



***Sentidos do Campo:* anthropological storytelling and sound experimentation**

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Introduction

*Sentidos do Campo*¹ is a product that emerged from our experience with the *Campo*: an anthropological podcast, which we have carried out together since 2020. In previous publications (LACERDA; PARREIRAS, 2020; PARREIRAS; LACERDA, 2021), we present the history, as well as the main issues that motivated the creation of *Campo*, our podcast. In order to make the most of our space in this collection, we will not rescue this context again. However, it is worth mention-

1 In English, we can translate as Senses of the field. Field here is the sign of the fieldwork, a central concept in Anthropology and for conducting ethnographies.

ing that *Campo* appears within the scope of a graduate discipline and with the purpose of offering, in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and the suspension of face-to-face activities, an alternative for the teaching of anthropology, in this case, through a digital artifact that is the podcast.

Thus, its proposal is closely linked to education and scientific dissemination, as well as other podcasts in the social and human sciences (AGUIAR; SANTOS, 2020; BAZZO, 2021; PINHEIRO, 2020; FLEISCHER, 2020; FLEISCHER; MANICA, 2021; FLEISCHER; MOTA, 2021). In our case, even after being separated from a formal discipline, we still focused on the presentation of authors and their works, also counting on a study group to discuss the works prior to the recording of the podcast. In *Sentidos do Campo*, our proposal revolves between different and less formal axes: experimentation, ethnography and storytelling.

In this text, our main goal is to share our bets and perceptions about anthropological narrative—or anthropological storytelling, as proposed by authors such as Webster (1983) and Taussig (2004, 2006, 2011, 2015)—mediated by sounds and voices. In other words, we start from the principle that the construction of a narrative in Anthropology is fundamental in the practice of the discipline. However, despite being fundamental, the so-called “ethnographic description” does not follow fixed rules, there is no booklet, and this often raises doubts in those who are starting the training in this area. Within the anthropological field itself, there are many discussions about ethnographic work and, consequently, about what an ethnography would consist of. The ethnographic description, still, can generate doubts in those who do not have training in Anthropology, because, after all, what would be the specificity of this form of description? How would it differ, for example, from the journalistic narrative?

In the following pages, we will not present formulas or closed definitions, as we believe that this is not the way to go. We will argue in favor of a bet on the centrality of experience and on the “adaptive” and “incremental” character (HINE, 2015) of ethnography. We will seek to share some reflections on the ethnographic description of a field of research through the use of the podcast. Although exploring the theme of ethnographic narrative is not something new in the discipline, since it has already been the subject of reflections by experienced anthropologists (GEERTZ, 1978; CLIFFORD, 2008; ABU-LUGHOD, 2018), we believe that a special

contribution of our proposal is to think the narrative of our research from the sounds we hear, incorporate and produce during fieldwork.

And, also, from the most subjective sensations and perceptions, to a large extent constructed by sound materials: what are the first impressions we form about our research contexts? How have these sensations affected us and how have they changed over time? How is it possible to carry out a re-reading of field research from the sound representation, a type of sense that does not always appear in the texts of dissertations, theses and articles? What are the challenges and implications of carrying out this experiment collectively, in which sounds and voices function as an ethnographic narrative and a form of representation? Thinking about these issues was the proposal of our experimentation with *Sentidos do Campo*, which so far has one season, with five episodes.

The making of *Sentidos do Campo*: practical issues and ethical choices

As already mentioned, *Sentidos do Campo* arises from our previous experience with the production of podcasts and from conversations raised by the appreciation of both authors for narrative podcasts², especially by those who seek to experiment with the format, with the script or even with editing. Hence the decision to create a “derived product”³ (PARREIRAS; LACERDA, 2021) that would become an anthropological storytelling based on sound experimentation. This way, there were months of research and tests in which we looked for ways to construct an ethnographic narrative mediated by sounds, some of them recorded during fieldwork research and others that came from a re-reading and rediscovery of ethnographic material, which was done by both authors, in a shared way and carried out years after the research was conducted. Thus, we decided that the experimentation would start with the research developed by Paula Lacerda more than 10 years ago, in the city of Altamira, in the southwest of Pará.

