Corpo-real ethnographies: bodies, dissection planes, and cutting. Ethnography from the anatomy laboratory and the public morgues in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

Is there a mode to our doing ethnography together that we should be thinking about conceptually? This was the guiding question, of sorts, that opened the path for this text. We suggest there is one, and we call it corpo-real ethnography. Out of our ethnographic fieldworks in an anatomy laboratory and the public morgues in Colombia, here we conceptualize how that mode takes form and what it does to the practice of doing ethnography. Drawing from Marylin Strathern’s notion of the ethnographic moment and building on Karen Barad’s notion of intra-action, we suggest that by cutting each other’s work—in likeness to the manner in which cadavers are cut in dissection planes during the scientific practices that take place in the laboratory and the morgue—we can find new and unexpected conceptual and ethnographic surprises that allow for the emergence of our collective ethnographic conceptual work. Cutting each other’s work takes the form of letting ourselves be affected wholly by the ethnographic work of the other insofar as it generates a collective empirical site from where to do ethnographic work together—corpo-real ethnography.

Etnografías corpo-reais: corpos, planos de dissecação e corte. Etnografia do laboratório de anatomia e necrotérios públicos na Colômbia

RESUMO

Existe um caminho particular para o nosso trabalho etnográfico conjunto que devemos explorar conceitualmente? Esta é a questão que nos guia no presente escrito e que além abriu um caminho exploratório. Propomos que sim existe um modo, e chamamos de etnografia corpo-real. Do nosso trabalho etnográfico no laboratório de anatomia e nas morgues públicas da Colômbia, neste escrito nos conceituamos as formas tomadas por esse modo e o que eles fazem para a prática da etnografia. Inspirado pela noção de momento etnográfico de Marylin Strathern e desenvolvida a partir da noção de intra-action de Karen Barad, propomos que o corte do trabalho do outro

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similarmente a como se cortan los cadáveres en planos de disección quando ocorrem as práticas científicas que nos ocupam no laboratório de anatomia e nos mortuários - podemos encontrar inesperadas surpresas etnográficas que nos permitem emergir em nosso trabalho conceitual etnográfico coletivo. Cortar ou trabalho do outro se manifesta como uma deixá plenamente nós mesmos ser afetados por o trabalho etnográfico do outro, uma vez que produze um campo empírico coletivo do qual podemos fazer o nosso trabalho etnográfico -nossa etnografia corpo-real.

Etnografías corpo-reales: cuerpos, planos de disección y corte. Etnografía desde el laboratorio de anatomía y las morgues públicas en Colombia

RESUMEN

¿Hay un modo particular a nuestra labor etnográfica conjunta que deberíamos de explorar conceptualmente? Esta es la pregunta que nos guía en el presente escrito, y la cual nos abrió un camino exploratorio. Proponemos que sí hay un modo y lo llamamos etnografía corpo-real. A partir de nuestro trabajo etnográfico en el laboratorio de anatomía y en las morgues públicas de Colombia, en el presente escrito conceptualizamos las formas que toma ese modo y lo que éstas hacen a la práctica de hacer etnografía. Inspirándonos en la noción del momento etnográfico de Marylin Strathern y elaborando desde la noción de intra-acción de Karen Barad, proponemos que al cortar el trabajo del otro -similarmente a como se cortan los cadáveres en planos de disección cuando tienen lugar las prácticas científicas que nos ocupan en el laboratorio de anatomía y en las morgues- podemos encontrar inesperadas sorpresas etnográficas que permiten que surjamos en nuestro trabajo conceptual etnográfico colectivo. Cortar el trabajo del otro se manifiesa como un dejarnos afectar completamente por el trabajo etnográfico del otro en tanto que genera un campo empírico colectivo desde el que podemos hacer nuestro trabajo etnográfico conjunto -nuestra etnografía corpo-real.

1. Introduction

For the last few years, we have worked together on writing in a mode that we have come to call corpo-real ethnography, a kind of doing collectively collective ethnography. As we contribute with this text to reflections on the ethnographic endeavor, we find it matters greatly to think the manner through which our collective ethnographic doing has emerged. With this in mind, in what follows we unravel one instance of this doing.

Our first interest is to expand what we have found to be the complexity of the idea of writing together and being together in writing, beyond the insufficient understanding of it as mere teamwork. To do this, we draw inspiration from Marilyn Strathern’s reflections on writing anthropology and her conceptualization of the “ethnographic moment” (Strathern 1999, 6). A concept she posits forward to remind us that anthropological field sites and analysis have a relation of concomitance that emerges and becomes such in and along the practice of writing. In her words: “We could say that the ethnographic moment works as an example of a relation that joins the understood to the need to understand”
Writing and fieldwork are in a complex relationship, “each is an order of engagement which partly inhabits or touches upon but does not encompass the other” (2). We could think of this relationship as a partial and mutual inclusion that has the ethnographic moment as a site of connection.

Our intervening on each other’s work is by means of an active engagement with our “recreation” of our fields and our conceptualization in writing. Working together around ethnographic moments is the only way to make this procedure possible. We produce and make complex ethnographic moments, so that we engage as we conceptualize with the ethnography of the other. This idea destabilizes usual understandings of ethnographic writing as the second stage in a process – in which the ethnographer has to first go to the field in order to gather data that will later be transformed into a representation of their site of research. We take issue with such a representational model of the ethnographic work. Thus, we want to intervene ethnography with our mixed and sometimes-erratic procedure. This allows each of us to move within the ethnography of the other as field and as writing, in order to think them and do them as our corpo-real ethnography.

