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My room is my witness: the perks and drawbacks of doing Anthropology from a 20 square-meters space

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When the pandemic began in the spring of 2020, a great deal of ethnographers were forced to adapt their research settings according to quarantine measures. Through the mini-series *En Casa* (At Home), HBO decided to accompany those ethnographers in their reflection about what it means to stay home. The TV channel shows how it is not necessary to go far away in order to tell a great story. There was one episode in particular that I liked and to which I could relate as a researcher conducting ethnography from home: *Viaje Alrededor de Mi Piso* (Journey Around My Apartment). The protagonist, finding inspiration in an eighteenth-century book by Xavier de Maestre (*Voyage Autour de Ma Chambre*), starts a monologue orchestrated by the aesthetics and the details of the place she calls home. It is curious to observe how a small and seemingly static space can raise so many thoughts (see also Dietrich, 2020).

In the same manner, I intend to use this article as an excuse to voice out loud a series of questions that have accompanied me over the course of my research in these peculiar times. Last summer I conducted digital ethnography with devotees of Self-Realization Fellowship (SRF), a Hindu-inspired congregation founded by the guru Paramahansa Yogananda, and in this paper I present a line of thought that springs from this experience. Concretely, I will deal (or at least try to) with multiple (virtual) sites, a (a)synchronization of different routines and auto-ethnographic descriptions—though I admit that this goal makes the following text appear as something more like an organized brainstorm. More specifically, I expose a chain of reflections about the implications of collecting data from the 20-square-metre space where I happen to also live. During my research, my room was more than a locality: it was a trigger, a witness and a recipient simultaneously.

On asynchronicity and fragmentation

As part of my project, I conducted several interviews with SRF members living in Madrid and in Galicia, attended an online World Convocation hosted by SRF headquarters in LA (which included virtual pilgrimages) and participated in online meditations. I also attended an online colloquium, organized by El Teatro Cofidis Alcázar of Madrid, with the Spanish theatre actor Rafael Álvarez (El Brujo) about his performance in *Autobiografía de un Yogui* (a theatre play inspired by Yogananda's book of the same name). The LA headquarters usually offered the majority of the congregation's online services, together with Yogoda Satsanga Society (YSS), the equivalent of SRF in India, which also emitted some guided meditations from the different ashrams that the community has in this country (Ranchi, Dakshineswar, Dwarahat and Noida). The different digital environments that constituted my fieldwork made me doubt the character of my research. Could it be considered multi-sited, even though I have stayed stuck to my desk in my small room in Leuven during the majority of my data gathering phase?

A quote from Antonius Robben, "Multi-sited fieldwork is not the same as fieldwork at multiple sites" (2012, p. 367), came into my mind whilst I was trying to answer this question. Multi-sited is supposed to deal with movement, with the ethnographer's iteration and with the circulation of the participants and things under study, but in this regard, I was not really moving. My fieldwork was rather static. It is true that I did not need to suffer the consequences of jet lag during my fieldwork, as Ghassan Hage (2005) experienced during his research among the Lebanon diaspora, but I did suffer the consequences of time zone differences anyway. In fact, I would not recommend anyone to attend an online meditation at 1 am or 5 am, at least for research purposes; it is very difficult to concentrate while you are fighting the urge to fall asleep in such a relaxing atmosphere.

