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# Epistemic Tools for a Sustained Liminality: An Introduction in the Meantime

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# Epistemic Tools for a Sustained Liminality: An Introduction in the Meantime

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The still unfolding global pandemic highlights our forms of interdependence, as well as our separations. This was noted in our first instalment, where we shared several insights into how the COVID-19 is changing the anthropological experience of being with others. We observed, for instance, that data, parcels, waste, and energy are circulating more than ever, while bodies are not and can not (Green 2020). Also, we talked of how people try to normalise the extraordinary, about rediscovering domesticity and we tackled the way our expanding virtual relations call for a room of one's own (see Collins and Durlington 2020; Errázuriz and Greene 2020; Feder-Nadoff 2020).

Overall, there is a sense that yardsticks are lacking, and knowledge being suspended, a limbo condition with “epistemological and ontological implications for our interaction with the world” (Martínez, Berglund and Estalella 2020: 41). Martha-Cecilia Dietrich (2020), for example, described an imaginary waiting room, with no anticipated end. Edgar Gómez Cruz (2020) felt like an absolute beginner, with little experience, suspended in sustained liminality and impelled to renegotiate what only yesterday was deemed familiar and ordinary.

In the second and third instalments, we focus on the infrastructures and rituals that enable various kinds of closeness but also separation. For instance, Alexandra Balandina works from within the pandemic and finds hints that might help to understand previous field experiences. As an example, she observes how her ‘indoors’ condition has acquired a new density and particular sense of equivocation, reminding her of how music was performed in Iran in the 1980s. Mar Gil also notes a sense of asynchronicity and fragmentation. In her digital ethnography with the Hindu-inspired Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF) congregation, Mar observes that a seemingly static space - such as her room - can raise many thoughts

about fieldwork; also, she notes how digital developments brought practical advantages in the field, but also novel ethical conundrums.

Many surely share an overwhelming sense of needing to escape or disconnect from the rigours of the everyday during the quarantine. There may be something pedagogical in this, both in the sense of professional re-training (i.e. how we let the ethnographic ‘happen’), as well as a way of getting to know ourselves-differently as Maxime Le Calvé points out in his essay. He notes that working from home is “conducive to deeper introspections”, on both our research practices and on our dwellings. Our homes, the places where we sleep, cook, take care and work (and many more things, these days) almost appear as an ‘upgraded monastery’, to paraphrase reactions provoked by Maxime’s drawing and creative writing exercises.

Such thoughts on the limits of mediated closeness also echo some of the discussions outlined in our first instalment (see for instance Clarke et al. 2020; Haapio-Kirk 2020; Tuominen 2020). In anthropology, distance has itself been constituted of a learning process, as different *theres*, actors, institutions, inter-dependences and back-and-forth relations are entangled in the practice of fieldwork (shifting what is knowable). Yet we now find that a remote elsewhere may still be too close or not far away enough. This comes to the fore in the multiple-hands ethnography, our third instalment. Matters of distance in social relations are indeed difficult.

The debate is more actual than ever. For instance, from a different vantage point, in a recent analysis of the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, Hannah Brown and Almudena Marí Sáez (2021) describe how fears of infection animated multiple practices of separation and detachment; these insights are helpful for efforts to understand the impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and how the virus has changed the temporality of our work and our relations.<sup>1</sup> As Brown and Marí Sáez conclude, one of the requirements that the virus has brought is a need to make new kinds of connections and comparisons across the diverse in order to patch or suture the multiple ruptures that we are experiencing.

### **The coevalness of our epistemic tools**

Due to the virus, the crafting of social relations has changed. For anthropology (like other fields), the need to be physically apart has started opening up new ways of making connections, and also generating anxiety among ethnographers because we cannot keep up with the epistemic changes happening in the world. In *Designs for an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (2008), Paul Rabinow and George Marcus already noted the epistemic tension in our discipline of studying timely phenomena with tools developed to study people out of time. The pandemic itself, seemingly disconnected from the past and moving towards uncertain futures, might require novel methodologies for connecting, for understanding, and for keeping up with the ongoing reconfiguration of presence.

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<sup>1</sup> As Brown and Marí Sáez show, doctors use distance as an instrument for managing the risks – from patients, but also from other colleagues.