Our empirical bases are an anatomy laboratory and the state morgues in Colombia. We want to explore our ethnographic fieldwork as the result of relational connections between our different sites. To us, the field site is a location but also the writing of the other one. In this way, we can say that each of us has been on the other’s fieldwork site. Our intention is not to make a comparative exercise for our conclusions are not only related through similarities and differences between arrangements of actors and procedures. As we will illustrate here, our intention is to delve into the complexities of our ethnographies. We actively search for instances where our ethnographies erupt into each other and themselves, as these encounters are also a site for our collective ethnography. We developed this method by working with the materials of the other. From field notes to conversations, our procedures imply asking questions to the field of the other that draw from our individual work. It is in this way that ethnographic moments emerge sometimes as connections between our work(s).

We can transform, modify, and complicate the work of the other because the practices we are studying are partially connected (Strathern 1991). Julia’s ethnography takes place in the state morgues, particularly in medico-forensic practices performed by forensic medical doctors and forensic pathologists. Inspired in a material-semiotic approach (Latour 1987, 2005; Law 2002, 2004; Law and Mol 2002; Mol 2002) Julia’s work questions relational practices that make necropsies and forensic science inside those morgues in order to think the modes through which death becomes such. Meanwhile, Santiago has worked with anatomy students and professors, also with a material-semiotic approach, in order to understand the emergence of anatomical structures and knowledge in the daily work of the anatomy laboratory (Martínez-Medina 2016). This work takes place in the encounter

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1There are many other ways to destabilize this representational model. These are related to the classical scientific model of knowledge production. Within ethnographic theory this means a reconfiguration of the relation between field and writing (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1989). This issue has special implications around the ethnographic work related to the body and embodiment processes (Flores-Pereira, Davel, and de Almeida 2017). An analysis of all these possibilities is beyond the scope of this article.

2Julia’s work is based on two years of ethnographic fieldwork (2013–2014) in the state morgues from the cities of Villavicencio, Medellin, and Bogota in Colombia. She was granted full access to these morgues and her work saw her deeply immersed in the everyday medico-forensic practices of those who participate of them. This mainly entailed following the performance of one or two post-mortem examinations every day six days a week. It also included attending the annual
of anthropology, ethnography, and science and technology studies. Materiality, knowledge, and medical science are keywords of our divergent but related academic journeys. We relate our empirical and analytical work with the work of ethnographers of science – particularly of medical science (Bonelli 2016; Law and Mol 2002; Lock and Gordon 1988; Lock and Nguyen 2010; Lock, Young, and Cambrosio 2000; Saunders 2008; Thompson 2005), and especially works that think anatomy, surgery, and forensic sciences (Fountain 2014; Hallam 2017; Lock 2002; MacDonald 2015; Prentice 2013; Timmermans 2006).

A crucial relation among people, objects – tools and instruments –, and cadavers triggers action both in the anatomy laboratory and in the morgue. That is, students, doctors, and other workers engage by means of instruments and tools with cadavers to do anatomy, necropsies, and forensic sciences – i.e. cadavers are cut. The cutting of cadavers is done following *dissection planes*\(^3\) – layers of tissue that the professional lifts one by one in order to advance inside the body.

We take *dissection planes* as a guiding concept of our ethnographic immersion. To do *corpo-real ethnographies* we look for material endeavors that partially connect our fieldsites. We build on the concept of *dissection plane* because it is one of the many connections that surge from among our ethnographies. We want to think of *dissection plane* as a link between the anatomy laboratory and the state morgues, and also between our collective (mixed) questions and our collective (mixed) fields. In anatomy laboratories and the state morgues, anatomy science, and forensic science emerge out of the practice of cutting – which takes the form of doing dissection planes as students, doctors, and other workers search into the bodies they are engaging with – at the same time that anatomical structures and medico-legal evidence as materiality also emerge. In this way, and with the concept of *dissection planes* as our ethnographic drive, our objective is to perform other *dissection planes* in our ethnographies. We want to cut the work of the other so that we can produce something else.

### 2. Dissection planes

Anatomy science enacts the anatomical body as a complex set of dissection planes. These layers of tissue come about not only as the result of hands, scissors, and scalpels that partake of the professional cutting and lifting of tissue, but also of the guides, textbooks, and handbooks that guide the anatomical undertaking. Dissection planes as such emerge as a result of the encounter between all these heterogeneous entities that make them be. We take those planes to be our empirical materialities. Additionally, to do planes is to do knowledge of them – anatomical knowledge. A dissection plane is flesh for us – anatomical flesh at that – but only under the condition that we consider knowledge as part of that flesh – knowledge done through the dissection. At the same time, out of this encounter...

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\(^3\)A dissection plane is the result of an ordered cutting of the body. In the contexts that we are referring to, every dissection described comes along with a description of a way to cut, which makes planes that the anatomist can follow in order to perform the procedure. This term is related with, but should not be mistaken with, the concept of *planes of the body* or *anatomical planes* – a set of coordinates used to transect the body, in order to describe the location of structures or the direction of movements. There are three major anatomical planes: sagital, coronal, and axial.
also emerges the person that has the capability to anatomize bodies. In other words, both anatomy – as knowledge and as material structures –, and anatomist become out of the action of cutting. Now, let’s go back to where students learn how to do anatomy: the anatomy laboratory.

