 145). As Charles Sanders Peirce maintained, the



logic of abduction is truly heuristic, being the only logical mechanism that reaches for creative, original connections (1940). “Abduction is the process of forming explanatory hypotheses. It is the only logical operation which introduces any new idea” (1957; 1931-66, CP 5.172), because it draws together cognate phenomena besides a causal relation. While abduction conceives of potential relations, the work of generalization by deduction or induction is only capable of deriving consequences from explanatory hypotheses (deduction) or verifying hypotheses by testing its consequences (induction). Abduction instead consists in re-ordering the (visual) field in such a way that allows one to detect previously unnoticed connections as relevant.

- 16 This act of re-ordering consists of imposing an analytically useful framework, shaping the field of investigation. Through a three-dimensional analysis the project aimed to relativize an otherwise normative expression, that of ‘food citizenship’ (Jhagroe 2019). Through a fine-grained analysis – empirical and conceptual, a complex picture would emerge of the underlying societal imaginaries about how, in each site, it is perceived or debated that one *should* participate and belong in local food procurement networks (hence the question mark in the project title). Next, I elaborate on collaboration, to debate what kind of teamwork was needed to let this complex picture emerge.

## Collaboration and Teamwork

- 17 Plájás, Ragazzi and van de Ven (this issue) reflect on collaboration as a form of ‘collaboration’ (Niewöhner 2016). The expression is very apt to render the labour, negotiations and compromise of teamwork. In the case of their project, this dynamic process defines the core of the project’s agenda: together the authors (principal investigator, postdoc and Ph.D. candidate) want to ask from different disciplinary viewpoints: ‘how does one map and visualise the complex arrangements of computer vision technologies used in the field of security?’ In the article, they tell the story of how they came to the conclusion of ‘pluralizing their visualisation practices’, ‘rather than searching for an illusory consensus’, using a “diffractive” approach (Barad 2007).
- 18 For the *Food Citizens?* project agenda, this would not have been possible, because it hinged on working out the conditions of possibility for comparison collaboratively. In order to do so, all the members of the team had to be willing and able to share the same framework for analysis as spelled out in the project documents, team calendars, etc. With a team of two postdocs, three Ph.D. candidates and a research assistant, over the last five years we attempted to bring to life this epistemological framework, using a recursive methodology alternating prolonged fieldwork and taking stock periods. Fieldwork covered 16 months in total, divided into three months pre-fieldwork, six months fieldwork (phase 1), and then again seven months (phase 2), over the period December 2018-August 2020. In between each period of participant observation, the team held collaborative reflection sessions, during which the researchers would reflect and (re)assemble their field experiences, the project’s categories, and the connections, similarities and contrasts between the sites.
- 19 In particular, the precondition of ethnographic comparison was not to go down three separate fields of analysis altogether, but rather to combine a measure of constraint with a measure of freedom, operationalizing freely but in a coordinated way, the initial matrix for analysis - which consisted of these three cities, these three levels of analysis, and these four analytical categories. Within the potential prism of these three

dimensions of analysis, the researchers were free to scout their own cases, but bound to narrate and justify their rationale within the project framework back to the rest of the team. In other words, data collection and choice of case studies were open to co-determination, but only to an extent. For example, the project did not foresee an ethnography of markets, which was carried out by the initiative of the researchers. However, the choice of one would influence the others and vice versa. Data gathering was in this sense structured, meaning that it was interconnected across sites and levels of analysis, in such a way that this interconnection could also eventually facilitate, enable and instruct their comparison. This required meeting frequently and intensively. Hence the project methodology foresaw a series of ‘taking stock’ half-day or one-day sessions (in person), which led to ‘putting flesh on the bones’ of the initially proposed grid of case studies (from figure 1 to figure 2, so to speak). Taking stock became our narrative approach to a progression towards comparison, as well as our mode of working together.

Figure 3. Narrating and comparing maps



The researchers created maps of each other's fieldwork, based on reading one another's field reports during phase 1 and before phase 2 of fieldwork.

