



**Volume 3, Issue 2 (Autumn/Winter 2020)**

**Introduction: Anthropology Of/At/From Home**

Francisco Martínez, Eeva Berglund and Adolfo Estalella

**Keywords:** multimodal ethnography, experimentation, anthropology of home, digital knowledge, world anthropology

**Recommended Citation:**

Martínez, F., Berglund, E., and Estalella, A. (2020). 'Introduction: Anthropology Of/At/From Home', *entanglements*, 3(2):39-43



**Licensing**

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

# Introduction: Anthropology Of/At/From Home

Francisco Martínez, Eeva Berglund and Adolfo Estalella

## Multimodal Ethnography During the Pandemic

The locking down and confining brought by the pandemic turned homes into both objects and places of research, and it drew attention to the widespread problems with homes. But the crisis is also inspiring reflections on what counts as research and evidence, and about what it might mean to do ethnography nowadays. This is the first of three instalments where we open a reflection on the multiple interrelations between anthropology and home, where home is understood in different ways. In this theme issue, we propose questioning what a home is and what it does methodologically, through a series of home-based, multimodal micro-ethnographies. We feel impelled to invent new forms of collaboration and narration, creating and designing methods that allow us to research from home and to reconsider the conditions and contexts where anthropology is produced.

We suggest approaching home from the point of view of diverse epistemic processes, opening up even further the object and modes of inquiry in anthropology and cognate fields (geography, sociology, STS, cultural studies, etc.) We also recall reflections on the 'anthropology at home' from thirty years ago, which were focused on renewing how anthropology is thought and communicated, and repatriating discourses of the self. That discussion of doing anthropology at home brought important epistemic changes to the discipline, influencing how practitioners organize ideas, prepare outputs and engage with our public, and it questioned traditional notions of relevance and evidence (Strathern 1987).

We discern shifts in all those terms that demand our attention. We therefore engage in rethinking anthropology's aspirations as a discipline, as well as its ethos, ethics and attachment to place(s). Fieldwork was traditionally addressed as a question of choosing between going 'there' or staying 'at home' (Clifford 1997). Consequently, the field

was supposed to be ‘somewhere’—a location, a site, a place, or a space where the ethnographer was (in varied ways) present. Aptly, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) challenged the idea of moving in and out of the field, arguing that the field had now become virtually everywhere, no longer could we escape it and pretend that we were out of it. As they put it, fieldwork is a political location, hence less an evocation of a local and more an exploration of a locality.

Sometimes the home as such does not change, it is our understanding of it that evolves, based on different processes of homing (Feder-Nadoff). Yet, as the pandemic is shaking registers for inhabiting the world, we aim at better ways to articulate these shifting understandings, as well as new ways to extend our imaginaries outwards from the domestic space. For instance, we explore how homes (including our own) relate to those that are far from us, while we practice different degrees of (multi-sited) proximity and remoteness, materializing novel sharing practices and dialogue across disparate geographies (see Clarke, Duffy, Grant, Homma, McWhinney and Taki’s contribution). The trope of home opens up different analytical and empirical perspectives, generating differently articulated versions of what a home is and does. It might refer to a feeling or condition of safety, familiarity and comfort, “being at home”; to a localizable ideal, “my home”, placing oneself in relation to it, or in turn, mirroring who you are, or were (feeling homesick); the place where one grew up, the homeland; to a dwelling to call one’s own, to a material assemblage, reflecting notions of taste and personality; to habits and cultural frames, and their opposite – the unhomey; to a technology that communicates, narrates and performs acts of belonging; to a solution or shelter through which one negotiates or rather copes with the impact of socio-economic complications; to a burden that prevents change; to an institution, through which kinship relations are organized; to an infrastructure that (dis)connects and requires maintenance; and, why not, also to an object of emotional, material and financial investment.

There are different ways to extend ethnographic research and introduce elements of experimentation and ambiguity within the analytical connections that we make and in how we communicate findings. We gathered contributions based not just on words, but also sound, photos, videos, drawings, diaries etc. As the essays in this issue articulate different evocations of ‘home’ in their multi-modal narratives, they rethink interlocutors and their roles; this entails revisiting our outputs and commitments. This eventually influences what we consider as ours, how we define the ‘we’, and whom we intend to reach with our work.

