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“Il gioco” as collaborative method: Feminist and antiracist musings on the power of play

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Abstract

What transformative potential might reside in play as a collaborative method, particularly in contexts of migration and with populations of marginalized youth? In this paper, we explore play “*in anthropology* and *as anthropology*” while drawing from our collective experiences with collaborative research through a Palermo-based participatory film and storytelling lab that foregrounds “il gioco”(play). We discuss the lab’s approach to play as a collaborative method in the process of co-creation that helps with navigating social and linguistic differences, invites practices of improvisation, and aspires to disrupt uneven landscapes of power.We also consider how play can serve as a form of ethnography and mode of analysis. Engaging with theory on collaborative anthropology, creative and experimental ethnography, and decolonizing methodologies, we gesture to the possibilities for *critical collaborative play* as a feminist, antiracist methodological orientation. Particularly as the field of anthropology grapples with existential crises and strives toward decolonizing futures, play as method warrants further critical attention.

KEYWORDS

collaborative methods,creative and experimental ethnography,Europe, Italy, play, youth populations

FIGURE 1 The completed story matrix. Photo by Megan A. Carney.

INTRODUCTION

> *Palermo, July 2022: Several of us gather around Alessio who is shuffling a stack of cards.*[1] *He holds them up and fans them out before us to reveal their imagery* (Figure 1). *Continuing to shuffle the stack of cards, he explains the game that we're about to play: one at a time, each of us will take six cards from the top of the deck, and without revealing the cards to the rest of the group, begin to craft a story – inspired by the images – that contains a beginning, middle, and end. As the narrator tells their story, they will place the cards down on the table one-byone for the rest of us to see and follow along. The next person to narrate a story will do the same, but they have the option of trading one of their cards for another that has already been placed on the table by someone who went before. Others in the group help to translate the parameters of the game from Italian to French, Wolof, and English, and back-translate any questions. With the group nodding to demonstrate their understanding, we begin to play. This exercise in improvisation elicits nervous laughter or blushing by many of us at the table. Nonetheless, our stories gradually intersect with one another as rows of cards converge into an elaborate matrix. (fieldnotes from Megan)*

This game served as a "riscaldamento" (warm-up) during the summer 2022 edition of the Palermo-based FunKino storytelling lab with migrant youth. Launched in 2017, FunKino— whose name means "cinema of fun"—privileges "il gioco" (play) through playful moments of improvisation.[2] Since the lab's founding, the only criterion for participation is a willingness to "mettersi in gioco" ("to put oneself out there" or "to get in the game"). Cohorts convene for several weeks to engage in a process of co-creation that emphasizes self-expression, critical dialogue, and the fundamentals of storytelling, particularly storytelling as it provides the foundation of other narrative forms such as film.

Adolescents and young adults make up the bulk of participants who also trace their identities to diverse gender, racial, and ethnic backgrounds. Some are recruited from residence centers for migrant youth but also through word of mouth and social media.[3] Many (and sometimes most) participants have only recently arrived in Sicily, having crossed the central Mediterranean from North Africa through human smuggling networks and often with intervention by humanitarian search-and-rescue organizations. In addition to the storytelling lab, youth participants may later choose to learn firsthand about the technical aspects of filmmaking while developing the "storia condivisa" (shared story)—the ultimate end-product of each lab—into a *cortometraggio* (short film). Working alongside Alessio, a professional filmmaker and co-founder of FunKino,participants engage in casting,creating sets,camerawork,

lighting, costumes and makeup, and as on-screen actors while also being acknowledged as screenwriters in the film credits. With the creation of its short films, FunKino aspires to cultivate vocational opportunities for youth in film and television, an industry that has historically marginalized them,and to enrich and complicate contemporary debates about migration into Europe. FunKino conducts screenings at international and regional film festivals, as well as at public gatherings across Sicily, Italy, other parts of Europe, and in the United States.[4] As noted by Alessio, "we foreground the voices of migrants in educating Italian and European publics about contemporary migration."[5] Accordingly, FunKino stands in contradistinction to those projects informed by a "historicizing, white, and predominantly male European gaze" that reproduce "voiceless subjects…both talked about and talked for…"(Danewid et al.,2021). Rather than seeking to capture "a most authentic voice,"the lab emphasizes "radical listening and being heard" in forging a sense of belonging and attending to the social and emotional well-being of participants (Gubrium et al., 2015, 23; see also Cabot, 2016, 2019; and Chatzipanagiotidou & Murphy, 2021; and Fantin, 2022). FunKino's approach is also distinct from the many migrant integration and inclusion initiatives, "participatory welfare projects," and community-based welfare programs appealing to "affective politics" that have proliferated across Europe in recent years.This is in part because practices of critical consciousness and intersectional solidarity have been foundational to FunKino's lab since its inception (Ciccia & Roggeband, 2021; de Wilde, 2016; Einwohner et al., 2021; Fortier, 2010; Giudici & Boccagni, 2022; Vollebergh et al., 2021).[6]