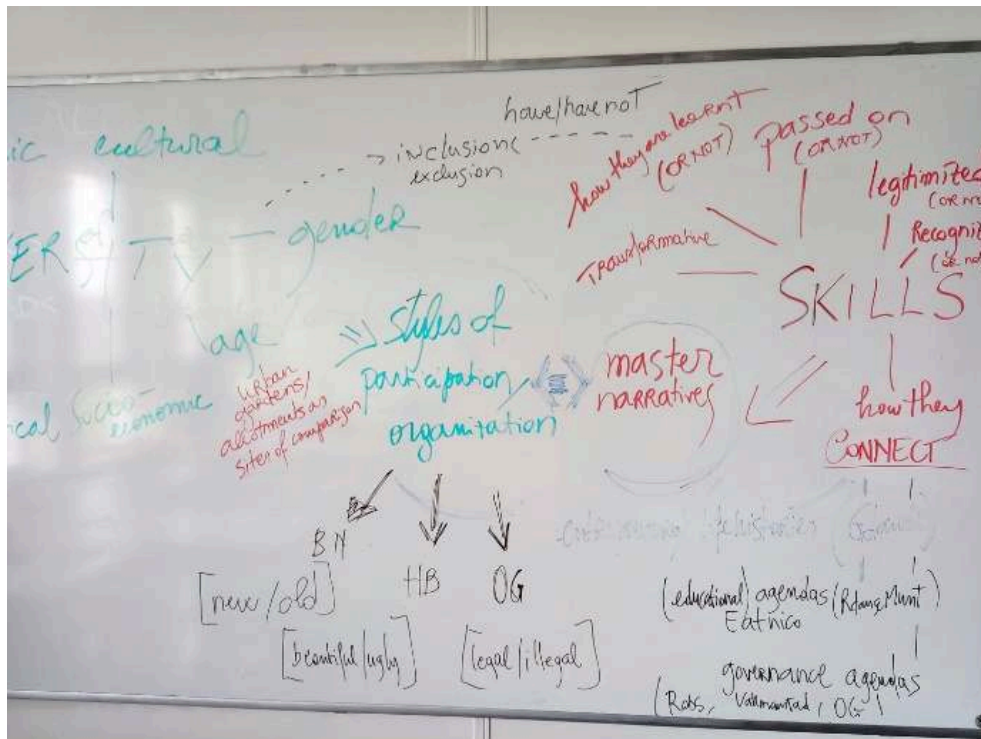
Photo by Cristina Grasseni, January 2020. Courtesy of Ola Gracjasz, Maria Vasile and Vincent Walstra.

- 20 Before leaving for the field again and after coming back for good, we (re)read and critically engaged with the questions identified in the field protocol, for example about scale of action and scaling strategies, and debates about whether to scale up or out: do collective food procurement networks connect with other types of networks? Do they expand? If so, how are they transformed or redefined? Do they re-organize their practices and re-think their mission, and if so, why and how? Are local practices influenced by transnational models? Do they negotiate access to resources with local or higher-level government? We reflected on findings on a case-by-case basis. At the same

time, we asked ourselves ‘How do we make our questions and answers visible in the platform?’ Which narratives do we want to develop? What can we already ‘see’ in one another’s materials from the field? Our plans to visit one another in the field were limited (but not destroyed) by the COVID-19 pandemic, which also shaped some of the ethnographies and convinced us to stay three months longer than planned in the field. Both Cristina Grasseni and Federico De Musso were able to visit all three cities independently, either to pay a visit to PhDs and stakeholders, or to gather footage and supervise audiovisual data collection.

- 21 After the fieldwork, we went back to the ‘grid’ of cases that we shared before leaving for the last time. Together we narrated what had been covered, and how each node related with one another. We used the four lenses of solidarity, diversity, skill, and scale as categories to ‘slice up’ narrations. In a progression of ‘taking stock’ sessions, we reflected on the project’s four categories and how each confronted the researchers with a different set of questions to be answered through the field case studies. This culminated in making four mental maps (by diversity, skill, solidarity and scale) connecting our narrations and reciprocal understandings of people, places and networks that belonged to the three types of collective food procurement networks (foraging or self-production; short food chains and governance) investigated in each of the three cities. The mental maps wove and drew connections across the narrated case studies that had been previously identified in the grid. As a result of this recursive exercise of sharing narratives, we could relate to one another’s fields and discuss them at length without having carried them out personally. This also enabled the last phase of our collaboration, namely mediation.

Figure 4. Comparing field sites



This is one of the maps created during our brainstorming sessions, comparing field sites through the analytical lenses of the project’s categories (in this case, diversity and skill).

Photo by Cristina Grasseni.

