Sorting, typing, classifying
The elephants in our ethnographic rooms

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Figure 1. Photograph of 'The Elephant in the Room' installation by Banksy (Los Angeles, 2006). Source: http://www.banksy.co.uk/.

The elephant in the room is huge, but quiet. It is so taken for granted that it melts into the tapestry. Nobody in the room notes its presence. Though disregarded, it is still strikingly present, a massive force that people must walk around if they wish to move within the room.

The metaphor of this troubling pachyderm, of course, is well known and widely used (see, for example, Krueger 2017; Thomas 2016). The figurative elephant in the room alludes to issues that seem obvious, but are so disturbing that they are actively ignored or put aside to ensure business as usual. In our view, the resulting spectrum of ignorance goes from voluntary blindness to the point where, hidden in plain sight, the obvious and disturbing issues may actually not be known by some of the protagonists.

In this think piece, which accompanies our special section on the problem of classification in ethnography, we suggest that matters of classification, categorization, and typology in all of their shades constitute an 'elephant in the room' of ethnographic field research and writing, both an obvious and invisible part of our anthropological epistemology. We decided to use the metaphor of the elephant in the room to guide us in this text, as we address questions of methodology, positionality, epistemology, and representation in ways we deem heuristic.

The elephants of classification

In their various shades (in terms of ancestry, class differences, diagnostic categories, racial and ethnic labels, and their many intersections), classifications in governmental and medical practice, among others, are extremely powerful, implying material effects for the subject(s) they target. They shape the epistemic space of what is thinkable, conceivable, and targetable. Unavoidably, the resulting categories include as well as exclude, often simultaneously. They can be tools and obstacles at the same time, and have profound impacts on the lives and bodies of both humans and nonhumans. In that sense, they are deeply relational and contingent; their effects vary depending on their specific articulation in practices. Their arbitrariness may play out between different actors as well as within individual subjects, as classificatory violence and social entitlement may go hand in hand; think, for instance, about the boundaries and privileges of citizenship, as explored by Nguyen (2010), Krause and Schramm (2011), Heinemann and Lemke (2014), and others.

In medical anthropology and the anthropology of science, where our own research is situated, we constantly encounter categorizations that help in making up people (Hacking 1986) and constitute natureculture worlds (Subramaniam 2014). Our interlocutors – among them clinicians, policy makers, epidemiologists, and lab scientists – often base their daily work decisions on standardized classifications. They do so explicitly, as part of their routine epistemic practices. These common categorizations (of disease, risk, or ancestry, for example) are intertwined with attributions of and assumptions about other difference-making categories: class, race and ethnicity, or religious belonging inform the epistemic practice of classification and have a profound impact on the intended social, scientific, and clinical outputs (see Subramaniam 2014). We both encountered such intertwinements in our

fieldwork: in the context of medical genetics in Oman for instance, clinicians frequently assume that the specific branch of Islam their patients belong to influences their opinions about prenatal diagnosis and medical termination of pregnancy. However, as it is not socially acceptable to inquire about this obedience, practitioners use a patient's name, address, physical appearance, clothing, or accent as a proxy for their religious affiliation. Depending on their resulting impression, they may mention the official ruling of the Saudi clerics (with patients thought to be Ibadi or Sunni) or decide not to raise the religious question at all (with those thought to be Shia). Or, to remain within the field of human genetics, many sampling decisions involved in the creation of biogeographically stratified databases in population genomics operate on assumed correlations among territory, language, culture, and body that link back to the time of colonial race science. So-called ancestral populations are thereby constructed as rather homogenous and place-bound. Despite geneticists' emphasis on the complex relationship between phenotype and genotype, and despite the explicit rejection of racial typology in contemporary genomics, race remains a sticky and troubling absent-presence that is hard to pin down (see M'charek, Schramm, and Skinner 2014).