The situatedness of FunKino's lab in the city of Palermo and in the broader context of Sicily is particularly salient. Both the island and its capital are conceptualized as occupying the frontlines of recent migration through the central Mediterranean (Carney, 2021). The city of Palermo is globally renowned as a city of welcome for migrants, an "open port" in times of anti-immigrant politics sweeping much of the country. And since 2014, Sicily has consistently recorded the highest number of migrant arrivals than any other Italian region and overseen various aspects of migrant reception, despite receiving limited financial and institutional support from Italy's government and the rest of the EU (UNHCR, 2022). Conditions of poverty throughout Italy's "mezzogiorno"(a reference to regions in the south),including Sicily, compromise in part local responses of frontline communities to migration (Blake & Schon, 2019; Casati, 2017; Kersch & Mishtal, 2016). As one of Italy's "colonies" (Gramsci, 1971), the region of Sicily occupies a rather marginalized status in national policy, while Italy itself is often relegated to the "southern periphery" of Europe along with some of its Mediterranean neighbors such as Spain, Portugal, and Greece (Giglioli, 2017; Soto Bermant, 2017). Local histories of land dispossession, social dislocation and physical displacement, and extraction of labor and natural resources orchestrated from the north continue to shape contemporary material and social realities on the island,

while also compounding with more recent phases of economic austerity (Carney, 2021; Schneider, 1998).[7] This hampered capacity of local communities often produces institutional failures and exacerbates everyday forms of exclusion and racial violence, such as inadequate reception facilities, bureaucratic delays, and discrimination in asylum processing (Albahari, 2015; Carney, 2021; Tuckett, 2018). FunKino's lab exists to promote the social inclusion of migrant youth and other marginalized youth populations.[8]

In the following pages, we engage with theory on collaborative anthropology, creative and experimental ethnography, and decolonizing methodologies to explore play "*in anthropology* and *as anthropology*" (Vidali, 2020, 395) while drawing on our experiences of collaborating as researchers and participants through the FunKino lab.Building on Vidali (2020),we examine play as a form of multimodal knowledge production, conceptualized as "different ways of knowing and learning together, new modes of collaboration, and dynamic forms of coparticipation that disrupt conventional understandings of individual subjectivity, authorship, and authority" (395).

Collaborative research in anthropology and play as method

A tradition of collaborative research already exists in anthropology but takes on different forms (Boyer & Marcus, 2021; Lassiter et al., 2020; Meulemans et al., 2018). As Meulemans et al. (2018) observe, "The words 'collaborative anthropology' cover a wide range of different practices and experiments,many of which have to do with a collaborative partnership between an anthropologist and local communities"(20).Pointing to the perceived advantages of collaborative approaches,Boyer and Marcus (2021) argue that collaborative research "has the potential to re-scale and re-frame the anthropological endeavor…its process can generate new terms of mutual worth among participants that would not have occurred without it and…its incorporation of participants as more than informants highlights the potential for new, intermediate forms of knowledge-making" (2).

Yet collaborative research also presents many challenges,including the indelible presence of power asymmetries that often can (and do) inflect research design, analysis, and dissemination processes (Austin, 2004; Halabi et al., 2015). For such reasons, collaborative research is framed as "an organic and emergent process"(Lassiter et al., 2020,11) that often registers as incomplete or imperfect among participants (Kazubowski-Houston, 2010).

While collaborative research may yield more politically and ethically sound forms of ethnographic knowledge than what is generated by the "lone ethnographer," not all collaborative research is oriented toward political ends such as advocacy (Boyer & Marcus, 2021). The research collaboration we

describe in this article weaves scholarly interests in the political and ethical dimensions of ethnographic research together with creative and participatory methodologies in projects to advance social justice.

Creative and experimental ethnography

Creative and experimental ethnographic methods are often utilized to provide new or emergent perspectives from groups whose ways of knowing and being in the world are devalued, unrecognized, or systemically rendered invisible (Chin et al., 2015; Culhane, 2011; D'Onofrio, 2021; Elliot & Culhane, 2017; Gill, 2020; Hartblay, 2020; Irving, 2017; Kazubowski-Houston, 2010; Köhn, 2016; Morelli, 2021; Pink, 2011; Sjöberg, 2008; Vidali, 2020). Such approaches to anthropological knowledge production may include storytelling (Culhane,2011),participatory ethnographic or documentary film (D'Onofrio,2021;Morelli,2021),participatory ethnographic theater (Vidali, 2020), and other theatrical and artistic forms (Elliot & Culhane, 2017; Hartblay, 2020; Kazubowski-Houston, 2010; Meulemans et al., 2018). Much of this work has been informed by the field of performance studies and experimental performance methodologies that engage with play and role play (see, for instance, Conquergood, 2006; Riley & Hunter, 2009; Sandhal & Auslander, 2005). Johannes Sjöberg (2018), for instance, argues for cocreative role play as a valid ethnographic method and introduces the concept of "field play" as an alternative framing from field*work*. Tracing evolving perspectives on social relations in the field, as well as a move away from positivist critiques of play (see also Eichberg, 2016), Sjöberg (2018) situates play within the broader "liberation of ethnographic methods"(see also Beliso-De Jesús et al., 2023).

Existing scholarship on play as an object of study in anthropology and related disciplines widely underscores its centrality to how humans (and many nonhuman species) bond and create a sense of place (Bialostok & Watson, 2022), build trust from an early age (e.g., play as "a developmental necessity") (Vygotsky, 1978), and learn to collaborate or enact systems of shared governance (Maturana, 1994; Piergallini, 2020). Perspectives on play offered by feminist and antiracist scholars demonstrate the potential of play for negotiating power imbalances and deriving pleasure. With respect to the former, play is sometimes conceptualized as contesting systems of oppression such as white supremacy and patriarchy. Studies of Black youth in the African diaspora for instance, have attended to the ways that play and cultural expression are turned into labor, or what scholars have called play-labor (Guzman, 2021; Kelley, 1997). In his foundational work on the urban United States, Robin D.G. Kelley (1997) shows how young Black men engage with play-labor by exchanging their play—in music, sports, and visual arts—as lucrative commodities in the context of a racial capitalist system. He explains, "Play undeniably requires labor, but it is usually thought to be

creative and fulfilling to those involved…the terms work and play themselves presume a binarism that simply does not do justice to the meaning of labor, for they obscure the degree to which young people attempt to turn a realm of consumption (leisure time/play time) into a site of production" (75).

