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The Pandemic (Day)dreams

Tamta Khalvashi and Nino Aivazishvili-Gehne

The Pandemic (Day)dreams offers an epistolary ethnographic experiment. It is a story of correspondence between two ethnographers based in Georgia (Tbilisi) and Germany (Essen), as they come to daydream about their homes through electronic correspondence in the form of a dialogic diary. We kept the epistolary diary from March to May 2020, to share everything that drove our everyday lives during the quarantine. As we looked back at our pandemic correspondence, we found out that homes emerged as a locus of phantasmatic dreams, contradictory affects and daydreams.

Covid 19 has radically changed our domestic space, not just physically, transforming it from leisure to working space, but also affectively and temporally. While the virus transcended national, transnational and domestic boundaries, it also found space in our bodies and minds, provoking different affective responses, (day)dreams and phantasies about the future. Thus, whilst confining us, the pandemic also made us more capacious to invoke thought-images, (day)dreams, and other viscerally-charged experiences of/about and through homes. It not only changed our everyday engagement with visual/visible, material/tangible and social aspects at/of home, but also provoked new sensory perceptions and experiences (see Pink 2004: 10). To be sure, the pandemic intensifies what Walter Benjamin called passages between sleep and awakening, in which a well-known everyday appears in a different and strange light (1999).

Day(dreams) are thus multimodal experiences in their own right; they are formed as involuntary thought-images and imaginations, “transporting us into the region of the

phantasm” (Crapanzano 2004: 19). But since they are fleeting and elusive impressions about the world, (day)dreams are often difficult to piece together. Moreover, it is often demanded that we awaken from such inchoate images, find the right perspective on them, put them in order and bestow them with meaning and clarity. We avoid such awakening in our epistolary ethnographic experiment. Instead, through our unpolished and chaotic correspondence, we capture and depict how (day)dreams not only break the boundaries between the real and unreal, but also constitute our affective and inconsistent worlds of experience (Ehn and Löfgren 2012). In this way, our epistolary ethnographic exercise enables us to trace states of our own minds in the form of (day)dreams that are not directly and easily observable in others. Our correspondence, however, demonstrates not only our own (day)dreams during the pandemic but also the forms of knowing and feeling in all its unpredictability, generating critical reflection on the process of “theoretical improvisation” in ethnographic research (Cerwonka and Malkki 2008). This, in effect, illustrates the extreme version of what doing “anthropology at home” could look like in times of pandemic (Martinez, Berglund, and Estalella 2020); home becomes a literal place of where the actual fieldwork is done, pushing us to think creatively about methodological approaches and epistemic paths.

Daydreaming has been an essential part of Georgian traditional religious beliefs. Unlike our secular daydreams, however, these forms of thought and imagination were part of the ecstatic state. In ecstatic state one no longer needs to move in order to be anywhere for it is a kind of magical flight between sacred and profane, or between transcendental and material spaces (Abakelia 2017). Moreover, according to traditional beliefs, homes, in fact, were also dwellings for various spectral creatures, spirits and goblins, rendering them simultaneously real and phantasmatic, tangible and phantomic (Khalvashi and Manning forthcoming). But thirst for the fantastic and for daydreaming has remained as unquenched as ever, and serves as a way of dealing with the pandemic crisis in our present, secular realities.

Below we provide the scenes from (day)dreaming. We move back and forth between dreaming and wakefulness, between reveries and more sober reflections about home. These scenes offer a way of staging the unsettling intimacy of dream and reality that the pandemic has inflicted upon us. We invite you to feel with us the emergence of home as a dreamworld or as a threshold between phantasy and reality, constituted by our own fears, confusion and hopelessness, penetrating our bodies and minds. The outcome of our epistolary ethnographic exercise is that it captures in its vitality how we permanently and intensively felt as never before to be at several places at once, both real and unreal. Indeed, the closure of homes during the quarantine did not necessarily make our homes more bounded from the outside world; they instead became even more transparent and stretchable both imaginatively and physically, through our (day)dreams, thought-images and virtual presence.