For some of the protagonists of our fieldwork, who perform the daily work of categorization, such (historical) relationships get sidelined in favor of pragmatic decision making. For others, especially those who are subject to the ordering gaze, the resulting categorizations may turn out to be deeply problematic and politically charged. Just like the metaphorical elephant lingering next to the sofa, the presence of difference-making categorizations in clinical and scientific practice is often palpable but not necessarily recognized or addressed by individuals who nevertheless practice them. As anthropologists, we might observe them, yet we are not always prone to discuss them explicitly, especially when considering the multilayered and arbitrary role of categories of difference in practice. The absence of discussion about the existence and performative power of multiple and intersectional categorizations by those who use them tends to simplify and naturalize them: in the local moral worlds where they are valid, they are taken for granted.

The fact that such powerful social phenomena are rarely discussed poses profound methodological, epistemic, and ethical challenges to ethnography. Certainly, we need to ask how categories and standards are forged and employed, and what kinds of work they perform (Bowker and Star 2000; Bauer and Wahlberg 2009; Lampland and Star 2009). However, we also need to acknowledge that our own anthropological practices also include arbitrary classificatory work and may unintentionally reinforce the very categories they intend to unravel. Offering the concept of 'classificatory violence', scholars like Flood and Starr (2019), Pollock (2012), and Schramm, Krause, and Valley (2019) urge anthropologists to attend to inequality and power relations that shape classificatory practices. We ask: what kinds of epistemological dilemmas do anthropologists encounter if they want to both take their interlocutors seriously and provide nuanced accounts of their practices?

In the following sections, we reflect on this issue by considering the elephant of classification as a material-semiotic creature that calls for a careful consideration of positionality and situatedness in our interlocutors' practices as well as our own. We start by zooming out of the first image of this think piece and attending to the surroundings of the pachyderm and their settings. This allows us to focus on the importance of situatedness and ethnographic attentiveness as necessary abilities for anthropologists to acknowledge and write about the elephants of classification in their fieldwork. We also deal with ways of liberating the metaphorical elephant when we propose not to give in to the dichotomous temptation that comes with classification. We stress the importance of historicizing the elephant's presence, shape, and role, as a first step, maybe, to driving it out of the room.

Of concealed, tamed, and painted elephants in anthropology

The image we have chosen to accompany our text offers a felicitous entry point to address these issues. It is titled 'The Elephant in the Room' and is taken from Banksy's 'Barely Legal' show, which took place in Los Angeles in 2006.[1] In the position of the audience, we look at the scene from the outside. Spray-painted in red with golden fleurs-de-lis, Tai, a thirty-eight-year-old female *Elephas maximus* is spectacular, yet camouflaged. The elephant fits into the setting; it takes the center of the stage. In the original Banksy performance, the elephant symbolized 'poverty', that problem of which everybody is aware but willfully ignores. For our purposes, we want to draw attention to the staged character of the scene: neither the living room nor the painted elephant are 'natural'. Likewise, classificatory processes are not natural; they need continuous work in order to be shared, sustained, and performed. This work involves taming: an unruly elephant would destroy the scene, making it impossible to overlook. But Tai, who had performed in numerous popular films, was taught to follow commands and fulfilled her prescribed role. Classifications also imply taming: their very purpose is to organize the world so that it can be grasped, understood, described (and thus discussed), and controlled. This organizing work produces tensions between the general and the specific, the standardized and the personal, as well as the normative and the queer.

Thirty years back, the sociologist Susan Leigh Star (1990) demonstrated the importance of paying attention to and caring for that which does not fit. In considering 'monstrous' arrangements that do not fit neatly into our binary classifications, she argues that both

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1   John Akomfrah's more recent contribution to the 2019 Venice Biennale 'The Elephant in the Room: Four Nocturnes' uses the metaphor to address yet another universe of planetary relations. We have chosen to stay with Banksy's performance because of its staged character and its straightforwardness as an illustration.

violent erasure as well as misrecognition could be potentially deadly. In her seminal piece 'Power, Technology and the Phenomenology of Conventions: On Being Allergic to Onions' she develops a 'theory of multiple membership' in which she questions the self-evident status of standardizations, and asks about the possibilities and limitations of alternative, more accommodating forms of classification (Star 1990, 26). Star points out the cost that is involved in membership: the exclusions, cutting, and covering, in other words, the taming of complexity that is involved in all modes of belonging. She also shows that heterogeneity and multiplicity cannot be resolved by more splinterings or compartmentalizations. Instead, she wants us to acknowledge the tensions, urging us to leave room for more fluid arrangements and to start from what she calls the 'Zero Point', that is, a point 'between dichotomies' that allows to think in new ways about technosocial assemblages (Star 1990, 47, 53).

