

<http://somatosphere.net/?p=14510>

Funny, Awkward, Tender, Focused: Drawing Bodies

2018-06-08 10:17:21

By Andrea Ford

Drawings from my research on childbirth in California created an opportunity for sharing reflections on fieldwork and “seeing.” Birth is a highly mediated experience, with ubiquitous images of happy, beautiful, peaceful babies and mammas crowding everything from packaging and magazines to instructional literature and advertisements for birth professionals. This birth imagery has a minor counterpart from the activist community that emphasizes power and agency. In either case, visual representations of birth often morally charge the experience. They shape which aspects are worth valuing, remembering, or striving for, and leave little room for the absurd, unpleasant, or discontinuous. This mediation sanitizes the visceral corporeality of birthing, and often bypasses lightheartedness and humor as well.

The mental images that stick out most strongly from my fieldwork as a birth doula are not in line with these dominant aesthetics, even though I am not considering overtly traumatic or abusive birth events. In the births I witnessed, there was tedium, gore, medical paraphernalia, swearing and laughing, dragging exhaustion, sweat and feces and vomit, and lots of awkward poses. Even something like tenderness directed towards the mother as opposed to the baby is unusual in dominant representations. Although words can describe these moments and convey many sensory details, drawing them allows a different kind of presentation, including one that embraces humor, frustration, misfit, and a broad sweep of other affects. A.K. Summers’ wonderful graphic memoir *Pregnant Butch* is a stellar example of this capacity. Drawing as an ethnographic method is a way to cut against the grain of packaged visual representations. More logistically, drawing allows seeing and sharing of intimate bodily moments that many of my interlocutors (who are also clients and friends) don’t want photographed or filmed. In these birthing moments cameras are frequently experienced as obtrusive.

What is perceived, remembered, and shared about this multifaceted embodied experience can be influenced via drawing. Andrew Causey differentiates “looking” from “seeing”: while looking is passive, “*seeing* interpretively illuminates the visible, in many ways bringing it to being” (2017:13). He advocates “seeing-drawing” as an

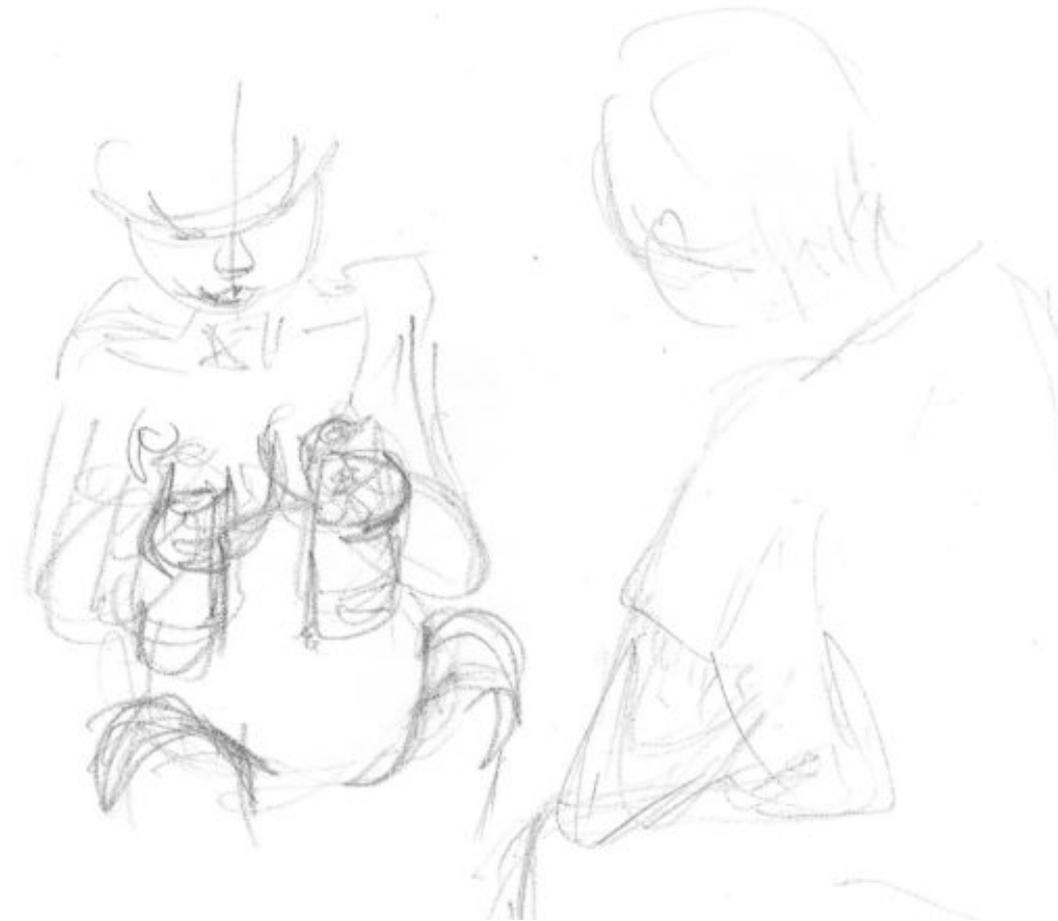
ethnographic method merging the strengths of participation (“being active, alive, vital”) and observation (“using your reserve, focus, and concentration”) (11). Kimon Nicolaides asserts that drawing must “utilize as many of the senses as can reach through the eye at one time,” and that because our senses are influenced by the subconscious mind, drawing “may be thought of as a way of expressing certain of our ideas about objects, which have been formed by means of visual experience, without being necessarily a literal recording of that experience” (212). Ethnographic drawing, then, both results from seeing, and is a means to achieve seeing.