The anatomy lab and the cadavers that occupy it are the site from where we begin a slow but profound familiarization with dissection planes. Dissection guides and handbooks are central to anatomy laboratory practices -by following the practices prescribed in them students of anatomy acquire their expertise. This relation is so close that even some literature has argued whether the guide and the handbook are a representation of the body or vice versa (Armstrong 1983; Prentice 2013). Furthermore, dissection guides and handbooks also lead the students in their doing of anatomy through dissection, a relation in practice that we want to follow here. Doing anatomy is to effectively perform cuts in a way that allows for the emergence of dissection planes.

Let’s take a closer look at a specific procedure: the dissection of the *Superficial Back and Posterior Axilla* (Senesac and Bishop 2010, 1).

Make a skin incision superficial to the spinous processes of the vertebrae from the external occipital protuberance (inion) to the level of the crest of the ilium. Continue the incision laterally along the iliac crest to the mid-axillary line. A second incision should be made from the external occipital protuberance to the mastoid process of the temporal bone. This will facilitate handling of the skin flaps. Using hemostats forceps, lift a corner at a site where two of these incision lines meet. Pull the skin so it is taut. With a scalpel held at an angle, slowly work through the superficial fascia until muscle fibers are encountered.

There is no need to dwell on technical words here. Rather we must notice the manner in which this fragment describes a path, a guide across referential points that we do with scalpels and forceps. Following that path results in the materialization of a dissection plane; a plane that you can, and must, lift up in order to continue further into the body and further with the guide. In this way, performing a dissection is to do planes that can do anatomical structures. If you follow the “correct” path, you will do with your own hands the structures that you want to “find.” Now, “to find” is merely a way of saying something, but nonetheless a way that hides that anatomical structures are the result of an encounter of relations. Dissection guides are organized as a set of steps, all of which must be followed when performing a complete dissection. Instructors teach this to students with persistence in the anatomy laboratory. To do anatomy you must follow the guide’s steps. The anatomy guide provides stability to the otherwise uncountable possibilities of cutting a dead body.

Thoracic Wall, Pleura, & Pericardium: Reflect the skin from the root of the neck upward: Starting inferiorly at the lower free edge of skin overlying the clavicle, reflect upward the skin and superficial fascia of the anterior part of the neck leaving the sternocleidomastoid and strap muscles in place. This flap will include a tissue-paper thin subcutaneous muscle; the platysma (…) The skin should be reflected to a line approximately midway between the jugular notch and the mandible.4

Students in the anatomy laboratory where Santiago conducted fieldwork follow the anatomy guide with great diligence every day. In this, dissection planes are a consistently

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4A rather freely paraphrasing from http://www.med.umich.edu/.
relevant presence even after the dissection procedure has taken place. Students recognize this during their initial engagements with a cadaver:

A cadaver lies in the last dissection table inside the anatomy laboratory. Medical students rotate from table to table; they are taking a closer look to both specimens and corpses. “This cadaver is very interesting,” says one of them […]. Another one notes the professor has already dissected most of the chest – he lifts up the first layer of muscle only to get another layer. Once they are able to go through this second layer, the students find the ribs, which have been partially removed so that a space that lets them introduce their hands in the thoracic cavity in order to feel the lungs is produced. “It opens like a book,” says one of the students. This triggers a realization: we just opened, layer by layer, dissection plane by dissection plane, a dead body in order to get in it.

Dissection is an experiential exercise. Students get attuned to flesh in many different experiential levels, all of which would be impossible if they had not acquired first the necessary sense of fleshiness to afford such attunement. It is because of this that we can state that by following dissection guides the students not only do the anatomical structures they are being taught but also their own hands and eyes, their own bodies, as they “find” those structures. In this, the body that is dissecting and the body that is being dissected are not separated distinctly from each other yet. Now, anatomy as knowledge and anatomy as structure are not two different entities in ontological terms. Nevertheless, we cannot say they are a single entity, for the cut performs a separation that indicates their difference. Only later on can anatomy as flesh and anatomy as ability in a pair of student’s hands be disjointed, a disjoint that, nonetheless, does not entail an absolute separation. As they follow the routes prescribed by dissection guides and dissect according to dissection planes, students do them both. It is in this and because of this that their difference emerges. That is, by doing dissection planes – cutting in specific ways across intra-acting bodies – anatomy and anatomist emerge in their ontological divergence. And, anatomy as knowledge is precisely the cut that is performed by the anatomist.

The notion of intra-acting bodies we used above draws from Karen Barad’s materialist notion of agential realism (Barad 2007). It allows us to stress, in terms of Barad, the “mutual constitution of [their] entangled agencies” (2007, 33). We could not write this as “bodies in interaction” because anatomy as structure and anatomy as ability do not precede their entanglement, “the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through their intra-action” (33) Now, it must be made clear that we are not proposing here that the separation between anatomist and anatomy is arbitrary. Rather, “[…] the line between subject and object is not fixed, but once a cut is made (i.e. a particular practice is enacted), the identification is not arbitrary but in fact materially specific and determinate for a given practice” (155). The cut separates but also allows a new set of relational possibilities – it links intra-acting entities with other entanglements. At the same time, the cut is a momentary stabilization that needs to be reenacted in every single anatomical or forensic act. A dissection plane is a complex set of cuts, and also a way to make present the agential cut that is performed in a practice – where the act is quite literally made with a scalpel. For that reason, we want to stay longer in intra-action. The notion of dissection planes affords us that possibility.
3. Agential cut and ethnography