However, as the think pieces of this special section show, clinical practice is more often than not guided by forms of classification that aim to produce clear-cut boundaries: you receive the test or you don't (see McDowell in this special section); you are entitled to access the health care facility or you aren't (see Brenman in this special section). Better inclusiveness may be attempted by adding or accommodating group labels (see Brenman in this special section), thereby shifting the boundary between 'deserving' and 'undeserving', while keeping the very distinction intact. The work of classification takes place within a complex assemblage of links and relations: making one category fit – including with the help of well-wishing anthropologists who take part in feeding the elephant of classification – may produce new exclusions, new blind spots (see Moyer in this special section). Certainly, the additional presence of the anthropologist in the room already filled by the elephant adds a layer of interesting complexity to the scene.

Moving (around) elephants: Situatedness, positionality, and writing

Star writes (1990, 52): 'Power is about whose metaphor brings worlds together and holds them there. … Metaphors may heal or create, erase or violate, impose a voice or embody more than one voice'. Returning to Banksy's installation: a journalist tells us that Tai remained calm and played along (Oliver 2006). She was an experienced performer, as her keepers assured the press. But the act of painting her body drew the attention of the animal welfare authorities, who ordered that she be scrubbed clean of the potentially toxic paint. Local authorities ruled that she had to remain in the staged living room for the time of the performance without her camouflaging paint. Thus cleansed, Tai stood out in the room, losing the purpose the artist had intended for her.

Having shifted positionalities (back and forth from 'art piece' to 'political message' to 'animal welfare symbol'), the example of Tai may help us think through the methodological

challenges that we face when dealing with the work of classification. Who indeed has the power to paint or to scrub clean, to display or conceal? With this metaphor of the elephant in the room, we try to maintain an awareness of relationality and power in our consideration of classificatory practices. Here we need to go deeper than merely acknowledging the discomfort and tension that appear when facing the disturbing categorization/elephant. How can we begin to think from Star's point 'between dichotomies' as the space of tension? Facing unfamiliar categorizations, how can we stay in the place of generative epistemic disconcertment, which Helen Verran (2013) marks as the site for 'doing difference together', thereby allowing for new ethnographic alliances? This, we argue, would allow for more inclusive practices of anthropological work that do not pretend to be all encompassing (and thus totalitarian). In our view, the elephant of classification can be tackled methodologically in two ways: a) by paying attention to situatedness and positionality, and b) by cultivating ethnographic attentiveness and forms of writing that do not ignore the elephant, or pretend to, but engage with it.

Questions of positionality have been extensively and critically discussed among anthropologists, entering the mainstream of the discipline with the *Writing Culture* debate (Clifford and Marcus 1988), if not earlier. These discussions about representation as a powerful and situated practice destabilized the earlier idea that ethnography is equivalent to 'reading over the shoulders' (Geertz 1973, 452) of cultural insiders, and suggested instead that anthropologists have problematically interpreted cultural texts from an unmarked position of presumed superiority. Attempts to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with interlocutors have ranged from collective research and writing (Fortun et al. 2014; Lewis and Russell 2011) to more explicit forms of solidarity (TallBear 2014). These writings emphasize that the researcher's presence always makes a difference, that ethnographers are ourselves protagonists in our stories. As anthropologists have come to realize, the 'God-trick' (Haraway 1989) that would apply a view from nowhere is unfeasible. Ethnography is now widely understood to be all about situatedness, and to draw its strength from the meticulous analysis of concrete settings and relationships (see Gluckman 1940; Clarke, Friese, and Washburn 2018) as well as their historical formation. Ethnographic methods call for an explicit consideration of multiple positionalities and their impacts in our analysis, and of the several blind spots that emerge from our own involvement and standpoints. In fact, acknowledging the situatedness of our knowledge production may allow us to find better ways of recognizing intersectional overlaps in classificatory practices (Collins 1986; Haraway 1989; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013).