Tanja Ahlin and Fangfang Li (2019) also offer a reflection on applying the label of 'multi-sited' to a fieldwork experience in which different geographical locations are encompassed through digital media. As a response, they coin the term "field-event" in order to understand "the field as a collection of 'events' that are co-created within specific practices by ethnographers, their study participants, and ICTs" (p. 4). Indeed, Robben, following George Marcus (cited in Robben, 2012, p. 368), clarifies that multi-sited fieldwork has much to do with connections, with flows, and with how different places are intertwined; the ethnographer becomes the crafter of the entanglement. In that sense, my room in Leuven thickened, acquiring the role of recipient: a site of convergence and articulation of different places. This summer, my computer has been a window into different parts of the world. I was sitting at my desk, but the different locales manifested through my laptop's and phone's screens. My room was the central node around which the different "field-events" that constituted my project took shape.
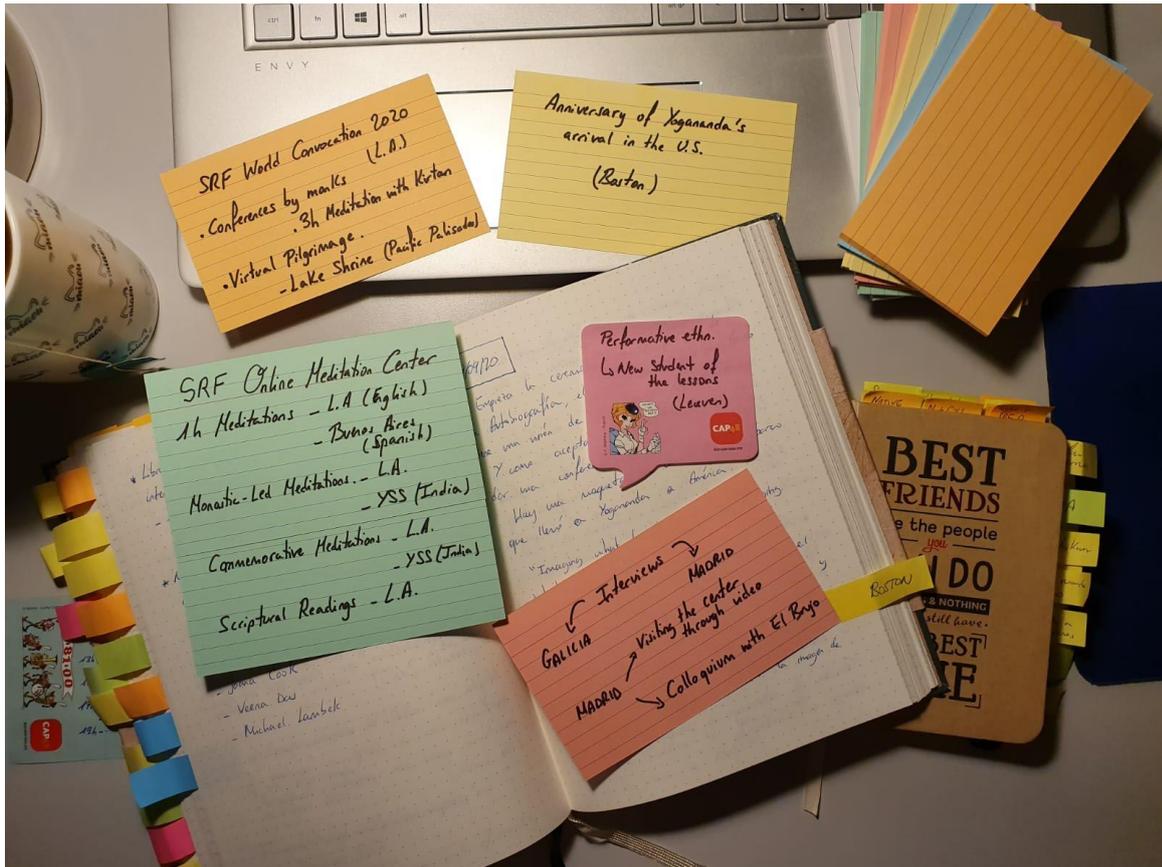
Figure 1: My fieldwork looks like a collage.

Of course, this came with a series of consequences, some of them more related to digital ethnography per se than the fact that I was in my room. For instance, the effects of the time difference did not only manifest in my battle against sleeping during certain online meditations. When the online SRF World Convocation took place, I was not able to attend the live stream of the conferences given by SRF monks; either they were late at night or some personal obligation claimed my attention. Consequently, I ended up watching the recordings of the programme[1] sometimes weeks after it took place. This led me to see myself as a sort of delayed observer. I was not observing the Convocation in the moment that it happened; I was always deferred. "I will take a look at it later on" and "I will check it next week" became usual sentences in my vocabulary. If I needed to find a word to describe my fieldwork, it would be 'scheduled'. The digital aspect allowed me to plan my moments of observation. The availability of my participants, the broadcasting of the events and, for the most part, my own obligations were the main constraints of the arrangement. There is a deep truth in the following affirmation: ICT shapes how we gather data and what type of data we gather (Ahlin and Li, 2019).