Similarly,Elena Guzman (2021) examines how Black women's performances of embodied spiritual and religious practice in Haiti comprise a form of play-labor, giving "people who perform it a political power in its ability both to critique the state and status quo and to provide people an escape from *mize* (misery)" (254). In other words, through playful performances, these women "challenge quotidian gendered and patriarchal scripts,"allowing them to "carve out and craft spaces of mobility and boundary crossing"(255).Jillian Hernandez (2020) underscores the contributions of Black girls in the United States to Black cultural production and creative expression. In her formulation of "aesthetic excess," Hernandez (2020) calls attention to the ways that young Black and Latina girls traverse and exceed the boundaries around "legitimate and deviant forms of gendered Blackness and Latinidad"(3) through their creative self-expression, while also deriving pleasure and joy from this practice. Relatedly, Annalisa Frisina and Camilla Hawthorne (2018) show how Afro-Italian women confront oppressive beauty standards and enact antiracist resistance through the pleasure of "going natural"with their hair.

The methodological orientation to play promoted within FunKino's participatory storytelling lab, as well as the specific creative and experimental forms that emerge and constitute forms of play, we feel offer important insights for the field of anthropology and how we think about the social relations of knowledge production. Our exploration and discussion on the power of play is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather we posit that a turn toward the playful could help to advance feminist, antiracist, and decolonial ethnographic and analytical frameworks.

Decolonizing methodologies

Whereas the Eurocentric tradition of research has been widely criticized for reproducing social hierarchies,systems of oppression,and extractivist practices (Escobar,2018;Robinson, 1983 [2005]), decolonizing methodologies are often touted as a means to uplifting marginalized ways of knowing and being in the world (Davis & Cravens, 2022; Dyrness & Sepúlveda III, 2020; Mohanty, 2003; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Anthropologists are increasingly destabilizing and troubling notions of "the ethnographic toolkit" in pursuit of more critical collaborative approaches that support the co-production of knowledge with our interlocutors, aspiring to advance antiracist,feminist,and decolonial research frameworks,and by extension the struggles of the systemically and historically marginalized (Bejarano et al.,2019;Benton & Bonilla, 2017; Berry et al., 2017; Dubuisson and Schuller, 2022; Gupta & Stoolman, 2022; Tengan, 2018).In a recent essay that revisits the foundational contributions of Faye Harrison's *Decolonizing Anthropology* (2010

[1991]),Black feminist anthropologist A.Lynn Bolles (2023) states, “Decolonization entails looking beyond the colonizers’ perspectives and using the frames of reference of those being studied.It also raises questions about how researchers deal with the ‘Other,’ that is, those who differ from the researcher, and their role in shaping anthropological knowledge” (1).

To some extent,all (or most) of the work filtering under collaborative and creative or experimental anthropological approaches could be argued as drawing on play or the social realm of the playful. Yet play as a method remains relatively underexplored and ripe for analysis, with much potential for advancing aspirations toward an antiracist and decolonizing anthropology (Bolles, 2023; Gupta & Stoolman, 2022; Mahmud, 2021; Rana, 2020). Like art, we argue that play “can be a research method;it can be a way of doing anthropology and not just of communicating it”(Meulemans et al.2018,27).Critical collaborative play,as we explore herein,shares much in common with other collaborative and creative methods but is also distinguished in bringing these domains together through an explicit emphasis on play as liberatory praxis.

Notes on co-authorship and publication

Our group of co-authors includes two researchers, Megan (a US-born, white cisgender woman with research commitments in Italy since 2003) and Sara (a northern Italian, white cisgender woman researching information systems and social change); FunKino co-founder Alessio (a white cisgender man originally from Naples,filmmaker and founder of the umbrella nonprofit organization Zabbara);project coordinator and FunKino co-founder,Daniele (a white cisgender man, originally from Sicily, sociologist and expert in designing social innovation programs); FunKino lab co-facilitators and former lab participants, Muhammed (a Black cisgender man, originally from Gambia, living in Italy since 2017), Ibrahima (a Black cisgender man,originally from Côte d’Ivoire,living in Italy since 2017),and Alma (a northern Italian,white cisgender woman and social worker).

While our collaboration began in 2016, the material presented in this article is primarily based on our observations of and experiences with the summer edition of the lab in 2022.At this time, Megan and Sara were documenting the lab’s methodology through a framework of collaborative data collection and iterative analysis with ongoing input from Alessio, Daniele, Muhammed, Ibrahima, and Alma. In regards to our writing process, some authors contributed more than others. Megan and Sara recorded conversations in Italian with all the other coauthors, transcribed those recordings, and translated and synthesized their content along with other sources of data. A complete draft of the manuscript in English was shared with Alessio,Daniele,Muhammed,Ibrahima,and Alma,who reviewed and made

minor changes to the manuscript while corresponding in Italian with Megan and Sara about any questions or clarifications.

We have conceptualized this article primarily as an intervention into collaborative methods in anthropology. There are several reasons behind this decision. Although Megan and Sara conducted research activities such as participant observation and interviews with lab facilitators and former participants and received human subjects approval from their respective universities, it would be inaccurate to reduce our entire collaboration to "research." The bulk of our collaboration has consisted of producing material that resonates outside of an academic context,such as through film screenings and methodology workshops.In this regard,we strongly identify with Gatt and Lembo's (2022) statement that publishing in academic journals comes second to collaborative work,as the former is accompanied by "the queasy knowledge that in doing so we are participating in processes of epistemic colonialism…[though] we look forward to any deeper engagements this writing might entail in the future" (833).