## Mediation: A Narrative Approach to Digital Visual Engagements

- 22 The *Security Vision* project set out to map actors who ‘develop or use security technologies based on computer vision, such as the ones used in biometric border technologies, smart CCTVs in “smart cities” or in social media content moderation’ (Plájás et al., this issue). The team members mediated their ‘exponentially diverse’ interdisciplinary knowledge through various data visualizations. First they created a geographic map and a network visualisation based on data collected in Semantic MediaWiki. They then moved on to hand drawn diagrams and a data visualisation that integrates a 3D space as to attend to ‘unknown data’. These different maps can be read through one another in what Karen Barad (2007) calls 3D spaces using a “diffractive” approach. In the case of the *Food Citizens?* project, the case study grid, the mental maps and ethnographic narration became the main epistemological tools to enable interaction among the researchers’ individual ethnographies. This also ‘mediated’ the case studies – as each became a node in an overall picture, connecting the three cities. Initially fixated in ‘grids’, the cases were interwoven firstly through drawing mental maps, and then through in-depth narrative sessions on ‘mediation’ and ‘comparison’ – eventually leading to the project’s i-doc (De Musso, this issue). Throughout the project, narration techniques included drawing mental maps of the relations between the various people, places and networks personally encountered in the field, but also – for example – narrating someone else’s fieldwork based on having read their field reports (which we shared fortnightly via email among the team).
- 23 The graphic exercise of mind-mapping enabled a first step toward comparison, by bringing different fieldwork experiences into the same logical space. The potential for logical connection (which can be of similarity or contrast, continuity or hiatus, closeness or distance, etc.) is operationalized by proximity in space, as exemplified in Aby Warburg’s tableaux of his 1927-1929 *Mnemosyne Picture Atlas* where he assembled side by side (reproductions of) primary visual sources such as paintings but also postcards, newspaper cuttings, and book covers (le Fevre Grundtmann 2020, Brown and Green 2002).<sup>10</sup> A similar logic is at work in the cinematographic technique of montage, which operates both with audiovisual materials and with ethnographic writing, as George Marcus explained (1990). In *The Atlas and the Film*, I reflected on how ‘virtuallscapes’ could enable collective forms of ‘storytelling’ through digital annotation, and afford space for analysing ‘ecologies of belonging’ by gathering together relevant media (text, videos, photos, but also live web documents and media) that one could annotate, highlight and organize into ‘visual arguments’ or as many ‘nodes’ on a digital canvas (Grasseni 2014).<sup>11</sup> This would allow the work of ‘contextualization’ of the ‘soundscapes’ and ‘sightsapes’ of ethnographic encounters, such as those I was investigating in the context of Boston’s North End and its Italian American devotional ‘Saints’ feasts’. In the case of the *Food Citizens?* project, Federico De Musso’s original contribution to the project consisted in digitally organizing the space of potential logical connections the team had only explored in mind maps, by designing and coding the digital i-doc (De Musso, this issue).
- 24 For this to happen, however, a fourth layer of analysis, namely a further epistemological intervention, was needed. This would ‘realize’ the three dimensions of

analysis outlined above, making them congeal into one concrete visualization. People, places and networks are the anchor points of ethnographic observation. They make cultural dimensions tangible and concrete, and relevant to specific sites and contexts. They are what allows us to operationalize and juxtapose, as in a montage, clearcut juxtapositions and relationships between salient characters, significant objects and specific places. It is by connecting these anchor points that the *Food Citizens?* i-doc connects the three levels of analysis of collective food procurement, as carried out in three European cities, through the four chosen dimensions of solidarity, diversity, skill and scale.