Seeing can take place as the ethnographer sketches “notes,” or reflects on fieldwork through illustration (in many ways akin to the writing process as inherently interpretive), and as the audience engages with illustrated ethnographic work. Below are drawings I made of particularly memorable birth moments in fieldwork, juxtaposed with quoted portions of my writing. Producing the drawings effected a strange sort of splitting that made these birthing people both more and less “real” to me. The drawings consolidated how I saw them as an ethnographer, making me more present in the moment of participant observation, while simultaneously distancing me from these people’s complex personal situations and my multifaceted relationships with them. It heightened a particular kind of awareness while dampening others. Drawing influenced how I wrote about the moments, and vice versa. What the illustrations and words evoke for the viewer/reader, and whether they work together or at odds, is an open



question.

I remember a moment when I brushed damp, dark hair from a birthing woman's forehead and was struck by how long ago it seemed I had plaited that hair into a French braid, from which those strands had by now come loose; the tender calm intimacy of that act of braiding seemed worlds away from the panting pungent exhaustion that now engulfed us.



The redesigned breast pump's fantastic cyborg possibilities reminded me of an evening of early labor with a doula client, Sylvia. Her water had broken, and she was in the hospital trying to get labor started since infection is said to be a risk of waiting with a ruptured amniotic sac. The staff encouraged starting with "gentle" induction methods before moving to pitocin (synthetic oxytocin) and suggested trying nipple stimulation, which releases physiologically produced oxytocin that stimulates contractions. Sylvia and her partner did not think the hospital was a particularly appealing place to do this by hand, so the nurse suggested using breast pumps. Sylvia was not lactating yet, but they could be used dry without a problem. The nurse helped her hook both of them up, and we all laughed and giggled as Sylvia sat there chatting to us with her dual canisters suctioned on, comparing herself amusedly to the fembots on Austin Powers.



The obstetrician is addressing Molly, who is squatting on a low chair with a hole cut in its seat, called a birth stool. Molly is flushed, naked, and has a trembling, panting glow that is somewhere between triumph and exhaustion. She is a marathon runner, as my elderly doula mentor, Anna, proudly explained in our earlier meeting with Molly. She is used to persevering through intense physical situations. Suzanne, the midwife, is kneeling at the base of the stool, fuzzy blond ponytail brushing the linoleum as she practically lays her head on the hospital room floor, watching Molly's vulva and encouraging her with praise and reports on progress. Molly has been "pushing" for over two hours... Suzanne uses her hands to massage Molly's perineum, the tissue between the vulva and the rectum, oiling it and softening it for the "ring of fire" when the child's skull emerges. The awkward angle seems cumbersome, but Suzanne is engrossed.