Separately, the linguistic diversity of the 2022 lab and lack of a shared vernacular posed certain challenges to implementing those aspects of our collaboration that *do* resonate more as research, such as interviews with lab participants. Verbal interactions were often translated into at least one, if not sometimes two or three different languages, a process that proved quite time-consuming but also engaged participants who were polylingual. This represents one potential limitation as we are unable, for instance, to substantiate some of our observations with extended quotes and testimonials from lab participants. Yet, we hope that our collaborative writing process helps to temper some of these limitations while taking cues from Lassiter et al. (2020), who observe that "as a group we can bring together our different positions and understandings such that,through a collaborative frame,we can offer a broader, and deeper,understanding of the event and its aftermath that none of us could do alone"(12).

Play as collaborative method in the FunKino lab

The summer 2022 edition of the FunKino storytelling lab convened at Casa FunKino, a community arts space located in Palermo's historic center,over the span of 3 weeks for four hours each day (Monday through Thursday). The 2022 cohort evolved in size but never exceeded 18 participants and consisted primarily of young men (whose ages ranged from late teens to early twenties) from Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, Ethiopia, and Sicily. All were encouraged to feel "a casa" (at home) and to hang out, share meals, and have fun together (see Figure 2). Similar to what Dara Culhane (2011) describes in doing a storytelling workshop series with "subaltern research subjects"(258) in Vancouver, Canada, the FunKino lab hoped to "convey a sense of fun, respect and

possibility…to create an environment radically different from the everyday lives of the participants: a space and time in which they would be respected, feted, and treated as complex human beings with untapped creative capacities and imaginations" (263). Consistent with FunKino's commitment to a flexible methodology (more on this later), participants were invited to engage in the ways that best accommodated their individual circumstances. As frequently reiterated by Alessio and Daniele during the 2022 lab, each of us participants would leave our imprint, regardless of how small that might be (e.g., an image, a gesture) on the final *storia condivisa* (shared story) of the group and be included in any future correspondence about the evolution of our story and opportunities to stay engaged or re-engage, such as in the production of the film.

During Week 1, Muhammed and Ibrahima were instrumental in facilitating a variety of play-based activities to build rapport and to establish a shared environment for co-creative production. They significantly enriched group interactions by sharing from their own previous experiences with the lab while also helping to advance the increasingly complex exercises and benchmarks that comprise the FunKino play-based storytelling methodology. Drawing inspiration from the work of dramatherapist Mooli Lahad (1992) in Northern Israel as well as from Italian pedagogist Gianni Rodari (1973), the methodology is designed to liberate participants from the exigencies and constraints of Western philosophy, such as rationality and reason, and to instead stimulate the creative mind.

FIGURE 2 Participants of the July 2022 lab share a family-style lunch at Casa FunKino. Photo by Sara Vannini.

During Week 2, participants started engaging in storytelling activities and acquired knowledge about constructing effective narratives, telling stories, and sharing and exchanging stories. Besides narrative creation, the focus of the second week was two-fold: (1) cultivating listening, reciprocity, and empathy among participants and (2) pushing participants to detach more and more from any obligation to tell "real stories" and to use creativity and imaginative thinking.[9] It is not that we were discouraged from telling stories based on lived experiences, but rather that we did not have to be beholden to these stories.In the specific case of migrant youth, there is often the expectation that one rehearses a particular narrative for gaining recognition by state institutions, such as immigration bureaucracies (Cabot, 2019). The lab has no interest in replicating the extractive procedures exemplified in state practices and their concomitant logics of deservingness (Willen, 2012). Nevertheless, it is still important that the lab provide a space for migrant youth to process their experiences. Connecting and forming friendships with youth of similar backgrounds as well as with participants from Italy, Europe, and outside of Europe is a primary goal.

The third and final week of the lab consisted of telling and retelling stories by breaking apart their elements (characters, images, etc.), exchanging them, and creating new stories starting from them in different ways to finally arrive at a single "shared" story that represents the group. As Daniele conveyed, he feels "a responsibility to guarantee that the process has an end, that participants feel a sense of accomplishment." (see Table 1).

In the following sections, we share observations from how collaborative play was mobilized in the summer 2022 lab as we collectively (1) navigated social and linguistic differences among our cohort,(2) encouraged practices of improvisation in the crafting of a shared story, and (3) aspired to disrupt uneven landscapes of power.

TABLE 1 Schedule of lab activities by week.

	Lab activities
Week 1	Narrative-based games and other forms of play
Week 2	Principles of storytelling
Week 3	Crafting the shared story

Navigating social and linguistic differences

Day 1 of the lab: Our group stands in a circle and anticipates instructions from Daniele for "Name and gesture" (nome e gesto). It is the first day of the lab, but we will repeat this riscaldamento over the next few days as we get acquainted.The instructions are quite straightforward: each person states their name to the rest of the group while also performing a gesture, such as tapping their head with the palm of their hand, snapping their fingers, stretching their arms, pretending to kick a ball, etc. As we go around in the circle, each person will follow their own name and gesture with the names and gestures of those preceding them. The person standing next to the first person – the person who goes last – has the greatest responsibility as they will have to repeat the names and gestures, in consecutive order, for the rest of the circle. Some gestures elicit laughter from the group, such as a dance move from a young man that others are certain they will not be able to replicate. Some members prove better at recalling gestures over names, or vice versa. Sometimes the group provides cues to help someone in remembering either detail.Sometimes names and gestures are confused such that one name is uttered along with a gesture that someone by another name actually performed. This too elicits some gentle intervention or correction by the group. Some show their disinterest by crossing their arms and only half-performing the gestures, or not at all, as their turn comes around. Every once in a while, the group helps to intervene when a name is mispronounced or a gesture is misinterpreted. Once all have gone, we reverse direction allowing each person to repeat the names and gestures of the group. (fieldnotes from Megan). (see Figure 3)