In articulating novel modes of inquiry and different approaches to location and home-making, the contributions explore new routes to ethnographic knowledge about and at home. Feeling at home increasingly refers to a series of inter-dependencies (as noted by Clarke et al. in their contribution), rather than to being confined to a place of origin, or relating to some straightforward and homogeneous collective memory. It is a bodily projection, as Francisco Martínez reminds us, a gesture of putting the world in order (even if temporarily or illusorily). In so doing, home-making shows an embodied engagement with the surroundings, in the form of personal preoccupation and lived experience.

Traditional accounts have also associated home with a safe space of withdrawal, as if it were a refuge or a cocoon. COVID-19 has produced, however, a sense of interval or

standby, forcing us into an uncertain confinement with no clear narratives about where things are headed (Tuominen). Everyday interactions became risky and our individual behavior was turned into “a matter of public health” (Gómez Cruz). Our bodies remain then isolated “to save the lives of others” (Dietrich) and we are asked to show “self-restraint” (Haapio-Kirk). As a consequence, we started to experience our homes as our whole world: “my home became my office, my library, my café, my restaurant, my cinema, my gym; my only place”, notes Edgar Gómez Cruz.

We are absolute beginners with no previous experience in a global pandemic disease, insists Gómez Cruz. Martha-Cecilia Dietrich in turn writes of a sense of an unforeseeable future, seeing our present as encased in an imaginary waiting room, with no anticipated end. This, she writes, generates “a feeling of disjuncture, which is familiar in its elements but unfamiliar in its intensity”. Such limbo has epistemological and ontological implications for our interaction with the world, as it generates a sense of suspension of knowledge. The temporal experience of crisis is noted, for instance, by Jason Pine and Kathleen Stewart, who observe how the pandemic is producing a “restive unknowing”, as we did not, and still do not, know “how long it would last and what was to come next”; we are feeling the world “away”, and are losing the tactility of the world. This sense of rupture and disorientation makes us reconsider what is happening to our homes and to rethink our place in the world (as if the world itself was out of place). Other contributions, such as the one by Marcos Ferreira, for instance, address the gap between our personal time and the current historical time, and their impact in our cognitive processes – eliciting unexpected nostalgias and place-making gestures, arrivals and departures. In this context, the home appears as a realm in dispute, a once sovereign space that is now being bombarded by unforeseen socio-biological, political and economic changes, a condition that enhances the necessity to filter and negotiate what is let in.

### **Home as It Might Be**

In recent years, homes sizes in metropolitan areas have decreased, as have our skills in working with material things, repairing, fixing, installing, and reusing the stuff around us. In their contribution, Tomás Errázuriz and Ricardo Greene engage directly with this issue, reflecting on ideas and skills that we thought were forgotten yet came back during the pandemic. As they show, “the Coronavirus has helped us imagine other possible worlds”, exposing the fragility of our social and cultural structures while turning our homes into a productive space of resistance and creativity “from where it is possible to generate alternative forms of knowledge and material culture”.

Modernity bequeathed a dominant view of the home as a site of familiarity and intimacy. Those ideas of home have been destabilized. Indeed, we might even argue that long held notions of homes, as stabilizers of relations and emotions, built as durable solutions to big problems (Capo 2015) or thought of as ‘problem-solving’ entities (Gibson 1995: 129) to deal with disaster or crisis, are shifting. Likewise, we observe how supreme values of modernity, such as liberty and the free market, have been put into quarantine. It is in this sense that we contend that the pandemic crisis is not simply medical and economic, but also social, political and cultural. It is being experienced as an experiment in vulnerability, establishing novel kinds of connections and disruptions

(Green, in this issue), as well as new intensities of invisibility (Simone 2020).

The pandemic has also generated complex relations of inwardness and outwardness, foregrounding relations of inter-dependence within families, between colleagues, and also with the material-ness of our homes, which age just as we do. COVID-19 has indeed made even more evident the temporal entailments of the vulnerability of things. We can also talk of 'home precarities' (Chambers 2020), underscoring challenging and difficult conditions, how social fluctuations impact on our ideas of home, and how homes help to cope with or conversely, to destabilize aspects of everyday life. Eventually, this makes homes an important site for the production of mutuality (Martínez) and for ontological security (Ferreira). As such, the pandemic raises important existential questions: who, what, where and how we are, with the built environment as much as with nonhuman creatures. As the pandemic continues, it highlights attachments to place and the shifting identifications that go with these, which reminds us of perhaps forgotten responsibilities and modes of inter-connectedness.