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[1] The recordings of SRF World Convocation are accessible on YouTube:
https://www.youtube.com/user/YoganandaSRF

Despite planning being intrinsic to fieldwork, I found that, in my case, it was exaggerated. With my room being my 'field-site' as well as my home, scheduling became a strategy to draw boundaries between my private life and my moments of observation. As noted by Martha-Cecilia Dietrich, "When all structure is reconfigured into one space, the challenge is to be/stay a master of your routine" (2020, p. 84). Also in this vein, María Isabel Jociles Rubio (1999) argued that participant observation and ordinary observation are quite similar, and that the main difference is located in the gaze adopted by the observers. While ordinary observation comes naturally to us, the anthropological gaze is an intuition that one needs to learn. Applying this insight to my own situation, last summer, I experienced my fieldwork as a sort of mental state, an on-off button that was automatically activated when the anthropological gaze needed to be adopted (usually triggered by the light of a screen). Still, such 'artificial'/DIY field boundaries ended up being permeable. As I will explain later, the philosophy of Paramahansa Yogananda also ended up infusing my every day.

Nonetheless, although my private sphere played a major role in my way of proceeding, the daily life of my participants was also part of the entanglement. For instance, towards the end of the interview with A., he confessed that he was actually cooking and that this was the reason why he preferred a phone call, rather than using Skype or Zoom; like that, he could also do other things—in this case preparing Basque-style cod for a family meal—while he was answering my questions. Thus, our conversation went from what was the correct pronunciation of the names of SRF lineage of gurus to fish, meat, vegetables and general diet. This particular moment was illuminating for me. The "meshwork" (Ingold, 2013) that my room had become, did not only weave my private life to SRF 'sacred' aspects, but also to the quotidian of the devotees. The digital media was a bridge of connection between our mundane routines.

In this respect, I also felt as if the asynchronicity allowed by certain digital platforms was extended beyond the limits of text messages. I re-discovered the power of waiting (Dietrich, 2020; Janeja and Bandak, 2018). I waited for responses (that in some instances never came), re-scheduled meetings cancelled at the last moment and left my recording on stand-by while my interlocutor attended to personal issues that came up in the midst of our conversation. Regarding this, the series of interruptions—between interviews, within interviews, between online services and postponed video recordings—   conveyed my fieldwork with a curious double play in which the form ended up mimicking the content.

> M.: I have another question about the commemorative days. For example, this Saturday is Babaji's day. Do you notice something special [on these days]?
>
> T.: Wait, Mar, the teacher is leaving [her granddaughter's teacher] Did you finish? [She asks her granddaughter] Do you mind if I call you in a minute? [She speaks to me again]
>
> M.: No problem.
>
> […]
>
> [Silence, T. calls again after 8']
>
> T.: I'm here again, I needed to say goodbye to the teacher. Well, my apologies, what were you asking me?

[…]

M.: I wanted to ask you also about silence, because I remember from other interview that the person in question mentioned the importance of silence after meditation.

T.: Yes, it's important. It's not always possible, but it's important because…What's more, you don't want to speak. Well, not all meditations are the same, but when you experience a deep meditation that is fulfilling, you don't want to speak. Look, when we do retreats during the weekends, sometimes some are longer, they are in silence, when I come back home, usually on Sunday evening, I find the house with my husband, my daughters, my granddaughters…Hum…that noise…You love to see them, but…you need…because you have been in peace and in silence…I love silence, so it's a form of prolonging the feeling, the moment. Then, it's important.

M.: And for example, when you go to the centre, this must be difficult because you see people that you know…you want to greet them…

T.: Yes, but it's not like that. If I arrive early then I say hello, but when the meditation is finished, well, sometimes you talk, but most of the time you don't need to talk. You go out and get into the car. I go and come in silence. You don't always stay to talk. Sometimes yes, but…Indeed, we do that, too. The people don't talk to you when the meditation is finished…[interruption] Hello? [she speaks to someone in the house] My son is coming [she says to me, she laughs] This house is always moving. Hi love [she says to someone] My granddaughter [she says to me, she laughs] Do you have many questions left?