Alessio,Daniele,Muhammed,and Ibrahima opted for various nonverbal forms of play,such as drawing and illustration,to help mediate group interactions.These play-based interactions, such as “name and gesture,” proved especially helpful as we navigated the linguistic complexity of our group. “Name and gesture” did not require translation, aside from some brief remarks at the beginning to explain the parameters of the game and the occasional need to clarify those parameters.In another activity,we were asked to draw a memory from childhood that could be shared with others in the group.We each assigned a title to our drawings and narrated their contents while sitting together in a circle.One young man drew his village’s school that was situated near a river and a mountain,and he noted how he had learned to swim in that river. One of the youngest members of the group drew himself playing soccer, while another depicted himself playing on his PlayStation as Lionel Messi, his favorite FIFA player. Others drew themselves playing marbles,a childhood friend,street crossings from their home village, and intricate maps of the places they wandered. While these forms of self-expression were necessary to some degree in light of varying reading and writing literacy within the group, they were also pleasurable activities that yielded humor, compassion, and camaraderie. As shared by Daniele, these play-based activities help to “change the way that people relate to one another” through, as added by Alessio, “the crossing of cultural barriers and borders.”

FIGURE 3 “Nome e gesto” elicits laughter from the group. Photo by Megan A. Carney.

The activities for each day of the lab began and ended in a group circle, with several moments of coming back to the circle formation throughout the day. The circle served an important role in building group rapport and establishing a co-creative space,as other anthropologists have noted through engaging creative and experimental methods. Vivaldi (2020) argues that the circle helps to generate a certain group identity through a process that

she refers to as “alchemic transformation”in “which various elements combine and fuse to create a new state or a new way of being.This new state might be lasting or fleeting…Established practitioners know what works. They have tool kits of devices, ingredients, and formulas…many of these are found in the warm-up circle” (398). She adds that “Sensations of space, time, body, voice, vision, hearing, touch, weight, speed, and impact—and heightened attunement to them—are activated and fused in the circle experience” (Vivaldi, 2020, 399).

Encouraging improvisation

> *Day 7 & Day 8 of the lab: Toward the end of week two, each of us narrates the story we have created with the rest of the group.We've also been asked to actively listen and reflect on which images from the stories are most salient for us, as we will discuss these at the end of this exercise. Some group members improvise extremely elaborate and imaginative stories;they captivate our attention for nearly an hour or more as they sit at the front of the room and regale the group with stories that include a complex cast of characters, moments of suspense, and vivid details. Others require less time, but still attend to the fundamentals of any story as articulated by our facilitators: "protagonist, mission/objective, help/resource, obstacle, resolution or overcoming of obstacle, ending".*[10] *By the end of the last story to be told, we're asked to reflect on and share two images that "ci hanno colpito di più" (impacted us the most) from all of the stories. We compile a list of these images* (*Figure* 4). *The two images with the most mentions by group members then become anchors for our next round of stories: a pregnant woman in prison, hungry; a young man stranded and lost in the desert without water or food. We're asked to play with these images – we can transform and reorganize these images from their original context to improvise a new story (Figure* 5). *This is how we will embark on our creative work together as co-authors and toward a shared story. (fieldnotes from Megan)*

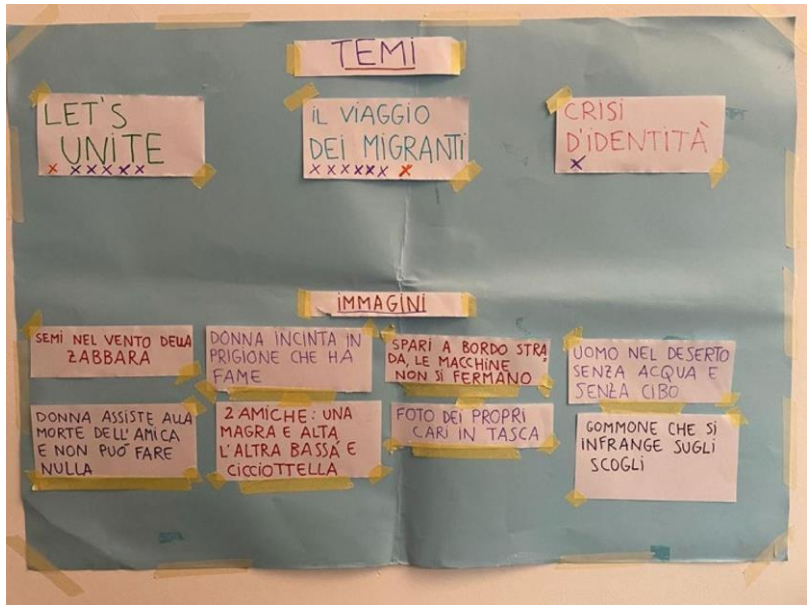

FIGURE 4 Themes (temi) and images (immagini) connecting participants' stories. Photo by Megan A. Carney.

FIGURE 5 Piecing together the shared story. Photo by Megan A. Carney.

The meaning and various iterations of play that unfolded within the lab, as with the stories themselves and the shared story to which all participants would contribute, emerged organically through the collective through practices of improvisation.Core to the lab's

“metodologia flessibile”(flexible methodology,as emphasized on several occasions by Alessio and Daniele), participants shaped the contours of play both within particular phases of the lab and across different labs over time.For instance,former participants could eventually assume leadership roles within the lab, as in the case of Muhammed and Ibrahima. As facilitators, they enriched the methodology with their political commitments (i.e., Muhammed’s organizing with Black Lives Matter Italy), lived experiences, and creative self-expression.