We want to stay around the notion of cut – agential cut – as a very literal and material endeavor. In anatomy, cutting enacts agential separability – which according to Karen Barad is the condition of exteriority-within-phenomena (2007, 140). So, anatomy and anatomist are exteriority-within: more than one but less than many (Haraway 2000; Strathern 1991, 36) – in it the dissection plane, a complex set of cuts, is the way that anatomists and forensics use for knowing. In such manner, for an anatomist to follow a dissection guide is not a request, or a requirement, it is the condition of possibility of anatomy as knowledge, as ability, and as materiality. It is also the condition of possibility of entanglement of anatomist and anatomical fleshiness – entangled but also divergent as the cutting is enacted. Anatomy is, thus, a very good example of a material-discursive practice that performs agential cut by actually, and literally, cutting. So, a dissection plane is a unit of anatomy as a material-discursive practice. If one manages to perform new dissection planes (new in the sense of not being in the anatomy guide) one will obtain another anatomy and another anatomist, or anatomy and anatomist in a different way. Remember we are not talking here about anatomy as anatomical structures only. To learn to talk in anatomical language is to learn to perform dissection planes that allow oneself to produce one’s own ability and structure as intra-acting results. This conceptualization of dissection plane serves us here because there is no separation present. A dissection plane is the cut itself.

Cutting as agential activity provides us inspiration to think our effort of a collective ethnography. Like many other ethnographic field sites, the anatomy laboratory and the state morgue are locations full of activities, people, objects, and actions. It would be impossible to grasp with a sense of completeness all of the happenings that take place in them. Following Strathern’s conceptualization of ethnography, we are aware of the excess of information that the ethnographer produces in relation to the field. Nonetheless, this is not just any information. As Strathern illustrates: “[the] fieldwork exercise is an anticipatory one […], being open to what is to come later” (Strathern 1999, 9); namely, the writing exercise. In other words, we went to the anatomy laboratory and the state morgue with a material semiotic disposition – questions, sensibilities, and concepts – that allowed us to cut a myriad of possibilities. This cut operates always in writing, either in fieldnotes or in later writing. This is how we produced partially connected ethnographic realities. Even if we had not planned to work together when we did our respective fieldworks, we could share them knowing that it is possible because we were both doing ethnography. In terms of Strathern (9–10):

Much information is amassed, hopefully, by the field ethnographer with specific intentions in mind. But, at the same time, knowing that one cannot completely know what is going to be germane to any subsequent re-organization of material demanded by the process of writing can have its own effect.

In the second field that is the task of writing cuts are performed. Writing as a process of conceptualization reworks the events documented in the field, narrowing the relation between fieldwork and writing by re-creating the first in the second. This complex relation between fieldwork and writing affords us the emergence of the ethnographic moment as the cross-point of the two trajectories – two fields. It is in such a way that even if none of us
has been physically present in the site of the other we have been in the sense that we have shared and thought with each other’s ethnographic materials during our conceptual cooperation, with the intention of cutting in different ways the material of the other. We might not be in the same physical spaces, but we think about ethnographic work in terms of “co-presence,” which goes beyond a simple “co-location” (Beaulieu 2010; Garforth 2012). Our procedure allows us to produce this kind of contiguity in our partially connected works. This is also the reason why we think with Barad. As we have stated, cutting in a different way produces new dissection planes that enact a different ethnographic result, but cutting produces also agential separability. This makes us ethnographers of the field site of the other.

Our procedure comes about in writing, and we think of it as a writing exploration. For us, to write is to cut in ethnography. Ethnographic writing is a research practice (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). As Julia Colyar puts it, writing is a product, a process, a form of invention, and an instrument of self-reflection (Colyar 2009). Therefore, we consider corpo-real ethnography not only a rhetorical exploration. We work on ethnographic moments in such a way that we also retroactively intervene in our field. This mutual inclusion of field and writing allows us to say that intervening our ethnographic moments transforms our work and constitutes our sharing enterprise.

To do this we usually begin by sharing our field notes, at the same time that we aim to maintain an awareness of the process of the other. We read each other insistently and constantly, and from there we emerge in our ethnographic togetherness. This, the process that we call corpo-real ethnography, only takes place when we write together. In this way, the material for our writing together comes from the ethnography of the other, usually as field notes that catch our imagination and sensibility. It is important to say that usually, we are working with different, but related, topics and theoretical inspirations. In one way or another, our procedure consists in letting the field of the other interfere in our initial individual processes. That is only the beginning. Later on, we embark on a slow process of writing together – we do not make topical or sectional divisions on this writing. Here, writing is to do research on the field of the other and thus constitutes a common field of exploration. We try to conceptualize with our shared materials. At the end, we manage to get a text where neither is sure of the authorship of the words. The results of this process could return to our separate work, but at the same time, they find a place in other kinds of publications, like the present one. As an ethnographic task, our procedure is imprinted in our ethnographic writing. For that reason, we invest on the need to be both at the same time empirical and conceptual (De la Cadena 2015). This paper performs corpo-real ethnography as we present our shared results.