The ethnographic material that we worked on for the production of this season of *Sentidos do Campo* was produced between 2008 and 2012, in the context of

2 As Santos and Peixinho (2019) show, the production of non-fiction narrative podcasts, especially journalistic ones, began to be done more widely in 2014. However, throughout their arguments, they make it clear how much the model of narrative podcast can be traced back to the heyday of radio storytelling.

3 Or spin-off, as shown by Magalhães (2021).

the doctoral research on the “case of the emasculated boys of Altamira”, consisting of documents produced by public agencies, interviews with various agents and also ethnographic observations about the city where the “case” took place. Talking about the Xingu River and the *Transamazônica* road were ways that the victims’ families, especially the women, used to narrate their own history, as well as to talk about their children: when and why they arrived in the city, if they liked to swim in the river, bathe in the creek, who sold snacks on the street or shined shoes at the market door.

Thus, more than a “context”, from narratives about the city of Altamira, we perceive the possibilities of exploring the multiple sensations and meanings of this fieldwork experience. We wish to emphasize the ways in which these sensations are not “marginal” elements to the research but reveal important aspects about the perceptions of the interlocutors, the researcher and, therefore, they conduct the investigation itself. These sensations—and their meaning—are what we tried to express in the production of the episodes, both in the narrative and in the editing, which we did based on the research experience of the first author and on the re-reading of this experience by the second author, who is a person external to the original research.

As can be seen, for the production of *Sentidos do Campo*, we developed other production and research strategies, something different from the experience that we had already accumulated with the production of *Campo*. In terms of editing, in *Campo*, we created a specific model that is used for all episodes, with slight variations in some of them. In *Sentidos do Campo*, having to revisit a very broad set of materials required more systematicity and control. It was necessary to carry out tests, experiment with sounds and look for audio materials that could be added. Initially, we planned the structure of the episodes, which must, at the same time, be able to present the research carried out, highlighting the senses, sensations, nuances, transformations and the course of the research that led to other questions, some already developed in articles and presentations and others still in development. From this initial effort and from the thematic axes thought by the first author, five episodes were planned.

The first episode, entitled *A Capital da Transamazônica*⁴, addresses the researcher’s first impressions of the city and explores how the research interlocutors perceive the city where they live. The second episode, *O Rio Xingu*⁵, continues in this

4 The capital of Transamazônica

5 The Xingu River

vein, pointing to ways of telling the region's history, and how this vision is permeated and transformed by political processes over time. The third and fourth episodes, entitled *O caso dos meninos emasculados*⁶, directly address the theme of the research developed in Altamira. In general terms, the "case" consists of a set of crimes committed against children between 1989 and 1993, which involved bodily harm (mutilation of the genital organ and others), homicides and attempted murders.

Initially, we had not planned to produce the episode about the "case" in two parts. This was only defined when we evaluated together that the themes to be worked on would extrapolate our expectation for one episode, not only in terms of duration, but also in terms of the narrative to be presented. The Part 1 of the episode, in a way, follows the content that the first author most described and analyzed in her written production: the multiplicity of versions and visions around crimes against boys (the "case" itself), as well as the struggle of victims' relatives for justice and reparation.

The Part 2 of the episode, on the other hand, deals with a topic rarely addressed by the researcher in her production: the universe of accused people, including their articulations with rising conservative politicians. The choice not to present the materials related to the people accused in previous writings was a thoughtful decision: throughout all the years of research, the researcher chose to know the many versions of the crimes, but not to give them the same weight. Nor did she give the same weight to the trajectories of the victimized boys and their families and to the trajectories of the accused people (and their families). But then, why was this decision revised? Why so many years later, and through a podcast?

This decision, discussed both with the second author and with the victims' families, was motivated by the evaluation of the diffusion that this material could have, with a far greater reach than written academic works and with also faster dissemination. For years, the researcher of the "case" has been sought after by press and media professionals interested in reporting and documenting. Most of the time, what triggers the interest of these professionals is not so much the "case" itself, but a set of events related to it: the arrest of some of the convicts, even when, supposedly, there is a confessed defendant, accused of being a "serial killer".