- 25 To prepare and enable this fourth layer, the project's plan incorporated audiovisual training in digital visual engagements (Grasseni and Walter 2014). We would not only narrate with words, but also visualize the researchers' fields according to a shared grammar, a visual language so to speak. A common grammar for gathering visuals meant again coordinating with one another as to the type of shots, processes and objects we would focus on.<sup>12</sup> Finally, building on our 'taking stock' recursive discussions, which included the collective narration of the audiovisual documentation of specific people, places and networks, Federico De Musso 'drew together' (Ingold 2011) the researchers' individual - and to an extent serendipitous - lines of investigation on a digital canvas (see De Musso, this issue). Although Ingold does not talk of comparison, I find his metaphor of 'understanding as drawing together or binding the trajectories of life' (2011, 221) inspirational to describe this process. The project's i-doc in fact does not only work as an online platform to disseminate the team's accrued case study information, but also as an epistemological tool, namely a digital-ethnographic form of montage (Suhr and Willerslev, 2013) that generates comparison through juxtaposition (Grasseni 2014).
- 26 In sum, throughout the project and in particular over the period September 2020-June 2021, we worked as a team through a series of collectively narrated sessions. Guided first by spontaneous narrations from the field, using mental maps and focusing exercises, we revisited the research protocol's questions and the four categories of analysis of the project (solidarity, diversity, skill, and scale). This process progressed, partly by trial and error, partly guided by a predetermined calendar of meetings and thematic sessions.<sup>13</sup> Revisiting the project's questions and categories one by one led us to draw conceptual maps during our 'taking stock' sessions. Finally, first in collective sessions on 'Mediation' and 'Comparison', then in individual working sessions with Federico De Musso, the Ph.D. candidates tagged and labelled the people, places and networks that had been documented audio-visually, and sorted them as representative of a 'solidarity', 'diversity', 'skill' or 'scale' dimension of analysis, connecting them by similarity or contrast with other cases in the same city, and by similarity or contrast in other cities (an idea of Federico De Musso, this issue).
- 27 In conclusion, the narrative approach involved every aspect of the project: firstly, we shared readings and discussed them over several months. Pre-fieldwork and Phase 1 of fieldwork led to the finalization of the fieldsites grid. The field researchers shared fortnightly field reports throughout 16 months of fieldwork. After returning from the field, ethnographic vignettes, audiovisual materials, thesis chapters and outlines were workshopped by the entire team collectively over several months. Articulating, 'fabulating' and mind-mapping one's encounters in the field became progressively a heuristic technique, which allowed each of us to familiarize ourselves with the cases by

comparing them with others in the same city or with similar and contrastive tales in the other two cities. ‘Taking stock’ of fieldwork as a narrative approach was thus a conceptual positioning exercise, conducive to ethnographic comparison as a form of ‘descriptive integration of phenomena’ (an expression of Alfred Kroeber 1935: 545, pace Ingold 2011: 222, 226).

## Collaboration, Mediation and Comparison. Reflections from Field Practice

- 28 On the basis of these premises, with this special issue we wish to reflect together with fellow researchers (particularly Ildikó Plájás, Francesco Ragazzi, Ruben van de Ven and Paolo Favero) on our experience with collaborative, mediating and comparative practices, using a diverse set of multimodal methods. The aim of this special issue in particular is to investigate which epistemic practices we produce together with our interlocutors and colleagues, and how in turn these practices affect our way of doing research (Favero 2017).
- 29 For example, *the Food Citizens?* research protocol included participant observation, interviews, cultural maps, focus groups, life and career histories, and documentary analysis. As said, different researchers shared a visual framework in order to provide comparable materials from different field sites. However, collaboration is a practice emerging in the context of mutual engagements in the field, with research participants as well as co-researchers. On the one hand, conceptual frameworks, epistemological tools and equipment mediate this practice. On the other, encounters in the field reframe our practices of vision and require that we open up to collaborations with our interlocutors (Collins et al. 2017). The authors in this special issue, thus, discuss various ways in which collaboration and mediation can be generative for thinking about ethnographic comparison as a form of understanding and as a process of engagement. By placing mutual engagements (with field interlocutors, with other team members, and with visual artefacts) centre stage, we want to trace ethical and epistemic paths that address the following questions: which ethical dilemmas does collaborating with fellow researchers and field participants engender? How do mutual engagements blend/bend the categories of observation and participation into some form of dynamic integration? How do collaboration and mediation work, and what kind of knowledge do they generate?
- 30 In the first three of the following articles, Ola Gracjasz, Vincent Walstra, Maria Vasile and Cristina Grasseni reflect on how they used diverse tools such as photography, focus group and visual analysis in the field, focusing on the aspects of collaboration, mediation and comparison. Ola Gracjasz elaborates on the combined perspectives of photography and anthropology, as disciplines and field practices that come into mutual engagement based on her fieldworks in Gdańsk and Cuba. She focuses in particular on the first-hand experience of the ethnographer/photographer ‘mediating’ fieldwork through her camera. Maria Vasile and Cristina Grasseni use field photography differently, as field notes interrogating diverse ‘skilled visions’ and political perspectives on urban renewal and urban green planning in Turin’s periphery. They also add other visual materials produced by interlocutors in the field, in practitioners’ scholarship, and circulating in Turin’s public spaces, to combine ethnographic and visual analysis. Vincent Walstra reflects on how to combine photo-elicitation

techniques, videoing and focus-group sessions to study collectives of food procurement, based on his fieldwork with urban gardeners in Rotterdam. He focuses on how the photographs chosen to interact with, as part of setting up the focus group, mediate participants' discussions around the meaning of their engagement practices.