Positionality makes a difference: you may not realize the elephant's presence when you are inside the room (be it the living room, the triage room, or the project room) because you have already accommodated it; it has become part of the routine scenery. In other words, you could be experiencing 'actors' blindness' (Bowker and Star 2000), 'where the system's description of reality becomes true'. Or you may need to actively ignore it, so that you can keep your focus (like the woman in the opening photograph who is absorbed in her reading). This work of actively ignoring can take different forms, depending on whether you sit on the sofa or lean on one of the walls. During fieldwork, we might bump into the elephant at first, and then follow the example of other individuals who pretend they do not see it as they walk around it. Perhaps we still notice it but then become absorbed in other things, just as some of our interlocutors do. Shifting locations therefore helps us to situate the elephant and to follow its moves. However, reflecting on the ontological weightiness of the elephant and the presumed given-ness of the 'room' as the ethnographic scene does not mean we consider them to be fixed parameters in our ethnographic spaces. Explicit work on positionalities is also necessary to delineate how complicit we might be in setting up the space that holds the elephant, the elephant itself, and their unquestionable materiality.
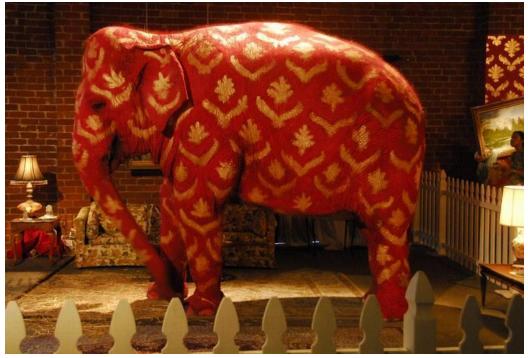

Figure 2. Photo by Bit Boy (2016). Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/bitboy/246805948.

From the outside, we may indeed see different things. The second image shows how the installation is arranged to draw our gaze to the elephant (as well as the artificial space of which it is a part, including here the fence). Familiar with the saying, we may first think of

the symbolic meaning of the elephant in the room. We may also consider not only how she interacts with the material environment (the furniture, the tapestry), but also her various relationships with her caregivers, the other actors in the room, or with us, the spectators. Similarly, ethnographers in settings where the work of sorting, typing, and classifying is part of professional routines may choose to shift their position and point of view, scaling up and down, so as to be able to spot the conspicuous elephants as well as the mundane relationships that have stabilized the working arrangement.

At this point, our second methodological consideration – ethnographic attentiveness – becomes relevant, as does the question of how we can nurture such attentiveness in our writing. If we think about writing ethnographically about the fleur-de-lis-covered room, we might imagine ourselves first sitting next to and talking with the woman on the sofa, and then stepping out and talking to the spectators, and then describing these different actors and contexts. However, we should not assume that ethnographers are the only actors on the move, or that the local protagonists in our stories are prisoners of their circumstances (and are therefore bound and fixed to one room). Nina Glick-Schiller's (2010) important critique of methodological nationalism, which remains common in migration studies and other ethnographic work, calls attention to the problem of fixed categories and the epistemological limitations resulting from it.

We are not suggesting that researchers ignore the significance of categorizations and labels. On the contrary, the ethnographer is called upon to describe and analyze how certain categories are brought about, the kind of work they do, and how we can historicize them. How did the woman come to sit on the sofa? What is she reading? How and when did the elephant enter the room and how is it related to the content of her book? What routines have developed around it, what traces does it set? In genealogical terms, it also involves asking what elephant was there before this one, whether it was bigger or smaller or even standing in another room, and what ghostly presence it might still have. As ethnographers, we cannot afford to ignore the elephant; we must consider it as a living and breathing being, not a prop. As recent scholarship in science and technologies studies has shown, standards, classifications, and indicators are not static, neutral, or dead; they inhabit complex worlds (Rottenburg and Merry 2015).

So, what practices of ethnographic attention and writing allow us to shed light on the actions of classification (without reproducing the unquestioned hierarchies of truths, or falling into the trap of naive relativism)? In their account of 'complexities', John Law and Annemarie Mol (2002) suggest starting with alternative forms of arranging and ordering ethnographic material. Through listing, mapping, and rearranging, we can focus on multiple relations that constitute, stabilize, or dissolve classificatory objects, rendering them relevant or irrelevant.