6 The case of emasculated boys

This way, the possibility of disseminating scientific knowledge about the “case” through a sound production was understood as an opportunity to present a contrary and critical version of the media initiatives that accompanied the narrative of conservative politics associated with the condemned. As a result, the commitment to the victims’ families and their struggle was maintained, as their version of these strategies structured the criticisms, and some responses were produced to the press professionals, politicians and other agents.

With this, we emphasize another dimension of the podcast: not only does the dissemination tend to be greater than what we achieve through written productions, but there may be a type of subject and approach that gains dissemination and scale through this form of communication based on the sound diffusion. Furthermore, it is possible that there is an audience that can be more easily reached by a podcast than by an academic article, or a doctoral thesis—something like being “caught by the listening”. Our data regarding the access to the podcast, provided by Anchor, the platform we use to distribute the episodes among different platforms, helps to support this statement, showing that there was great interest in *Sentidos do Campo* and, specifically, in the two episodes about the “case”.

The following episode deals with the daily life of women in Collective Urban Resettlements. The RUCs, as they are also known, are new neighborhoods created in the context of urban transformations in Altamira. As we close the first season of *Sentidos do Campo* with this theme, we offer an account of a research agenda spanning from more than a decade. We intend to demonstrate how the report of a research allows different approaches.

A theme that permeated the process of elaborating *Sentidos do Campo* had to do with the exposition of materials that could even have been described but had not been “shown” until then. The choice to make such materials public meant revisiting the first field notebooks, revisiting ideas that sometimes proved to be wrong, or certain bets. Hearing again interviews carried out years ago meant hearing voices transformed by the action of time. In addition to the voices that reveal the passage of time, the sounds of traffic, birds, and domestic animals reminded us of where each interview took place: in a house near the side of the road, in a farm, in a house in the city, in an NGO; as well as if there was privacy during the interview or, on the contrary, if the subject was discussed publicly, in front of other adults and even children.

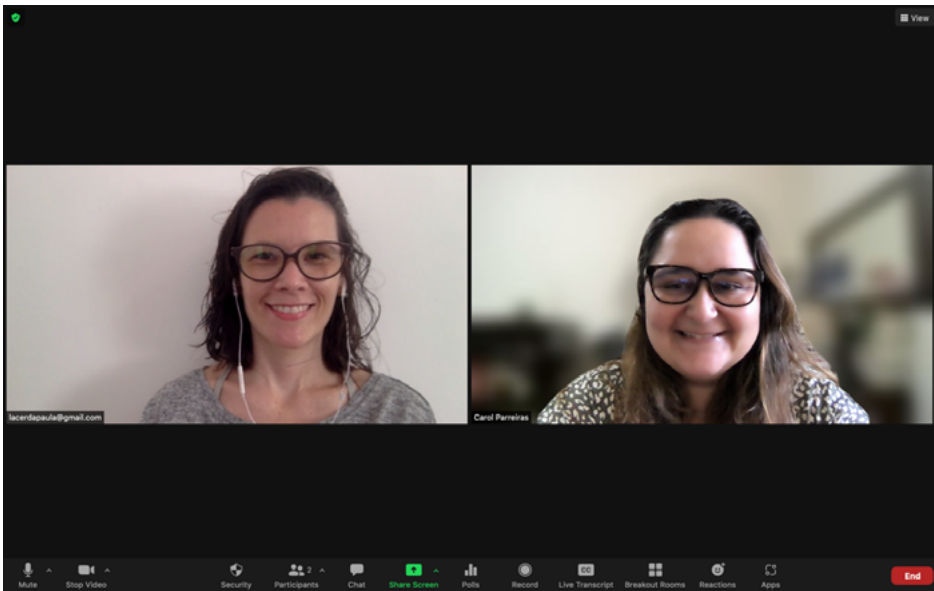


Caption: place where the first author carried out most of the fieldwork and some interviews. Backyard of Dona Rosa Pessoa's house, in Altamira. The photo was posted to Facebook on May 9, 2010 and extracted to integrate this article on September 27, 2021. Description: A backyard with a cement floor, plants and trees, a wooden "lover" style bench with a dog lying down, a purple macaroni chair and a mosquito repellent. Author: Paula Lacerda.