- 31 Federico De Musso then reflects on the making of the *Food Citizens?* interactive documentary (De Musso 2022).<sup>14</sup> If four years of conceptual, abductive, descriptive and fabulative work together was *conducive* to ethnographic comparison, the choice of the visual layout and the work of digital structuring (through coding) of the project's i-doc were instrumental to making ethnographic comparison actually happen. To the potentially infinite iterations of our ethnographic narrations - however constrained by the three layers of our analysis - the fourth layer of 'objectification' actually 'realized' comparison by reducing and connecting the rich and potentially infinite ethnographic narrations in the form of as many lines, 'drawn' on the digital canvas of the i-doc. The originally designed interactive digital dial, once coded, did the work - but digitally - of descriptively integrating our mental maps, weaving and parsing lines of similarities and contrasts through case studies. Like a conceptual-digital, four-way switch, the dial connects or disconnects the case studies selected by the ethnographers, on the basis of their perceived relevance, according to a four-way analysis by the categories of solidarity, diversity, skill, and scale (De Musso, this issue).
- 32 Finally, Ildikó Plájás, Francesco Ragazzi and Ruben van de Ven reflect collectively on how they have progressively placed into focus their diversity as team members, their methods and epistemological views in the framework of their *Security Vision* project. In the ways indicated above under the headings of comparison, collaboration and mediation, they 'bring together different approaches to mapping, so as to harvest the generative frictions between them' (this issue). To this combination of viewpoints and experiences from the field, teamwork and engagement with media, Paolo Favero offers his afterword with further reflections for our investigations.

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## NOTES

1. For our profiles and those of other members of the team (Robin Smith, Hanna Stalenhoef and Marilena Pouloupoulou) please see <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/foodcitizens/about/the-team> (accessed June 2022).
2. For more on the project and its members see Security Vision. (accessed June 2022).
3. We met with Paolo Favero in hybrid format in June 2021 to discuss the rationale of the special issue and brainstorm ideas for our articles, and again at the Food Citizens? Conference in February 2022 where Francesco Ragazzi acted as discussant together with Advisory Board members Agata Bachorz, Francesca Forno, Paolo Graziano and Colin Sage, and Leiden visual anthropology colleague Sander Hölsgens. See *The Food Citizens? Conference - Leiden University* ([universiteitleiden.nl](https://www.universiteitleiden.nl))
4. For the project's annotated bibliography and model case studies on urban gardens, short food chains, and food policy councils, see the project's public resources portal *Public Resources - Leiden University* ([universiteitleiden.nl](https://www.universiteitleiden.nl)).
5. The Gdańsk project advisory board seminar was hosted over two days at Gdańsk European Solidarity Centre in 2019, while a one-day symposium is being held in May 2022 at Urban Lab Gdynia. A restitution workshop is planned in Turin in 2022.
6. For details, please consult the project's narrative: *What we have done, how, and why - Leiden University* ([universiteitleiden.nl](https://www.universiteitleiden.nl)) (accessed June 2022)
7. I would like to take this opportunity to thank in particular the members of the project's advisory board Andrea Saroldi (Rete GAS Torino), Elena di Bella (Città Metropolitana di Torino), Vittorio Bianco (ReteCasedelQuartiere.org), Aetzel Griffioen (Vakmanstad, Rotterdam), Jan Willem van der Schans (TaskforceKorteKeten.nl), Cees Bronsveld (Eetbaar Rotterdam), and Jacek Kołtan (European Solidarity Centre, Gdańsk).
8. For a complete calendar of seminars with guest speakers and team meetings, including reading lists, please consult the project's public resources: <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/foodcitizens/dissemination/public-resources> (accessed June 2022)
9. For details please consult the research protocol <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/sociale-wetenschappen/ca-os/foodcitizens-documents/research-protocol-for-website.pdf> (accessed June 2022).
10. Warburg's final unfinished work, *Mnemosyne Atlas (1927-1929)*, survives only as folios and notes stored at the Warburg Institute in London (Brown and Green 2002).
11. For example Worktop, an integrated development environment for the humanities which was being developed by Brown University Graphics Group and of which I was one of the end-user prosumer collaborators in 2011 <http://cs.brown.edu/~bcz/worktop/about.html> (accessed July 8, 2022).
12. To consult our training programme and protocol for gathering visual materials, authored by Federico De Musso, please see [foodcitizens\\_audiovisualmedia\\_introduction.pdf](https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/binaries/content/assets/sociale-wetenschappen/ca-os/foodcitizens-documents/foodcitizens_audiovisualmedia_introduction.pdf) ([universiteitleiden.nl](https://www.universiteitleiden.nl)) (accessed June 2022).
13. Our calendar of sessions and relevant mapping exercises are reported under our 'public resources'. We began with taking stock sessions after the first half of the fieldwork, in January 2020, and then in earnest once we returned from the field, in September 2020, through to January 2022. See <https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/foodcitizens/dissemination/public-resources> (accessed June 2022)
14. The i-doc is available open access on the project's website: *Interactive platform - Leiden University* ([universiteitleiden.nl](https://www.universiteitleiden.nl))