We can also draw attention to implicated (and concealed!) actors (Clarke and Star 2008) while avoiding the problematic paternalism of 'giving voice' to others. These techniques of writing and analyzing need to achieve the difficult aim of keeping the tension between categories in place, without falling for one dichotomy or another. This is what we call 'liberating the elephant'.

In our view, the edginess, loose ends, and unresolved contradictions of ethnographic writing need not be erased but rather sharply delineated. This involves working through, around, about, and with the elephant, with the very categories of difference and belonging that are part of the field situations we are investigating. Such writing may happen in experimental formats or more conventional ethnographic styles. Against the primacy of visual categorization (Haraway 1989), we may acknowledge other sensual aspects in our work, including the epistemic dimension of affective relations (Stodulka, Selim, and Mattes 2018). Certainly, we sense the elephant's warmth and can smell it, even if we do not see it.

We should also attend to the ghosts that haunt contemporary knowledge production (Subramaniam 2014) in order to arrive at better research practices, both in anthropology and the fields we study. Among these ghostly presences are those racialized, classed, and gendered forms of classification that mark hierarchical differences. They are often inscribed in research designs and analytical practices without explicit mention or recognition. The relevance of ethnographic work, then, is derived from modest interventions in and irritations of such practices, not in providing all-encompassing alternatives (for example, new ad hoc classifications). The goal is not to get rid of the elephant but to engage with it. Such engagement, as we have already outlined, can take different forms. Certainly, the elephant, once recognized, causes disturbance. But it also invites us to share in its tactile sensibility: touching, reaching out, and treading carefully. We might also derive fresh ideas from the surreal arrangement that puts the elephant at center stage of an otherwise well-ordered scheme. The metaphorical elephant might then also signal a move against classification, marking that which cannot be sorted, typed, or classified. In any case, we should not take the categories we encounter, nor their effects and effectiveness for granted.

Some of the elephants of our ethnographic rooms: About the think pieces in this special section

The three think pieces that accompany this introductory essay face their elephants in different ways. They shed light on 'in-between situations', exploring the cracks left open by usual classifications. For example, they discuss circumstances where health care practitioners divert a globalized, standardized logic of categorization in their daily practice (Beaudevin and Pordié, 2016): basing his treatment decisions on a sense of personal responsibility for the

global health funding spent on the testing of his patients, the Indian TB specialist described by McDowell moves away from the clinical categorization framework defined by the program developers. The think pieces also demonstrate how, in other situations, individuals may strive to refine an obviously problematic classification system in order to produce inclusion, thereby creating layers and cumulative changes. As ethnographers, our three colleagues pay attention to the dilemmas and critical moments arising from the tension between generalization and specificity, population and individual that inform their interlocutors' work. They explore the tinkering practices that evolve around triage, and the limitations and capacities of notions of 'deservingness'. Finally, they pay attention to the multiple ways that various actors in their fields relate to boundary-setting elephants, often marked by commonsense notions of race, ethnicity, citizenship, and economic status.

Some of these practices explicitly contest invisibilization, that is, they recognize the discomforting and space-taking presence of the elephant of classification and try to address it. However, as the three think pieces make clear, they cannot fully dissolve it or otherwise make it disappear. In our view, the stickiness2 of categorizations is part of the ethnographic challenge: to acknowledge and demonstrate the power of classificatory practices by paying close attention to how they are brought about as well as to the multifarious and often arbitrary work they perform. Hence, the necessity for anthropologists to accept the discomfort that classifications cause: they are at once tools and obstacles, opening and closing off opportunities. Starting from this location of discomfort allows for a mode of critique that demonstrates that the social, epistemic, and economic relations shaped by classificatory practices are not necessarily static nor fixed, but dynamic and thus open to change.