In their multiple-hands ethnography around the topic of remoteness, Martínez, Berglund, Harkness, Jeevendrampillai and Murray hint that our relative confinement demands from us novel ways of methodological curation and also to be analytically available, participating in efforts to decolonise knowledge production. Particularly in times of uncertainty and change, it is important that we rethink epistemological tools and the relations they engender. Our compressed present requires something like ethnographic promiscuity, they suggest, a way of attending to things in the world out there, while nourishing their own concerted efforts to make time for themselves and those somehow entangled in their projects. Their open-ended collaboration explores ethnography being done in a loose way, juxtaposing thinking through multiple entanglements and layered ways of knowing-with to figure out what to continue and what to change.

Today, instead of thinking of the field as a place to move in and out of, it would be more precise to speak of turning it on and off, and also of curating it. Arguably, the field is bounded differently because of novel ways of mediating and producing relations. Doing fieldwork was traditionally a question of choosing between going 'there' or staying 'at home' (Clifford 1997). Consequently, the field was supposed to be 'somewhere', a place where it was possible for the ethnographer to be present. This idea was challenged by Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997), who argued that the field was now virtually everywhere: we could no longer escape it or pretend that we were outside of it. As they put it, fieldwork is a political location.

Conversely, Matei Candea (2007), has argued in defence of the epistemological necessity and boundedness of the fieldsite; spaces have to be delineated for heuristic purposes, even if these boundaries are constructed and seemingly arbitrary. These thoughts are in line with Marilyn Strathern's claim that disciplinary boundaries and practices of epistemic "cutting" contribute to our ways of seeing and make partial connections possible (1996; 2004). For sure, creating boundaries and separations is a key element of all learning and sense making.

In a similar vein, Arjun Appadurai (1986) and Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) have noted that in anthropology, every view is a view from somewhere, every act of speaking is a speaking from somewhere. Similarly, Clifford Geertz's point about the methodological relations between the somewhere and the elsewhere in our practice, as "a way of describing others, one in which distant oddities were made to question domestic assumptions" (1988: p. 23). He thus highlighted the importance of switching familiar frames of reference by combining 'experience-near' and 'experience distant', the macro and the micro, the scientific and the biographical, the intuitive and the analytical (Geertz 1983; 1988).

Drawing on these assumptions, and with the provocative title 'Anthropology Has a Village Problem: A View from Somewhere', David Henig has recently reflected on how we juxtapose "the all-too-familiar and the wildly exotic in such a way that they change places" (2020: 106). Since the beginnings of anthropology as a discipline, field research has grounded the epistemological authority of researchers even if the actual ways of being in the field have always been diverse. We could even go so far as to say that the field is being experienced as an entanglement of people, things, ideas and diverse conditions that have to be laboriously constructed by the anthropologist, much as Vered Amit (2000) conceptualised it at the turn of the century. In this kind of fieldwork, new forms of epistemic generosity come to the fore. Here we are talking of ways to generate shared analysis, co-create knowledge, make

connections, and commit ourselves to the mutual challenge of doing analytical work together – as in our many-handed ethnography, the third instalment.

### **Sustained liminality**

Through an epistolary ethnographic experiment, Tamta Khalvashi and Nino Aivazishvili-Gehne reflect in our second instalment on how the pandemic is provoking new sensory perceptions and establishing a complex balance between alertness and daydreaming, making us look differently at places and relations. In a confessional form, Khalvashi and Aivazishvili-Gehne daydream about their homes, share their fears and hopes, their increasing restriction of movement and their need for symbolic expansions. They then reflect on how to negotiate pressure through anchoring rituals, and conclude:

“the closure of homes during the quarantine did not make our homes more bounded from the outside world, but they became even more transparent and stretchable both imaginatively and physically, through our (day)dreams, thought-images and virtual presence”.

The pandemic has suspended many of the ritual structures that give stability to life, that help to create a sense of community, and that allow us to disconnect, rest and shut things down. Famously, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1972) suggested approaching rituals as machines for the suppression of linear time. As he observed, rituals introduce transcendental experiences into the otherwise repetitive nature of cyclical time. Storytelling, with its power to create communities and make the familiar look strange, is one type of such human ritual.