The ethnographic moment emerges of the interplay of different surprises (Strathern 1999, 10), so our task is to let the field of the other surprise us. We can be dazzled by the way the field site relates with our questions, sensibilities and concepts but we can also be dazzled by a previously unattuned event that we engage in the writing stage. Regarding this, it is of relevance for us that we can be dazzled by the way Julia or Santiago cuts the field notes of the other by writing about it. Dazzled here also means a corpo-real feeling. Our procedure implies to learn to feel our interplay, even as we are writing, because to write is also a corpo-real practice and concepts are also sensations (Colyar 2009). Our fieldwork can be and gets transformed by the intervention – the cut – of the other.
Nevertheless, as we stated above, there are ample differences between our two sites – starting from the fact that one of us works with medical students being trained on anatomy science, and the other works with medical doctors who decide on the state sanctioned cause of death of a dead body. It is on account of this that making clearly distinct dissection planes in the work of the other is not just a comparison. We do not want to show the similarities or dissimilarities between our field sites. Our intention is to affect the other’s field site with questions, sensibilities, and concepts that come forth out of the work of the other and of our collective work. It is experimental, in terms of Mann et al. (2011). Corpo-real ethnography is the result of diffraction of our own individual work with the other’s field site and writing, and with our working together (Barad2003, 2007; Haraway1991, 1997). Various layers of such diffraction constitute the corpo-real.

This is the mode of doing of our corpo-real ethnography in the everyday. We inspire each other, we converse concepts, we share and test ideas with each other, and we also misunderstand each other in a broad range of subtle ways. When Santiago writes and does the morgue, he cuts in unexpected directions. When Julia writes and does the anatomy laboratory the same unexpectedness takes place. We cut each other and each other’s field ethnographically, and by doing this we perform something different. The result is not, for instance, a tissue or an organ in the anatomy table, but the reconsideration of a fragment of our ethnographic work as an ethnographic moment. We hope our empirical work becomes different through this process. We allow each other to cut differently into each other – such is the nature of our corpo-real mode. This text is an exercise of such a mode.

4. First dissection plane: “death occupies an anatomical location”

In the morgue, providing a cause of death is of particular importance; that is, after all, the main purpose of its existence as a state technology. For this, cadavers, doctors, instruments, protocols, and many more, get immersed in the relational entanglement that emerges as a part of the practices that make causes of death. It is in this way that Julia’s field site is a site for the making of death as a socio-material and scientific presence, as Julia has suggested. Conversations among doctors, dissectors, and other morgue workers illustrate this. For instance, her friends at the morgue would say that they need to “kill the dead” – “matar al muerto” in Spanish – when trying to find the cause of death during a necropsy. This speaks of intricate generative relations among morgue workers, the dead, and death. It is not uncommon to hear them ask each other things like: “of what are you going to kill that one?” – especially when they are working on one case they find to be particularly difficult. Scenes like this interrogate how causes of death arise as a result of relations among violence, death, a dead body, bodies, instruments, protocols, evaluations, and forensic doctors and other morgue workers, and others inside the morgues. As we can see here:

Dr. B always works on the dissecting table in the south-oriental corner of the morgue, table number six, the one farthest away from the main entrance. Today she is working with A as her assistant and dissector in the necropsy. This is almost always the case. They are both sufficiently interested on my presence as to take the time to teach me slowly what they are doing as they go about their practice. The dead person today is a young man. Because medical examiners in Colombia do not go to the crime scene to do corpse removal procedures
themselves, necropsies in the morgue always begin with the doctors reading the file written by the crime scene investigators that always arrives with the cadaver. In this case the file registers the presence in the dead body of a “gunshot entrance wound over the left collarbone.” Nevertheless, A is the first one to notice this is not the case: “a stabbing is what this is!” “Oh, and they said it was a gunshot in the file. Can you imagine that?” says Dr. B. “Is there any other entrance wound?” “Do you see any exit wound?” she asks. A examines the body and the clothes, as either one can give indications to provide her with an answer. But, the only entrance wound is the one that seats over the collarbone. The necropsy starts from there. Dr. B does a dissection of the neck first. “Julia, I am going to do a neck dissection, it is going to be really beautiful, come closer and take a look! Remember, we have to lift layer by layer of muscle, so we can see where the lethal lesion is.”

To do a necropsy is a practice that is very similar to that of doing anatomy: Dr. B needs to go under the skin to be able to find lethal damages to the body’s anatomy. That cannot be done in any random way; she must follow the same dissection planes that anatomy guides dictate as the correct path for dissecting, getting deeper inside of, and looking into the neck. Nonetheless, at the morgue dissection began even before there is any initial cut on the body. As the ethnographic moment above shows us, Dr. B starts their practice by reading the crime scene file and doing a closer inspection of the clothes of the cadaver. In fact, their first definitive finding is that there is a difference between the crime scene file and the dead body – what was described as a gunshot wound was actually caused by a knife. As we cut this last fragment into the experience of the anatomy laboratory, it is revealed that in the morgue bodies are more than skin and flesh, they are also crime scene files and clothes. Thus, dissection in the morgue includes other layers, which must also be considered to answer the question of a cause of death.