M.: Well, I would like to talk a little bit more, yes. So, if you want, we can schedule another moment to continue. [Interview on July, 22, 2020. Original in Spanish].

Like in this vignette, where a tension is created between silences and interruptions, the scene presents a curious play of light and shadow. The conversation focuses on the importance of silence after meditation and the participant relates how, after a spiritual retreat, the generally pleasant noises of the home interrupt the peace generated by the prolonged silence. Similarly, it is these same noises that interfere with the interview. In the same way, but in a broader sense, the silence of the aforementioned in-between periods of waiting contrasted with the meaningful silence of the moments of meditation. "[S]ilence is a pact that allows the parties to come closer together" (Arias, 2017, p. 106, own translation). Silence is essential in the weaving.

Regarding the continuation of their research in a neighbourhood in Baltimore in times of the pandemic (continuation that involved embracing the digital field), Samuel Collins and Matthew Durington (2020) mention: "it occurs to us that we didn't really need to be there at all" (p. 93). They highlight the willingness of the people from the neighbourhood to collaborate in their project. Indeed, when the only connection with the participants relies on social media, the ethnographer needs to trust them profoundly. In my experience, my gatekeeper has been key in finding interlocutors and broadening the range of field-events. She became my eyes, ears and voice in the city of Madrid, getting devotees to agree to discuss something as intimate as their faith with me, a complete stranger whom they would not meet in person (at least for the moment). However, even if she found several contacts for me, I also needed to trust them

in order to respond in the middle of the silences. This trust ended up being mutual; at the present moment, it is I who stays silent while they wait for me to materialize, in writing, the product of their voices.

Figure 2: Literally, she became my eyes. Last summer, SRF Madrid changed location and opened a new meditation centre. My gatekeeper sent me a video tour of the place so I could also see it. These are screenshots of that video.

Nevertheless, unlike Collins and Durington (2020), I had limited access to the physical life of my participants. Sure, I interviewed them about their life worlds, but I did not observe—or ask them to document—how they implemented their faith in daily life. In this respect there was also a big silence that, without realizing it, I had started to fill in with my own routine.

I knew the figure of Yogananda from back in my childhood. My mother kept *Autobiography of a Yogui* (1998 [1946]), the main book of the guru, at home, together with other volumes edited by SRF. Thus, from a young age, I had been in contact with certain aspects of his philosophy. Because of this, there was already a shared experience between me and my participants that I could only hope to increase. For me, this project was an opportunity to explore more deeply a faith that, in one way or another, has always been part of my environment. This was the perfect moment to read the autobiography and subscribe to the post-mailed meditation lessons that SRF offers in order to properly grasp the message that my participants, and previous to them my mother, talked to me about.

In that sense, I discover myself practicing Neil Whitehead's (2009) 'performative ethnography'. The author describes this method not as a role-playing moment (p. 1), but as a vehicle to understand different subjectivities through auto-ethnographic descriptions. In other words, 'performative ethnography' is a way to explore the phenomena we study from an active

perspective rather than reactive (pp. 5-6). Hence, I read the book and started to follow the meditation exercises, accommodating my body to the described postures and regulating my breathing as indicated. I took the performance seriously. I included the individual-meditation practice as a daily routine and even adapted a little corner of my room in order to perform it as recommended in the lessons. In Figure 3, you can see my meditation corner. It is composed of a chair with backrest facing East and an improvised altar with the cover of Yogananda's autobiography and the cover of a book written by Sr. Yukteswar, guru of Yogananda.

Figure 3: *Here, we are facing East.*

Figure 4: *Altars. On the left there is a drawing of one of the altars exhibited during the online joint meditations. On the right there is my improvised altar.*