The concept of liminality, as formulated early on by Arnold van Gennep (1909) and later by Victor Turner (1974; 1982) in his studies on ritual, has helped examine the role of individual agency within periods of social transformation. It allows correlating conscious experiences with the cathartic notion of ‘I pass through’. The renewed interest in liminality of recent years has been linked to noticeably contemporary states like indeterminacy and ecological. Risk has also become a type of resource that can be financially managed, branded, traded, and touristically organised.<sup>2</sup> Arpad Szokolczai has, in this regard, diagnosed a form of ‘permanent liminality’: ‘If everything is constantly changing, then things always remain the same’ (2000: 226). As he argues, the intensification of instability has fixed the state of transitoriness and frozen the sequencing of the phases of transformation (separation, liminality, reaggregation). In a similar vein, Bjørn Thomassen (2014) argues that liminality, along with play, gambling, comedy, sexuality, entertainment, chaos, and violence, is something that modernity has stretched out and routinised.

Already before the pandemic, global architectures of time were creating new forms of temporal subordination, but also of resistance and subversion. Taking a critical position, Sarah Sharma (2014) challenges these speed theories that characterise the contemporary around the binaries ‘fast’ and ‘slow’. Instead, she calls for closer attention to the micro-

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<sup>2</sup> In relation to our current suspension of knowledge and twisted sense of time and presence, we might consider a right to opacity (Glissant 1997), or invoke it as a figure for interrupting the central, modern gaze, and looking instead for possibilities for reinvention and diversity, particularly of knowledge and learning (Martínez, Di Pippo and Frederiksen 2021).

politics of temporal coordination, and the ways that increasingly uneven experiences of time become normalised. As she puts it, the discourse of speeding up is part of the problem, creating as it does a cultural context that justifies new forms of social inequality, comprising ‘technologies, commodities, policies, plans, programs, and the labour of others’ (ibid: 139). Sharma’s ethnography brings to the surface the time-giving ecologies of care on which current architectures of time management are built, noting how a mass of cleaners, taxi drivers, and security guards make possible the sped-up life of a few.<sup>3</sup> As she concludes, however individualised our experience of time, when it persistently intersects with that of others, what emerges is a grid of social relations and dependencies.

### **Conclusion: Living in/by History**

So far, 2020-2021 has allowed for many learnings; we reflect on just two here: humans might not be the agents of History and we need epistemic tools that facilitate forms of re-integration after the multiple ruptures that we are experiencing.

Most salient for us is just how exhausted the modern belief is – or hope or illusion – that we could impose ourselves on History. Benjamin’s metaphor is apposite: sometimes people try to stop or re-direct the train of progress by turning to revolution, understood not as the locomotive, but the emergency brake, of History.<sup>4</sup> Our present conjuncture demonstrates, however, that the brake need not be pulled by a human hand: a global pandemic and techno-environmental chaos that appear to be beyond human control, suppress, sustain and redirect time. These agencies are also reworking History, altering Futures and bringing our vulnerabilities to the fore.

One implication is that this un-does any pretence of a human monopoly on directing change or interrupting time. Such thoughts bring us close to discussions around re-articulations of the relationship between nature and humanity. While calls continue to be heard that demand an intensification of human mastery and extractive powers, others are ever more intent on the opposite, a humble but energetic reworking of what is possible on a damaged planet (Tsing et al. 2019). There is much hopeful work being undertaken already, to negotiate diverse and heterogeneous worlds as they intersect in power-laden ways (e.g. De la Cadena and Blaser 2018). Thinking on the possibility of designing new relations with nature that allow alternative realities (Escobar 2018), acknowledging the world of many worlds that we inhabit, is one response. In the meantime, the pandemic can be and has been temporarily sidestepped as collectively thinking and imagining bodies working through their confusion together (Berglund and Kohtala 2021), and anthropologists and others find themselves searching for better possibilities.

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<sup>3</sup> Another example provided by Sharma is the work of corporate yoga instructors, whom she represents as ‘temporal mechanics’, who are in charge helping stressed desk workers recuperate as biopolitical subjects (2014: 79).

<sup>4</sup> “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake” (Benjamin 2003: 402).

Another learning that feels salient to us is that ‘living in History’ is very tiresome, “not the soil in which happiness grows”, as noted by Hegel (1975: 78). One of its consequences is losing a sense of the measure, or the interval, that provides meaning and allows us to give time to things, to the world. It may also be that we are exhausted ‘by living History’. Tired of both, the burdensome Historical Times and our intense condition of vulnerability. The present, indeed, seems to be making good on the predictions made by Ulrich Beck (1995) and Bruno Latour (2004), that social change now takes the form of collective or global experiments. We, in any case, inhabit a sense that it is indeed the end of an era, at the same time as we try to make room and time (measures and tools) for a new one yet to come.

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