Daniele talked about how they aspired to create “the possibility for new encounters” both among participants themselves and ways of knowing or being.While there were some parameters in place to contextualize interactions, we were encouraged to improvise new directions or surprise others through our own interpretation of the parameters and to move toward different ways of being together. One participant who had also been part of the 2021 lab alluded to how “We’re a great family, a great team” and facilitators regularly encouraged a spirit of conviviality in the lab where participants could “feel at home…play together and eat together” (Daniele). Similar to the surfing methodology utilized by Culhane (2011) for a storytelling workshop, in which they “tried to catch the waves generated by the participants, ride them as far as we could, not drown, and be ready for the next wave” (p. 264), those of us who wanted to also spent several hours after the conclusion of the lab each day to debrief, discuss challenges, and revisit and revise plans for the next day while having fun together.

The process of crafting the shared story began with selecting a narrative topic (*tema*) and developing our own story through responding to a specific set of questions:“Why is this topic necessary? Why is there urgency to talk about it today? How can it change the world?”Upon listening to the stories,we collectively assigned a theme to each one.We discussed and analyzed these individual themes until we identified an overarching theme. As Daniele explained in reflecting on the process, “it is not ‘my theme’ within a group, anymore, I am no longer [me] with my theme,but I am [me] who is creating a story around a theme that is not mine,but that I can probably understand or that I will also make mine.”

The overarching theme informed activities for Week 3 in which participants improvised even further in exchanging elements of stories with others in the group,abandoning their own narrations,retelling the stories of others,and creating new stories borrowing elements from others, in striving toward a more creative and collaborative approach to authorship. This process is very similar to Vidali’s (2020) description of participatory ethnographic theater projects that “rely on the dissolution of boundaries between individuals and their sense of ownership over material.They are forms of knowledge that are coauthored,coproduced,co-owned, and coinhabited” (395). Culhane (2011) also engaged improvisation through group interactions as her “organizing and animating principle” by telling participants to “improvise…pick up cues…respond…support people in moving towards…something” (262). Daniele reflected that the shared story represents “hard work done in a group because a synergy needs to be created, a work that everyone really feels is their own. Indeed it is a story that, at least in all the groups that we have had, everyone always says to us ‘This is my story’, indeed, ‘This is *our* story’.”The point here is that participants have found value in creating something dialogically through practices of improvisation, which arguably is the only means to truly cocreating anything. As observed by Vidali (2020) in discussing ensemble work and dialogic play,

> *The story is sequentially scaffolded by the real-time turn taking and by individuals’ investment in a shared process. Regardless of whether the story is easy to construe or whether it is more abstract and impressionistic—and regardless of*

whether it is literally intelligible and coherent to each participant in the same way— the fact remains that something was created together. This is no small thing. The circle itself has transmuted into a unique place and time, a place where something happened. The group now has its own story, its own history, its own identity. (400)

Aspiring to disrupt uneven landscapes of power

One afternoon after activities had wrapped up for the day,Ibrahima began describing the concept for a film that he was making. The plot centered on an immigrant living in Italy who wins the lottery. He goes to claim his earnings from the *tabacchi* (tobacco store that also sells lottery and public transportation tickets) where he purchased his ticket.Unfortunately,the owner tells him that he needs to present his proof of purchase,something that the young man does not have with him because it is permanently affixed to his bedroom door. He unhinges his door and brings that to the *tabacchi*,but the *tabaccaio* (tobacco vendor) tells him that it is now past the date by which he may redeem his ticket and he will need to go to such-and-such government office to file a specific form. The film proceeds along this vein, with the young immigrant being sent from one place to another as he navigates a complex bureaucracy in order to claim earnings that are rightfully his. It is an allegory of Italy's immigration bureaucracy and the many years and often nonsensical trajectories that those seeking papers must endure (see also Tuckett, 2018). For Muhammed and Ibrahima, the process of obtaining a *permesso di soggiorno* (residency permit)—the document that is required for accessing most employment and housing,as well as to exercise one's mobility—had taken nearly 5 years and hampered them in many ways,symbolizing how they had not been able to move on with their lives. In Ibrahima's case, at the time that he first shared his concept for a film, he was still awaiting documents.

Ibrahima's film provides some insight into how power asymmetries are always, already shaping the lives of migrant youth—a young man beats the odds and wins the lottery only to discover that the system is playing him: without a valid ID, he won't be able to cash in his prize. In comparing migrant youth both in Europe and the United States, Andrea Dyrness and Enrique Sepúlveda III (2020) argue that state-led efforts "to 'discipline' migrant youth, to transform them into acceptable subjects…work to criminalize migrants' cultural difference and connections to their homelands"(7). Migrant youth in Italy navigate myriad constraints in seeking to exercise their autonomy and agency, including as residents at reception centers. Based on their own experiences of staying at reception centers for migrant youth,Muhammed and Ibrahima noted that the occasional absence of some participants from the storytelling lab could be owed to reception center staff directing residents towards volunteering for the city rather than allowing them to structure their own time and to pursue their own interests.

In alluding to the mutual transformation that takes place during moments of storytelling and deep listening, as well as over the span of the lab as a whole, Alessio remarked "this is the magic."As an example,he noted how many participants from the 2022 lab had gone from being quite reticent at the beginning to becoming more outgoing and exuberant (frequently smiling and laughing,for instance),especially as they moved toward co-creating stories.Vidali (2020) observes this "magical"quality as well in what she terms as alchemic transformations. In bestowing the narrator with control of the space (i.e., a form of role-play), others of us existed together in the contours of the story as it was being told, perhaps partially or

temporarily suspending the social hierarchies and power imbalances that were otherwise quite familiar to us outside the lab.