The next step in the production process consists of writing the script. This role falls to the first author, since her field experiences form the base material for the episodes. The second author helps in the process of writing the script, thinking about insertions of material already consulted, editions, clippings. Once the script is closed, it is recorded by the first author, who is the narrator, and shared between the authors. In several episodes, we invited colleagues to read some excerpts, guaranteeing on the diversity of voices.

Then the episode begins to be assembled. There is the extraction of all the audios that will be embedded (some originally in video). In these audios, the second author does not perform any type of editing, in order to preserve their original characteristics, including imperfections. The narration itself undergoes a quick edit, just for noise extraction and normalization so that the sound amplitude is standardized.

During the editing, carried out by the second author, the biggest challenge is to produce a script reading that allows it to be transformed into a sound storytelling. In this sense, it is a process of interpreting data from another research in order to make it intelligible through this specific type of narrative. Consequently, it is something quite challenging and where collective work stands out the most. When the episode is ready, we carry out the same process as with *Campo*: it is hosted at Anchor and from there distributed to eight players. We publicize the new episode on our networks (Instagram, Twitter and Facebook) and, for that, we use some photographic record of the first author. To index our content within the platforms' data universe and boost its dissemination, we use a set of hashtags linked to the episode. On our website, we publish other photographs of Altamira, along with the Spotify player (which currently accounts for 87% of our audience).



Caption: Zoom screen print, in which a conversation took place between the two authors. Print registered on 09/03/2021. Description: The two authors presented inside Zoom squares. Paula Lacerda has loose black hair, wears headphones, glasses, and a gray blouse. Carolina Parreiras has black hair with highlights, wears glasses and a green and white blouse. Author: Carolina Parreiras.

Storytelling and sound experimentation

Walter Benjamin (1987), in his famous and important essay *The storyteller*, discusses, based on the work of the Russian writer Nikolai Leskov, the importance of narrative. He begins the essay by stating, in a blunt way, that the figure of the storyteller, the one who masters the art of storytelling and who communicates experiences, whether his own or those he hears from other people, would be on the way to extinction. These experiences, according to him, are the central point of the narrative (the oral above all) and will be incorporated, from listening, to the listeners' experiences. He also states that it is when you work—"spin or weave"—that the narrative becomes more alive for listeners. This point will be taken up later by Taussig (2020), by showing how much the act of listening to the radio (and podcasts) is associated with the execution of banal everyday tasks, such as washing dishes or driving. In these moments, the mind would be more open to narratives and to record them (and it is indeed a pity that we do not have studies or surveys on the reception of podcasts from this perspective).

The same Benjamin (2020) adopts this premise in his radio stories for children, in which he presents different places and events in the city of Berlin, both present and past, recalls his childhood days, creates fantastic stories about gypsies, bandits and other characters, or even tells about natural phenomena such as floods and earthquakes. By betting on orality, he becomes the storyteller himself, a craftsman who composes the narrative, who shares the experience and who masters this art.

It is interesting to think about Benjamin's statements contemporaneously and in the face of the continuous expansion of the Internet and different forms of connection. Contrary to what he feared, there was not exactly the death of narrative, but a proliferation of formats and ways of narrating, with appropriations by various social actors. Authors such as Page and Thomas (2011) and Alexander (2012) have been exploring, for example, the way in which new communication and information technologies have been appropriated for the composition and creation of other ways of narrating and for modifying existing ways. This set of ways of telling stories from the various digital tools can be called digital storytelling (Alexander, 2012). The podcast, as a digital artifact, would be one of these ways.