Such an experience is an impossible one inside the anatomy laboratory. In it, cadavers have no name, no history, and no accompanying documents that may play the role of a crime scene file that provides clarity about the circumstances of death of each particular body. There are no clothes with the cadavers either – they are always already naked –, disconnected from any particular circumstances. And, even the bodies proper are not necessarily alike. In the anatomy laboratory bodies have been through a process with formaldehyde and other substances that change the material configuration of the cadaver: the color of the skin, the traits of the face, the textures of the flesh, the appearance of the organs, etc., have all been transformed. In fact, cadavers at the anatomy laboratory are similar among themselves only because they have lost so much of the individual features through which we distinguish people from each other. Nevertheless, once a scalpel cuts into the dead body at the morgue, Dr. B needs to follow the same paths that must be followed when you do anatomy at the anatomy laboratory. As Julia’s field notes state:

I do what she asks me to, I look closer. To look is what I can do. In order to see I need Dr. B’s hands to guide me. “Look. Here we can see the wound trajectory, and so we must lift the muscle there. I am going to do it carefully so that you can see clearly. Little by little, we do not want to go past the lesion.” “A, hand me the guía5 again so we can be sure were to look!” A hands her the guía and holds it while Dr. B cuts the muscles: Pectoral muscle. Deltoid muscle. Middle scalene muscle. Subclavius muscle. Anterior scalene muscle.

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5 **Guías** are thin metal rods of around half a meter long used during necropsies as a tool to follow physically the trajectory of a firearm wound on the dead body. Usually doctors introduce them in the body through the entrance wound, and in this way follow a potential bullet trajectory.
Omohyoid muscle. Sternocleidomastoid muscle. Sternothyroid muscle. Great vessels. Jugular vein. "Nope. There is nothing here. This is a healthy jugular. It must be in the carotid." The metallic guía is no longer there, for it would impede vision. “Oh, look. You can see it perfectly! How beautiful Julia! Look, here you can see the laceration very clearly. Can you see it?” Dr. B has the surgery clamps she uses to do dissections on her hand, and with them she occupies the space the fatal wound has produced: a laceration of the carotid artery. You could not do the same with a healthy carotid. “Julia, do not forget that death occupies an anatomical location!” Dr. B just showed me death, and I then saw death.

As Dr. B tells us before starting to work on her search for a cause of death and later on when she found the lethal wound, dissection can be beautiful. If this same cadaver were the object of a prosection⁶ [4] procedure inside an anatomy laboratory, students could open its neck as a book: “… layer by layer.” In fact, dissection in the morgue could be an anatomy lesson; in many cases, actually, they are. Names of muscles come one after the other in a specific order that is the same prescribed and performed by the dissection – both actions at the same time. Nonetheless, there is something radically different in this anatomical dissection: there is something in the neck – precisely what Dr. B is looking for. That something is done by the dissection too, as it is the anatomical materiality of the body, but it is not flesh. The “laceration” is present at and also done during the procedure – both actions at the same time, too. In this way, death emerges in the morgue as something that you can hold with your forceps, that you can see, feel, and measure. “How beautiful,” says Dr. B as she teaches us the key to all the procedure: “death occupies an anatomical location.”

This statement also cuts Santiago’s ethnographic work. As Julia’s ethnography shows us, anatomy has the capacity to produce more than the fleshiness of organs and anatomical structures. When Dr. B tells us that death occupies an anatomical space she is not building a metaphor, she is indeed stating that death, in this case, is a material lesion in the carotid artery. By doing that she is also stating that the specific lesion may be described, located, and understood. And, more importantly for us, the lesion is thus made in the realm of anatomy both as practice and as knowledge. Later on, Dr. B will write her conclusions on the death certificate by locating a lethal lesion that could only be present at the morgue by being afforded of the means of dissection planes, scissors, arteries, and anatomical positions. The lethal lesion as materiality in the morgue required the realms of anatomy as knowledge, ability, and experience.

Cause of death: cerebral hypoxia secondary to hypovolemic shock secondary to a section of the proximal third of the carotid artery in its cervical portion.

This is not only a biomedical parlance way of saying the cadaver had his throat slatted. This is also a description of something that can be located inside the dead body – that occupies an anatomical location. A description of something you can hold with a pair of forceps even if there is no flesh to be held. The cause of death here is the description of something that may be materialized as a presence, at the same time that it appears to be nothing more than the action of cutting with a scalpel. Anatomy has the ability to make body-reality in a highly specific way; for instance, the ability to make spatial relations even if you are describing a section, a cut.

⁶Prosection is the dissection of a cadaver or part of a cadaver by an experienced anatomist in order to demonstrate anatomic structures to students.
Because the endeavor of gross anatomy is related to the fleshiness of the body, the question of materiality inside the anatomy laboratory is barely taken as an object of reflection. Materiality is taken for granted. Questions about the anatomy laboratory are mostly related with the particularities of the relations between living people and cadavers. If we are well oriented, nonetheless, our dissection plane that connects forensics and anatomy can demonstrate that even in anatomical science materiality results out of relations of practice between entities. Anatomy allows for a body that can be described even if the thing that needs to be specifically described has the appearance of being as intangible as death.

5. Second dissection plane: “death as an irruption of practice”

Death as a localizable entity can be present only at the morgues. At the anatomy laboratory where Santiago did fieldwork, there is no place for the presence of death. This is such on account of the fact that cadavers at the anatomy laboratory are not accompanied by any particular information or indication about their existence outside the laboratory. Students, professors, and others have no conception of the cadavers beyond their practice. This maintains the bodies’ death outside the laboratory, even if without a doubt the materiality of their bodies is present. The same situation can be very different in other countries. For instance, thinking out of the U.S., Rachel Prentice develops an argumentation about what she calls, drawing from Charis Thompson’s notion (2005), an ontological choreography inside the anatomy laboratory – were sometimes the cadaver is enacted as an object, especially in the practice of dissection, and sometimes is enacted as a person through memorials and tributes that commemorate the life of those who donated their bodies to the laboratory (Prentice 2013). In the Colombian anatomy laboratories, nonetheless, things are different: cadavers are not obtained by a personal or family donation. Because hospitals for the destitute without family members to claim their remains are the source of body donations, cadavers at the anatomy laboratory not only do not come with any information about them but also are not the subject of memorials that can make them present as a person – or at least not in the terms of Prentice’s conceptualization.