New divides are also being created, for instance an increasing gap between those who have access to Internet and smartphones and those without them (see Tuominen). Ultimately the home turns out to play a role in the relationship between politics and (of) science, and, in the process, between politics and publics. This is unfolding as experts work at establishing new criteria of evidence, articulating their authority, naming phenomena and making things knowable. It is in this vein that Laura Haapio-Kirk turns her attention to how networks of care and support infrastructures have been developed or reinforced in Japan, together with practices of surveillance.

This explorative set of multi-modal essays seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions about the quality of homeness, the changing relations between people and place(s), and the production of cultural connections and disconnections (Green 2012). The physical experience of fieldwork is changing (note Samuel Collins and Matthew Durlington), a phenomenon which influences anthropological imaginations, as well as our methodological spaces and communications. As a side-effect, the global impact of the pandemic is reinvigorating the idea that our work is part of something like a world anthropology, accelerating the integration of our discipline within international systems of knowledge production in particular ways (Ribeiro and Escobar 2006). This is impelling us to re-evaluate the usefulness of anthropology in multiple scales at once, and to describe the pandemic from within, as Michelle Feder-Nadoff does in her contribution.

Our call was explicitly generic so people could interpret these matters from their background and research interests. We also assumed that the feeling of home would reveal itself through multiple registers, which raises questions about anthropological evidence, forms of being present in the field, and non-verbal genres of knowledge production. In this vein, we gathered reflections on how the reconfigurations brought about with the pandemic compel us to reconsider what a home is and does, by engaging with colleagues in diverse geographical locations. Homes include a particular epistemology and are being experienced as sites of a new but contested project of reconstruction. Homes can be part of the solution to our current issues, but they can also be part of the problem. In both cases, a home appears as a key location in which and through which to explore anthropological re-learning and to experiment with alternative forms of fieldwork and of futures.

## References

- Capo, Jasna 2015. 'Durable solutions,' transnationalism, and homemaking among Croatian and Bosnian former refugees. *Refuge* 31 (1): 19-30.
- Chambers, Deborah (ed.) 2020. *Cultural Ideals of Home*. London: Routledge.
- Clifford, James. 1997. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gibson, Thomas 1995. 'Having Your House and Eating It: Houses and Siblings in Ara, South Sulawesi'. In J. Carsten and S. Hugh-Jones (eds), *About the House: Lévi-Strauss and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Green, Sarah 2012. 'On the Relative Location of Anthropology: Rethinking the Borders'. *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* 37 (4): 5-10.
- Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson 1997. 'Discipline and practice: "The field" as site, method, and location in anthropology'. In A. Gupta & M. Ferguson (eds.) *Anthropological Locations*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1–46.
- Ribeiro, Gustavo Lins and Arturo Escobar, eds. 2006. *World Anthropologies: Disciplinary Transformations within Systems of Power*. London: Routledge.
- Simone, Abdoumalig 2020. 'Fanfare for the Unsettled'. *City and Society* 32, 2: 1-10.
- Strathern, Marilyn 1987. 'The limits of auto-anthropology'. In *Anthropology at Home*. A. Jackson (ed.) London: Tavistock, 59–67.

**Francisco Martínez** is an anthropologist working at Tallinn University. He has published several books and curated different exhibitions. In 2018, he was awarded with the Early Career Prize of the European Association of Social Anthropologists.

Web: <https://tallinn.academia.edu/FranciscoMARTINEZ>

**Eeva Berglund** teaches and writes on issues to do with society and the environment, particularly on grassroots urbanism, environmental social movements and transformations in notions of expertise, whilst occasionally participating in and persistently trying to better understand activism. She has a doctorate in social anthropology and an MSc in urban planning, both from the UK. She is currently Adjunct professor of environmental policy, Department of Design at Aalto University. The collection that she co-edited with Anu Lounela and Timo Kallinen, *Dwelling in Political Landscapes: Contemporary Anthropological Perspectives*, was published in 2019 by SKS, Helsinki. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0269-562X>

**Adolfo Estalella** is Assistant Professor in Social Anthropology at the Complutense University of Madrid (Spain). He is interested in grassroots urbanism and digital cultures and he has investigated the knowledge practices and technologies of neighbourhood organizations and activist movements in different urban contexts in Madrid (Spain). A second research line explores and intervenes on the epistemic transformations of anthropological modes of inquiry through a sustained exploration of the modes of experimental collaboration in anthropology, an endeavour gathered in the xcol platform (<http://www.xcol.org>). His latest edited book is 'Experimental collaborations. Ethnography through fieldwork devices' (Berghahn, 2018).

Web: <http://www.estalella.eu>