Still in relation to narratives, Taussig (2006, 2011) is an important reference for us to think about the centrality that the act of narrating has in anthropology. In

the opening of the book *Walter Benjamin's Grave* (2006), he defines storytelling as a form of analysis, inseparable from writing, fieldwork and the “intense curiosity” that moves the anthropologist. In a later essay (2015), he advances this idea, showing how “making stories” involves an almost artisanal work around experience, which requires the coordination of “hands, soul and eyes” (p. 30).

Thus, we use the notion of storytelling inspired by these ideas and seek, through technology, to build a form of narrative that is at the same time anthropological, experimental and sonorous. Something that has been widely discussed since the 1980s is the making of ethnography. Clifford Geertz (1978) states that the culture of a people is like a set of texts that can be deciphered as codes, dissected as an organism, ordered as a system (p. 210). The metaphor between culture and texts, despite its limitations, is an inspiration for our experiment that involves ways of communicating experiences through sounds. Although the author refers to written narratives, the most fascinating characteristic of ethnography (and ethnographic work) is its experimental and always open character. This is what guarantees the possibility of “creating stories” in different formats (field diaries, drawings, videos, sounds or even a mixture of all of these) and from, above all, a focus on the experience—of the people we meet in the field and ours—and the constant search for “a way of knowing” (TAUSSIG, 2015).

Conclusions

As we have argued, we consider *Sentidos do Campo* as a sound experiment through which we seek to convey the idea of the multiplicity of senses and voices that make up fieldwork in Anthropology and its descriptions. We bet on communicating this experience as a way to launch reflections on something that sometimes appears naturally in our speeches, our writing and even in our activity, that is the “ethnographic description”.

Combining anthropological narrative and research materials in audio and other sounds, we feel encouraged to talk about research and description as something in a continuous process of construction, interpretation and montage. We consider that even something that happened in the past and already has a set of narratives, apparently consolidated, is still subject to new interpretations. Thus, we seek to point out an important contribution of Anthropology, which is to have instruments to understand, record and analyze social transformations,

even though, at first glance, some of these transformations—and, consequently, the people who are involved in them—are considered irrelevant or even invisible.

With the use of technologies, different sounds and voices and in a shared way (and, why not say, artisanal?), we seek to build a form of storytelling that gives an account of a set of experiences lived in the field. By betting on the centrality of the narrative, we try to “create stories” and transmit them in sound format, evoking an infinity of sensations that also involve the listener.

However, we recognize that a part of what we explore here – senses and sensations, hence our inspiration for the title of the product derived from *Campo*, – would not necessarily need to be approached through a sound narrative. Undoubtedly, it is also possible to write about how the body reacted to being in a different city, about what are the memories, including sensorial ones, that marked the fieldwork. However, in this article we seek to argue that reading about personal experiences is different from being able to hear them. We bet that it is a different way of sharing in which the spectator is invited to this field of research, being able to also hear part of what the researcher heard and feel sensations close or not to those that the researcher felt and described. By listening to the episodes, it is also possible to access the narrative, elaborated jointly by the two authors, carried out at the time of editing. The narrative that is presented to listeners, this way, is the product of collective reflection and work.

While, as we said, the first author’s challenges consisted of revisiting the research material, exposing something considered “intimate” and even being willing to present other narratives about what was so close to her, in the case of the second author, the challenge was working on someone else’s material and shaping it into a podcast. Something that, for people with other backgrounds (think of film editors, for example) is commonplace, in anthropology, even in collective research, guidance or text editing, is not so usual.

Thus, we conclude that our position is also the position of a listener, who creates his/her own interpretations from what he/she hears and that is what all of us have in common: who recorded or produced the material, who re-listened to it years later, who listened to it to debate and edit, who listened to the episode after it was published.

Editing a podcast, as well as listening to it, requires being open to being surprised by the voices, sounds and the many noises of the shared materials on which one works. If we, who produce, experience the challenging construction of creating a story from other stories, we understand that listening also creates its own interpretations and connections. This is very reminiscent of Benjamin's proposal, that listening to the storyteller creates a relationship: "whoever listens to a story is in the company of the storyteller". It is this company that we seek to make possible with *Sentidos do Campo*.

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Access the *Campo* podcast page on Radio Kere-kere here

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