Natassia Brenman's elephant of classification dwells in a UK mental health care center, where it is tamed and trained by the practitioners. Her piece shows the mental health practitioners and caregivers trying to enrich and broaden a categorization system they deem problematic, with the paradoxical (and expected) impact of increasing inclusiveness. At first disturbed by the 'Black and Minority Ethnic' (BME) category defining the beneficiaries of the center, Brenman could have addressed this trouble by tearing the BME label apart and critically discussing its historical, political, and social stakes without acknowledging the generative and inclusive potential of the categorization. Instead, she decided to do both. Using Haraway's (2016) evocative metaphor of 'staying with the trouble', Brenman looks at

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2   Thanks to Janina Kehr for this relevant image. We use this term in a slightly different sense from Sara
        Ahmed's (2004) original concept, which emphasizes an embodied dimension of attachment that is
        not central to our argument here.

how the BME category is crafted, enacted, and adjusted – first to BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) and then to BAMER, with the 'R 'for Refugee – in relation to the shifting institutional needs and clients' claims.

Andrew McDowell's paper takes us to a tuberculosis clinic in India, where disease-specific programs in global health are implemented, and where clinicians use a highly technological and informative instant test made freely available by global health philanthropists to better diagnose TB in children. But this test is not used according to the predefined categories of 'deservingness' that come along with it: the physicians add their own category of patient, the 'most needing', which they evaluate on the spot through 'intuitive class assessment'. The elephant in this TB clinic is the relationship of the health care practitioner's morally informed decisions to the patient's healing path. McDowell draws our attention to the limitations of standardizations and categories of deservingness that ignore the richly layered local social fabric in which clinicians work. Their decisions may be impacted by other factors than those shaping the work of the designers of global health programs. McDowell's clinic is a room occupied by several elephants that may stand in each other's way or clot up the clinical practice.

The elephant of class introduced by Eileen Moyer is, paradoxically, the result of the disappearance of a previous pachyderm: the one of masculinity. In the context of HIV care in eastern and southern Africa, the piece shows the role of global health practitioners as well as anthropologists in shaping risk categories and designing target populations for global health interventions. However, by focusing on gender and sexuality alone (thereby 'making up' specific categories such as adolescent boys, men who have sex with men, or expecting fathers), they produce a huge elephant in the HIV-prevention room, namely class difference. Moyer asks: What might be gained by recognizing and engaging with this particular elephant from the perspective of public health and also from anthropology? What happens to social theories of gender inequality, agency, and risk if we reconfigure middle-class men as 'at risk'?

At the end of the elephant trail, concluding thoughts

We started by exploring how and why we should acknowledge, point to, walk around, write about, liberate, care for, and sometimes help drive away the elephants of classification we face in our ethnographic rooms and field sites. At the end of this trail, we are convinced that a dynamic, relational, and multiscalar practice (in fieldwork, writing, academic policies, and political practice) is the way out of the overcrowded room. Our piece begins to outline such a practice.

We want to acknowledge the ongoing stickiness of categories of difference, as well as their solid, persistent, residual, and/or ghostly presence. These are matters one cannot walk away from in ethnographic practice. The metaphorical incursion into the lives of our communal elephants is driven by a common desire for a better anthropological practice. Our think piece is an account of this incursion, which started with a lively debate in Stockholm in 2018. Given the scope of the raised issues, we have no conclusive aspirations, but rather aim at launching further discussions with colleagues: what are your own elephant(s), and how do you interact and deal with them?

In posing this question, we acknowledge that the elephant only travels so far. Comparing the practices of sorting, typing, and classifying that we encounter (and sometimes produce) in our research to enormous animals that may be both disruptive and actively ignored is not enough to understand the multiple dimensions of the problems we are dealing with. There is more to the crafting of difference(s) than the simple fact that difference is both huge and rarely discussed, hence our interest in discussing the power dynamics at play in the making and various uses of these categories, their relations to other – seemingly less controversial – categories of differentiation, and their situatedness in wider historical and political fields. These issues indeed point to a complex landscape of epistemological and ethical discomfort that we have to enter and navigate (see Verran 2014). Such a journey invites us to question our own complicity, as authors who have to set themselves in the scenes they are writing about. It also leads us to search for alternative ways of writing, specifically turning discomfort into ways to build new relations across disciplines and epistemic communities as well as in academic and activist spaces. Attending to the elephant in the room, so we hope, may provide a vantage point that opens an unexpected door in the beautifully patterned tapestry of our ethnographic accounts, thus leading us to new pathways in anthropological inquiry.

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