Still, the creative process that FunKino aspires to activate through “il gioco” sometimes manifests unevenly among lab participants. Sitting with one of the lab participants as he was struggling to generate ideas for his story, Megan listened as he said “Our minds are not alike…there is so much stress in here”while pointing to his temples.He continued to describe how stress prevented him from sleeping,from dreaming,because he was constantly worrying about his aunt and younger sisters in Somalia who he had left some 6 years before. The creative block experienced by this young man might have been a source of retraumatization, as by our talking through it, memories that had been repressed gradually resurfaced. As a group, we eventually arrived at a story that centered him and his ambitions to become a doctor, but a sense of incompleteness undeniably lingered.

The experiences offered by this young man and Ibrahima serve as important reminders of how play and rest are frequently undermined or precluded by everyday structures of power and oppression. Opening space for self-expression and critical dialogue, the lab aspired to offer a liberating, healing, and playful setting in which participants could exceed the punitive logics and restrictive identities (e.g.,“legitimate”vs.“deviant”forms of migranthood;Blackness; youth) imposed upon them (Hernandez,2020).And there were times when some participants wanted play to be about something other than storytelling,such as creating music or performing poetry. They would play music from their phones and invite others to dance along, arrive late to our gatherings because they had been up all night playing video games, initiate an impromptu game of soccer in the alley, or daydream with others in the group about their future plans.

As Muhammed described, they hoped to “help youth grow, to increase their capacity.” By exercising their creativity through storytelling, Muhammed suggested that participants were “changing the narrative of migration, changing the story, and helping others come to know another reality.”This was made particularly explicit when participants collectively decided on “il viaggio dei migranti”(migrants’journeys) as the overarching theme for the shared story.While the theme of migrants’ journeys for the shared story and the images selected for inclusion in the story—in this case, a pregnant woman in prison, hungry, and a young man stranded and lost in the desert without water or food—could be viewed as tropes regularly surfacing in media, film, and existing scholarship on migration into Europe, many participants in the 2022 lab conveyed a strong personal connection to this theme.

The storia condivisa scripted by participants of the 2022 lab was developed into the short film Boza or Die. A synopsis for the cortometraggio reads “Libya, west coast. Binta and Abdul are held hostage by a trafficker who prevents them from continuing their journey to Europe. They have been sold, passed from hand to hand, reduced to bodies without identities, violated and disfigured. In a twist of fate, their executioners are swallowed up by a moonless night.” In the early months of 2023, several previous lab participants took part in the film’s production, both helping with various aspects of production and learning behind the scenes as well as starring in front of the camera and being acknowledged as writers in the film’s credits. While the subject matter of the film is undoubtedly heavy, depicting a young man and a pregnant woman being held captive by human traffickers in a small prison on the coast of Libya, backstage footage and playful banter vis-a-vis the WhatsApp group chat for “FunKino - Quarta Edizione” (FunKino - Fourth Edition) show people enjoying themselves, “having a laugh” (Kelley 1997).

Play as ethnography and mode of analysis: Making the case for joy

While long-term ethnographic fieldwork in a particular place has been a hallmark of anthropology, the reality is that our “communities”of research are often in flux and temporary, perhaps even more so for those of us working in contexts of migration and diaspora.As sites of statesponsored violence,dehumanization,exploitation,and death,migration and diasporic contexts present ethnographers with multiple methodological and ethical challenges (Anzaldua, 1987; Hawthorne, 2022; Tellez, 2021; Zavella, 2011). Yet these sites may also be generative in providing opportunities to operationalize collaborative approaches to knowledge production.

We can reimagine “deep hanging out”as a collaborative process and lend explicit credit to the ways that anthropological knowledge is always, already co-produced. Critical collaborative play may thereby minimize the burden on our co-producers of knowledge to conform to research objectives and protocols by allowing instead for collective definition and meaningmaking. As Morelli (2021) concludes from her own research on participatory filmmaking, “Engaging participants as co-creators of animation offers a way to achieve impact from the bottom up… who by accepting their own histories can use them to shape their own futures and those of their communities” (347).

In making the case for joy, we are especially cognizant of mounting dissent toward what historically has been prescribed as the “anthropological toolkit,”the pressures on which were especially accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Meulemans et al., 2018). Calls for the dismantling of this toolkit and its white-supremacist-cis-hetero-patriarchal origins allude to its imbrication with settler colonialism and racial capitalism, as well as to rapidly changing work and living conditions (Berry et al., 2017; Valdez, 2023). It is also important to acknowledge the ways that this toolkit has imposed unreasonable expectations and ableist logics on scholars and students in carrying out their fieldwork (Durban, 2022). This set of conditions has generated widespread burnout and moral fatigue among our colleagues and those we train, while also calling into question our own self-worth as engaged scholars and activists. Prior to the start of the 2022 lab for instance, which coincided with record-high temperatures in Sicily and unprecedented energy price spikes that severely restricted the use of air conditioning, Megan recalls expressing to Sara some anticipatory anxiety and self-doubt: about returning to in-person research activities after nearly 3 years of pandemic,about carrying out activities in the extreme heat, and about expectations—both real and imagined—that they “maximize” this time together in the field. Such preoccupations are not unfamiliar to those who have experienced marginalization and discrimination along lines of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, citizenship, and (dis)ability within the discipline and academy.