It is difficult to find empirical examples inside the academic practice where the cause of death and the life of the person that became the cadaver are important. Death is not a subject matter at the anatomy laboratory. It could be said there is not an easy place for death inside the laboratory – it is not a matter of concern (Latour 2004a). At the anatomy laboratory, the task of anatomy is life, not death. Life is what comes about with more frequency and insistence in the anatomy laboratory. Professors teach students about surgeries, medical cases, living patients, and address questions related to organs and anatomical structures formulated under the presumption that everyone is talking about a living person, not a dead one.

In this way, when the material conditions of the cadaver cannot be obviated, particularly when there is something missing inside the body or something different on account of the process of preservation, the difference is enacted as an artifice, as an error produced by the effects of formaldehyde in the human tissues, or as the result of the dissection. In consequence, most of the time students can work inside these cadavers as if they were working inside a living body. This is not to say that cadavers at the anatomy
laboratory are not capable of more, or that the absence of practices that make them a person implies cadavers cannot make materialities present. Let’s return to the lab:

All the students surround the cadaver. It is the same cadaver that one of the students found “interesting” earlier on. Natalia, a young student, realizes that the cadaver has remains of paint on his fingernails. “Look, he has paint on,” she says. “For what reason?” “Is the paint related with the cause of death? Is it related with his life?” “Maybe he was a painter when he was alive,” says one of the students. “Do you know why?” Natalia asks me. I have no answer for her. Thanks to Natalia’s discovery other students also talk about the paint. They wonder about his name. They look for a name in the paper tag attached to his big toe. They did not find any important information – and so they went back to their anatomical exploration.

In this vignette, we have a group of students that find something on the cadaver that affects them, something that arises questions beyond anatomy itself. Natalia, the young student, embarks herself on a search for answers to her concerns about the paint on the cadaver’s fingernails. She asks the laboratory assistant about the identity of the cadaver, but all she finds is his name. Because all cadavers are photographed when they arrive to the laboratory, Natalia is able to see the face before the transformation induced by the preservation takes place. That is as much as she would be able to find out, there is no more information for her and especially nothing that would satisfy her concern about the presence of paint in the cadaver’s fingernails and any possible connection to his life and/or his death.

It is precisely in this moment of her concern about the paint that something of importance happens for us. Something special made the student interrupt her dissection practice and devote her attention to what her peers did not even notice. Paint in the fingernails is a small detail that may not have much importance for the practice of dissection; nonetheless, it erupts as a reminder of death. By giving a place to the person that the cadaver was, as partial as it may be, the fingernails paint localizes death. This is something that also applies to the ethnographer, who began to talk about him (the dead body) as more than just a vague reference. And, for instance, all those present took notice of the sex of the body. The terms used in the laboratory are conducive to certain disregard for death: the word cadaver, for instance, collaborates to this particularity because it affords the erasure of many of the specificities we would otherwise use to refer to people. Paint on a fingernail brings about a person in the dissection table with the sense of a story and the possibility of history, who until then was a nonspecific dead body in the anatomy laboratory. It also brings about the person as dead. Hence, it also generates an opening beyond the laboratory that is not intended, nor necessary, for the anatomical practice. In relational terms, the paint on the fingernail folds (M’charek 2014) on the cadaver relations that are cut when the body enters the laboratory – a sort of vanishing line that can guide a sensitive student like Natalia to explorations that do not pertain to anatomy.

If we think this through the notion of agential cut, we must state that painted fingernails entail another type of cutting. As a phenomenon (Barad 2007, 140), the results are that Natalia is no longer an anatomy student with a specific task at hand in the same manner than the cadavers are no longer a nonspecific dead body. Something of importance has happened. At the same dissection table and in the same moment new entities have emerged and the practice taking place has changed. These moments of curiosity, interrogation, and discovery produce an irruption on the anatomy laboratory that forces
the students to put down scalpel, handbooks, and forceps. Here is another ethnographic moment related to this:

I was shocked. I remember that I was working with a prosection of the digestive apparatus, from the tongue to the rectum. What shocked me was the tongue … How can I say it? I was never aware that I was working with someone’s body parts until I saw the tongue – because the tongue had a little hole on it, a hole for a tongue ring. I was so shocked that I could not touch the prosection anymore that day.

It is at this moment that the student realizes for the first time that there is an origin of the lab material. Again, the tongue ring hole folds into this prosection other relations that can be imagined by the student. Since this case was a prosection, the presence of a complete dead body was not necessary to bring a story and a history to the laboratory. Individual body parts are also an anatomical material that does unplanned moves that allow for the emergence of new phenomena – of new agential cuts in which the body part is so intensively active that it can disrupt the practice of dissection.