Scenes from (Day)dreams

April 05, 2020

Excerpt from the letter to Nino

Nino, I had nightmares all night long. I remember only one part of the dream: as if I stood in the yard of my village house and suddenly, the shooting had started and the war broke out. The bullets were flying from all directions and I was trying to dodge them. I could not even move from one place, as I was afraid of the stray bullet killing me. After a while, I decided to run toward my house, to try my luck, and in hope of survival, cross the mine field that was my yard. I quickly moved from the spot, and started running in the wave of bullets, while at the same time shouting. At this point, the door of the gate had opened and my [deceased] grandad and my dad drove in with an old, brown Lada. I got all excited, as I thought they would rescue me, but I could barely avoid the flying bullets. I woke up screaming...

March 21, 2020

Excerpt from the letter to Tamta

There is an invisible wall around me. Physically this wall ends with a garden gate and a hedge, but in truth this wall is much more ductile and porous. On the one hand, it prevents me from looking beyond that and even if I would, I would find a silence in our neighbourhood. Mainly old people live around us. Some even find it difficult to walk. On the other hand, however, my frightened soul wanders past this wall. It makes me look at Georgia, Europe and the United States at the same time. Multidimensional and simultaneous fear... The father is doing better. Now my cousin in London is feverish. She has locked herself in her room and forbidden the neighbours to come in. She has hidden her situation from her parents. She doesn't want to punish with a feeling of powerlessness. She doesn't want to tear their hearts with uncertainty. She says her neighbourhood is one of the worst hit [by the virus]. The clinics are closed. Letters are sent to patients that say they should stay home for a week with symptoms. Hospitals would not be able to care for the sick... We grew up together. She is younger than me. Now she lies somewhere alone, feverish. Today I can't stay optimistic and say, "Hey, everything will be fine!"

May 4, 2020

Excerpt from the letter to Nino

Nino, being confined to my home and attached to one place for work has become a source of restlessness in me. I cannot find a place anymore; each spot of the house feels encroaching. In the beginning, I worked at my desk, then I moved to the couch in the living room, but I got restless here too, and settled at the dining table. But over the last couple of days, I moved to the balcony altogether. It seems to me that the restriction of movement in/between cities and countries, produced the intensified desire to move and extend at least at home. Is this the effect of the shrinking space on my body and mind? Are my dreams, daydreams and meditations part of this demand for expansion and movements?

April 03, 2020

Excerpt from the letter to Tamta

In the last few days, I have been thinking about how the children see the pandemic.

Mine don't talk about this very often. However, they sadly notice that they are not allowed to hug Grandma and Grandpa. That they can't meet with friends and that mum and dad are at home but at work at the same time. Very often they play a game about "Corona". They imagine a creature that end up swallowing a virus. If only this creature was found very quickly, as quickly as possible...

April 07, 2020

Excerpt from the letter to Nino

As I sat at the computer to write a letter to you, then, suddenly, a Facebook live popped up in the feed, showing my yoga instructor inviting us to work out. I could not resist the temptation and settled down in front of the computer to join the session. I have done yoga at home before, often with the recorded videos or without. But doing yoga live had never been my experience before. The exercise lasted for two hours and as usual, we ended up doing breathing exercises and meditation.

It was a weird experience to meditate together with those people, whose bodies and breaths you cannot feel and hear. Only thing you know is that some forty people are attending the live meditation. They are only numbers on the Facebook screen, but behind these numbers, real bodies are hiding. They are connected to this live video from various districts of Tbilisi: Gldani, Saburtalo, Ortachala. Settled in their homes, they simultaneously sit on the floor start a deep breathing to numb their bodies and then, observe the feelings produced in their bodies. When in one room, this

collective numbing and meditating, and closeness of bodies, create different kind of energy. In one room, it seems as if we all become one single body and our breathes are also communal and shared. Now, meditating in the virtual collective was completely different experience, breathing and meditating with humans as numbers simultaneously depended on the speed of the Internet, and not only on our bodily connection.