In reflecting on their research with Black women in Haiti and proposing the framework of “tenderness as method,” Dubuisson and Schuller (2022) ask “How can we, as feminist anthropologists and activists, make visible the experiences and agency of Black women and still allow space for a softness grounded in liberation?”(62). As a methodological orientation, critical collaborative play may yield such softness. Concepts such as “duo-” or “companion ethnography,” have emerged and provide fertile ground on which to rethink how we define both fieldwork and anthropological knowledge (Valdez, 2022). Inverting the gaze and situating the “anthropologist as subject” may provide “a means of interrogating [our] authority as researchers” (Hurston, [1935] 2008) in which the anthropologist practices vulnerability and a subject position of not-knowing. Akin to “breaking down the fourth wall of research” which “opens up the question of who is positioned as the expert” (Gubrium et al., 2015, 31), critical

collaborative play as method may help to elevate “research participants to the position of co-researchers who are quite capable of interpreting their own experiences” (Gubrium et al., 2015, 19).

Collaborative play as a feminist and antiracist orientation to fieldwork—wherein “play” represents both social relation and a site of knowledge co-production—we argue,places explicit value on joy. Engaging critical collaborative play as method represents in part an insurgent practice, one that eschews the imposed (and false) binaries of “work and play” in a capitalist system, and concomitantly the tendency to monetize and accelerate research activities and products within the context of the neoliberal university (Boggs & Mitchell, 2018; Boyer & Marcus, 2021; Giroux, 2014). Critical collaborative play privileges marginalized ways of knowing, moving through, and sensing the world, often bringing about a partial suspension of power relations that may open possibilities for transformation (Hernandez, 2020).

Conclusion: Revisiting critical collaborative methods in anthropology

Our research collaboration through FunKino’s storytelling lab has pointed to the transformative potential of play as a critical and creative collaborative method and as well as its potential as a feminist and antiracist form of ethnography and mode of analysis. The creative selfexpression of participants elicited through FunKino’s emphasis on “il gioco”—often intended to shift narratives of migration and belonging—bridges art with critical dialogue revealing the ways that play might be considered a liberatory praxis. Moreover, we underscore the significance of critical collaborative play in the particular social, political, and geographic setting of Sicily (and the central Mediterranean) for advancing the struggles of marginalized groups. While it could be argued that the linguistic diversity and shifting circumstances of participants (i.e., for many, Sicily and Italy are “transit” countries) pose significant barriers to fully realizing the co-creative storytelling process, we have argued that there is still value in creating spaces of belonging and working against everyday exclusion, even when such spaces might be fleeting.

In terms of future research, critical collaborative play in this particular setting may serve to critique the colonial history of ethnographic research that has contributed to the “Othering,” that is, essentialization and racialization of populations throughout the Mediterranean, including southern Italians and *siciliani*, and exploited these representations as grounds for justifying extractive economies,dispossession,and eugenics projects (Hawthorne,2022).As a feminist and antiracist orientation to knowledge co-production,critical collaborative play holds potential in countering these histories of racial, spatial, epistemic, and material violence.

As anthropology continues to grapple with questions of power in ethnographic knowledge production and representation, play as a critical collaborative method warrants further attention. Critical collaborative play may prove life-affirming through mobilizing processes of co-creation as quotidian yet powerful contestations of the myriad violences of Eurocentric epistemologies that have sustained anti-Black, racial capitalist systems. In reckoning with its colonial history, it is difficult to fathom a future for anthropology that does not embrace decolonizing frameworks and a more decisive turn towards the playful.

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NOTES

[1]Specifically, Oh Cards, https://oh-cards.com/

[2]FunKino also works with youth from marginalized contexts, orphans, victims of trafficking, survivors of violence, and people who are incarcerated. In 2022, FunKino launched "FunKino - Across Walls," a version of the lab for people who are incarcerated.

[3]FunKino has formally partnered with a small number of migrant youth residence centers in Palermo. Center directors typically meet with those interested in cultivating a partnership, determine the appropriateness of the partnership, and develop a memorandum of understanding with partnering organizations.

[4]Megan and Sara have helped to organize screenings at universities and film festivals outside of Italy, including in the United Kingdom and the United States.

[5]"Mette in primo piano le voci dei migranti nell'educare il pubblico italiano ed europeo alla migrazione contemporanea."

[6]Drawing from Ciccia and Roggeband (2021) "a commitment to intersectional solidarity requires that organizations enact a repertoire of practices of inclusivity to ensure that less powerful groups are included on equal footing in shaping movements' goals, strategies and tactics" (187).

[7]"Il gioco" in this setting, resonates with other Sicilian creative practices that have emerged from long-standing struggles for autonomy and dignity, for example, local celebrations of *carnevale* and puppetry (Opera dei pupi).

[8]Yet these populations sometimes encounter barriers to participating, such as the hours of the lab interfering with employment opportunities or other pressing obligations such as appointments with immigration offices.

[9]While FunKino's emphasis on play animates various aspects of lab interactions, this emphasis does not preclude possibilities for critical dialogue around the experiences of migrant youth. Engaging with play-based exercises in storytelling during the 2022 lab for instance, youth touched on themes such as being orphaned early in life, forced to flee home as a child, repeated instances of physical assault and theft, bearing witness to murder (often of a loved one), encounters with violent border regimes and organized crime, abuse and confinement by human traffickers, imprisonment in places notorious for human rights abuses such as Libya, and harrowing boat journeys across the central Mediterranean.

[10]Also known as the six-part story method, developed by dramatherapist Mooli Lahad (1992) while working with children traumatized by conflict in Northern Israel to help them cope with stress and anxiety.

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