This conclusion out of the anatomy laboratory makes a cut into Julia’s work. This last ethnographic moment emerges also as our collective intrusion in the other’s work. Julia complicates the ethnographic moment itself when she notices that the mode of attention that the two students have is the same mode of attention needed by forensic doctors and other morgue workers. Noticing painted fingernails or a tongue ring hole is not only useful but, fundamentally necessary at the morgues – the medico scientific value of a post-mortem examination is attached to the recognition of such presences in a dead body. A whole legal case may depend on such details. In the anatomy laboratory, to cut bodies (in terms of agential cut) in the same manner that is done in the morgue does not necessarily produce final results. Nonetheless, a different cutting enacts different entities and practices; it is because of this that the student in the second vignette could not work with the prosection any longer. The cadaver emerges as an active entity in more than an anatomical mode, an entity that can do more things and exceed the anatomical practice. Thusly, students start to follow other types of clues for which there was no predetermined path on a handbook. Dissection becomes immobilized on account of the irruption of relations that do not belong to the laboratory – the folding of stories, histories, and life in the cadaver.

This is another relevant result of our collective mode of thinking through and by means of complexity, of our corpo-real ethnography. Painted fingernails and tongue ring holes are on the body but not on the body that emerges from anatomical dissection. They do not emerge out of the practice of following dissection planes even if they do so in the dissection table and the anatomy laboratory. Nonetheless, there is no denying that they are in the body and they pertain to the body. In this way the body exceeds anatomy. At the same time, painted fingernails and tongue ring holes are the types of entities that must emerge in the morgues. They are what must come about inside the morgues, fundamental for any production of death.

6. Conclusion: making ethnography out of bodies and making a body of ethnography – corpo-real ethnography

It is along these lines that we understand anatomy and forensic sciences as partially connected practices that produce partially connected bodies. In our first dissection plane,
death occupies an anatomical location, on the second death exceeds anatomy. Death as it takes place in the morgues brings complexity into the body beyond the realm of anatomy as it takes place in the anatomy laboratory. For us there is not a straightforward way to make relations among anatomy, forensic sciences, body, and death. Furthermore, we complicate the idea of practice by stressing the fractal qualities of knowledge practices. Were we to do other dissection planes in our work, we would find other conclusions, other concepts, and other figures of this fractal and surprising schema.

We could not enact these conclusions without the particular procedure that we call corpo-real ethnography. Only by cutting each other’s work we could find new and unexpected surprises. If an ethnographic moment is the joint between the understood and the need to understand, with our collective procedure we can find new understandings with new questions and suggestions that need to be understood. Both ethnography and the ethnographer emerge of relationships fostered by the (double) field. It is from cutting – that materializes both in the participative observation and in the writing – that a divergence between both of them emerges, although they never disentangle. The performance of dissection planes in ethnography enables the emergence of relations that complicate the assemblage that inhabits the material and semiotic entities that also emerge from ethnography. We hope that this paper, a dissection plane by means of our corpo-real ethnography, finds echoes in those who want to think in the endeavor of doing ethnography collectively beyond the idea of teamwork -as an addition or commonality. This, inasmuch as corpo-real ethnography is not a summation of Julia’s and Santiago’s work – neither is it an intersection. Corpo-real ethnography is an exercise and an enactment of a partial connection between two method assemblages (Law 2004). We meet each other without looking for something to add or something to say in common, we meet attuned in a disposition for being affected by each other, and thus a disposition for transformation. It is because of this that we decide to think our collective work as corpo-real ethnography.

The term corpo-real enables us to address the very present fact that we work on factual bodies – we are interested in the fleshiness of the practices, in the material and the materiality of the anatomy laboratory and the state morgues. Corpo-real gets rid of divisions between the thing and sensing. The hyphenated corpo-real stresses that this work is about the reality of the body, in all its complex fleshiness, as a product of the practices that we engage with ethnographically. In other words, this is an intervention related with discussions about the multiplication of reality (Mol 2002), where we show how partially connected practices complicate, diffract, interfere with each other. There is, nonetheless, the second sense of corpo-real that we use when we say corpo-real ethnography.

As a collective endeavor, this exercise is a way to do body between our two different but related works. Inspired by the work of Vinciane Despret’s (who draws on William James): to have a body “is to learn to be affected” (Despret 2004; Latour 2004b, 205), we think our corpo-real ethnography also as “an interface that becomes more and more describable as it learns to be affected by more and more elements” (Latour 2004b, 206). It has emerged slowly and with hesitation as our ethnographies have become attuned. We are doing a body, an ethnographical body about body practices, a corpo-real exercise whose extension and results are unpredictable and open to experimentation. Such is the mode of our corpo-real ethnography.
There is a final conceptual openness provided by the use of the notion corpo-real. A literal translation into Spanish – the language of both our field sites – of the term corpo-real would yield the word “corporeo,” which has a very close relation to corpo-real in our first use of it. But, we also like to think corpo-real in Spanish as a neologism. Doing so allows us to say body and reality in a single word, and thus relate our conceptualization with the field of body studies – estudios de la corporalidad in Spanish – at the same time that we stress our material semiotic approach in relationship with our colleagues in Latin America (for instance Cardona and Pedraza 2014; Citro 2002; De Almeida and Flores-Pereira 2013; Flores-Pereira, Davel, and de Almeida 2017). We want to call attention here to our disposition to studying the complexities of the body as material and materiality, as flesh. Writing this text in English does not preclude us for the dialogues around that disposition that we have in Latin America. Corpo-real brings that with insistence to the arena of our reflections on our mode of writing ethnography (together).

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