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## ABSTRACTS

Four of the five articles in this special issue are authored by members of the *Food Citizens?* team. Together with our colleagues from the *Security Vision* project (fifth article), we reflect on the epistemological and methodological practices followed in our ERC-funded research projects, which involve different forms of collaboration, mediation and comparison. The introductory and final remarks explain the rationale of the conversation and comparison across the two projects (one anthropological, one interdisciplinary). Both engage with (digital) visual artefacts, maps and diagrams. We do not use them as straightforward representations, but as moments of co-creation, during which collaboration (and frictions) become embedded in diverse modes of mediation. In the central part of the introduction, a brief ethnographic narration of the *Food Citizens?* project provides the framework for the following four articles, explaining how this investigation was neither simply empirical nor inductive (generalizing theoretical definitions from a collection of samples) but that it rather interrogated the field in a coordinated way, while at the same time refining and confirming its categories from the field.

Quatre des cinq articles de ce numéro spécial sont écrits par des membres de l'équipe de *Food Citizens ?* Avec nos collègues du projet *Security Vision* (cinquième article), nous réfléchissons aux pratiques épistémologiques et méthodologiques suivies dans nos projets de recherche financés par le ERC, qui impliquent différentes formes de collaboration, de médiation et de comparaison. Les remarques introductives et finales expliquent les fondements de la discussion et de la comparaison entre les deux projets (l'un anthropologique, l'autre interdisciplinaire). Les deux projets utilisent des artefacts visuels (numériques), des cartes et des diagrammes. Nous ne les utilisons pas comme de simples représentations, mais comme des moments de co-création, au cours desquels la collaboration (et les frictions) s'inscrivent dans différents modes de médiation. Dans la partie principale de l'introduction, une brève narration ethnographique du projet *Food Citizens?* fournit le cadre des quatre articles suivants, expliquant comment cette enquête n'était ni simplement empirique ni inductive (généraliser des définitions théoriques à partir d'une collection d'échantillons), mais qu'elle a plutôt interrogé le terrain de manière coordonnée, tout en précisant et confirmant ses catégories à partir du terrain.

Cuatro de los cinco artículos de este número especial son obra de miembros del equipo de *Food Citizens?* Junto con nuestros colegas del proyecto *Security Vision* (quinto artículo), reflexionamos sobre las prácticas epistemológicas y metodológicas seguidas en nuestros proyectos de investigación financiados por el ERC, que implican diferentes formas de colaboración, mediación y comparación. Las reflexiones introductorias y finales dan cuenta de la naturaleza de la conversación y la comparación establecidas entre los dos proyectos (uno antropológico y otro interdisciplinario). Ambos utilizan artefactos visuales digitales, mapas y diagramas. No los utilizamos como representaciones directas, sino como momentos de cocreación, durante los cuales la colaboración (y las fricciones) se integran en diversos modos de mediación. En la parte central de la introducción, una breve narración etnográfica del proyecto *Food Citizens?* proporciona el marco para los cuatro artículos siguientes, explicando cómo esta investigación no fue simplemente empírica ni inductiva (generalizando definiciones teóricas a partir de una colección de muestras), sino que más bien interrogó el campo de forma coordinada, a la vez redefiniendo and confirmando sus categorías a partir del trabajo de campo.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** collaboration, médiation, comparaison, multimodalité, nourriture, réseaux, engagement, numérique, visuel

**Palabras claves:** colaboración, mediación, comparación, multimodalidad, alimentación, redes, compromiso, digital, visual

**Keywords:** collaboration, mediation, comparison, multimodality, food, networks, engagement, digital, visual

## AUTHOR

### CRISTINA GRASSENİ

University of Leiden, Institute of Cultural Anthropology and Development Sociology

Cristina Grasseni is Professor of Anthropology at Leiden University and principal investigator of the *Food Citizens?* project.

c.grasseni@fsw.leidenuniv.nl