Our connection was made possible through technological networks, through fibers and cordless networks. Unlike our biological bodies, constituted by nervous networks, synopsis or nerves, the technological body is constituted by its own tissue and structure. When the biological body functions with the technological one, that body is a cyborg, as Donna Haraway reminds us. I am a cyborg now.

April 4, 2020

Excerpt from the letter to Tamta

Since the [Covid 19] crisis has started, I took on the role of “the production manager” at home. I assumed this role without questions or hesitation. I never questioned my talent [to deal with crisis] because of my experiences from the 1990s, which I jokingly named “Master Classes of the 90s.” I create a daily meal plan, and allocate fruit and vegetable rations so that they last for two weeks. I feel confident in this role. Sometimes I go too far and my husband brings me back to the reality, “stop it, we won’t die of hunger.”

In his book, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places*, Gaston Bachelard offered a metaphor for a house as a “diaphanous” space (1994: 51). As he wrote, while citing Georges Spyridaki, the house is “diaphanous” even when it is not made of glass material. Instead, “it is more of the nature of vapour. Its walls contract and expand as I desire. At times, I draw them close about me like a protective armour ... But at others, I let the walls of my house blossom out in their own space, which is infinitely extensible” (ibid).

Indeed, the Covid 19 pandemic has charged our homes with phantasmagorical qualities in which the actual and the imagined are endlessly blurred and intertwined (Desjarlais 2018). It invoked multi-dimensional thought-images so much that homes became extensible entities through our dreams and daydreams, rendering them multiple, shifting and spectral. Drawing on what Carolyn Ellis calls a “heartful autoethnography” (1999 [Emphasis in Original]), we became aware of the phantasms of our homes because our everyday lives and sensibilities were radically disrupted. Our homes, thus, were exposed for what they have become for us during the pandemic: torn away from the certainties of life, but serving as spaces of phantasms, an inscription of flows or our (day)dreams and currents of fantasy.

The pandemic (day)dreams, then, reveal that homes are torn from what they are assumed to stand for; intimate, bounded and familiar qualities of domestic space. Instead, they come to generate unpredictable affects and phantasms that lead us to consider the elusiveness, uncanniness and uncertainty of the home itself, undermining the stable and knowable terrain of relationships. In other words, whilst homes are imagined as self-enclosed entities, they open into a fluid medium of displacement and phantasy. Our homes during the pandemic became sites of these kinds of phantasies and imaginations, as well as anxieties, paranoia and fears.

But our experience of homes extended beyond visceral understandings, into a space and time where the virus had not penetrated. We persistently returned to the experiences of the 1990s to invoke our abilities to deal with the crisis. To be sure, our sensorial attunements aligned us to the very experiences of the political transition from Soviet to post-Soviet epochs, where the senses for security, stability and continuity had also been ruptured by economic poverty, civil wars and ethnic conflicts. The pandemic incursions somehow reminded us of the post-Soviet exhaustion that came with the capitalist incursions, which also hinged upon our homes. In fact, it was hard to draw the line between memory and fantasy about the past, as our daydreams catapulted us in search of security and strength in our own past experiences. However, this search for security and strength had only a short-term effect. It somehow mitigated our fears of dealing with the crisis, but the virus also infected us with unknown fears about the future. These fears became our constant companion, making us wonder all the time.

It is in this way that the pandemic (day)dreams have made our homes stretchable and expansible through time and space. They not only catapulted us into the dreams, daydreams and the thought-images of the past, but also invoked phantasies about the future. Indeed, our kids imagined magical creatures that could swallow the Covid virus in the post-pandemic world. Conversely, our adult phantasies were tainted with less optimism. They pushed us towards imagining and being worried about a more intolerant world obsessed with an increasing desire for surveillance, closure, control and datafication. Yet, even in this technologically manipulated environment in the future, we still imagined ourselves as cyborgs (Haraway 1985), rejecting rigid boundaries between humans/nonhumans, men/women or nature/culture, and dwelling on the idea of affinity, resonance and compassion with the post-pandemic world.

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