The baby has just been born, has been laid on her mother's flushed and sweaty breast. The baby is bluish and waxy, delicate, alien with her stuttering movements and unfocused eyes. There is an indented ring around the crown of her bizarrely elongated head from the vacuum's grip. As her mother coos at her, her skin takes on the pink cast of a warm-blooded creature, infinitesimally small hairs rising to warm her body as she dries. The doctor is still focused on the pelvis, waiting for the placenta, massaging the fundus – the boggy, soft, mound of the uterus that minutes before was taut and straining. She catches the meaty blob in a pink plastic tray, and her blue-gloved hand is slippery with blood as she turns it over under the powerful spotlight, her efficient eyes stroking its surface to make sure it is whole. I, the doula and anthropologist, am standing between worlds, observing on my right the gaze developing between mother and infant, exhausted and enraptured, and on my left the surgeon's concentration as she sews up the destroyed perineum with her curving steel needle. Both are intensely focused as they go about their care-work. For the first time in hours, my focus softens, a respite from the labor of caring.

[Andrea Ford](#) is a Postdoctoral Fellow in Anthropology and the Social Sciences at the University of Chicago, from which she graduated with her

*Ph.D. in 2017. She researches the broad cultural contexts of childbearing in California, emphasizing the way current debates and tensions relate to American culture and politics. Currently, she is working on her book *Near Birth: Embodied Futures in California*, and developing research projects on reproductive toxicity and endometriosis. Andrea is also a practicing birth doula and a trained full-spectrum doula, and is committed to furthering reproductive justice in its broadest sense. She has done work in applied anthropology through writing for *Stanford Medicine* and conducting public issues research for the *FrameWorks Institute*, and teaches courses on embodiment, reproduction, gender, the United States, and social theory.*

[Image + Text](#) is a series that engages the landscape of graphic illness narratives. What can the production of comics and other graphic forms tell us about issues of embodiment, biopolitics, or biomedicalization? How do our relations of collaboration and translation as interlocutor, ethnographer/artist, or ethnographer and artist work to express subjective and intersubjective moments in complex social worlds that are fraught with illness and power relations embedded in a search for well-being? *Image + Text* is edited by Juliet McMullin and Stacy Leigh Pigg.

References

Causey, Andrew. *Drawn to See: Drawing as Ethnographic Method*. Toronto, 2017.

Nicolaides, Kimon. *The Natural Way to Draw: A Working Plan for Art Study*. Mariner, 1990.

Summers, A.K. *Pregnant Butch: Nine Long Months Spent in Drag*. Soft Skull, 2014.

AMA citation

Ford A. Funny, Awkward, Tender, Focused: Drawing Bodies. *Somatosphere*. 2018. Available at: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=14510>. Accessed June 8, 2018.

APA citation

Ford, Andrea. (2018). *Funny, Awkward, Tender, Focused: Drawing Bodies*. Retrieved June 8, 2018, from Somatosphere Web site: <http://somatosphere.net/?p=14510>

Chicago citation

Ford, Andrea. 2018. *Funny, Awkward, Tender, Focused: Drawing Bodies*. Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/?p=14510> (accessed June 8,

2018).

Harvard citation

Ford, A 2018, *Funny, Awkward, Tender, Focused: Drawing Bodies*, Somatosphere. Retrieved June 8, 2018, from <<http://somatosphere.net/?p=14510>>

MLA citation

Ford, Andrea. "Funny, Awkward, Tender, Focused: Drawing Bodies." 8 Jun. 2018. Somatosphere. Accessed 8 Jun. 2018.<<http://somatosphere.net/?p=14510>>