Before knowing it, I was sitting on my bed reading Lola Williamson (2010) when I found myself pictured by the author: "Outside of these gatherings, they each meditate on their own twice daily. Many keep a book by Yogananda on their bedside tables" (p. 57).
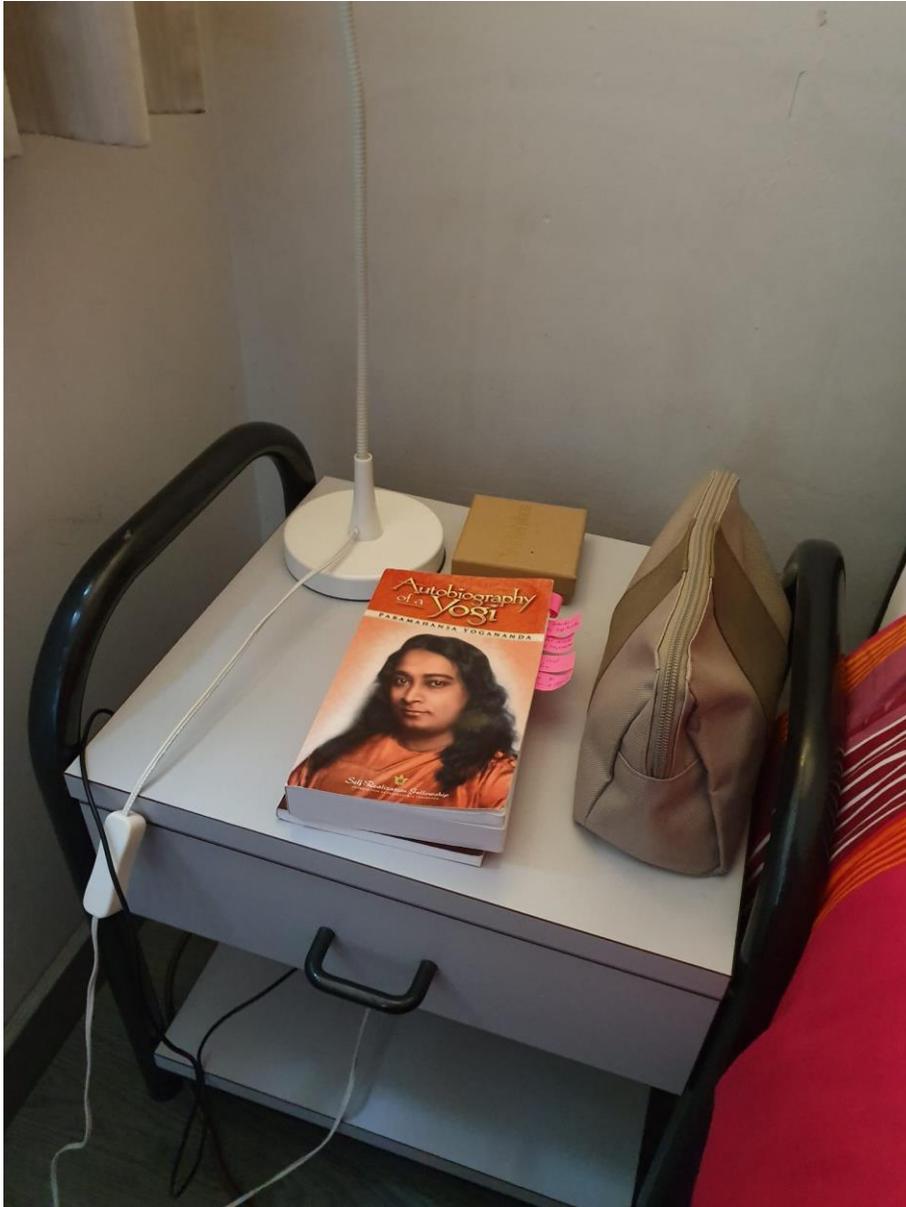

Figure 5: *Picture of my bedside table, where I keep both books.*

Returning to Collins and Durington (2020), my anthropological 'network' included physical and digital aspects, encompassed in the space of my room, with the only difference being that the physical was mostly represented by my own life and performance, rather than the lives of those I was supposed to observe. I re-centre the "I"—the "I" of the researcher—that Collins and Durington aim to decentre, as a response to the continuous presence of silences. My participants were "in situ" in their respective homes and I created my own "in situ" environment in mine, blurring the 'field delimitations' that I had previously wanted to impose.

Ann Cassiman (2011) describes how the village-rooms of the Kasena women in the North of Ghana have changed over time due to the migration of the youngest generations to the cities of the South. As such, the rooms display external influences, adopting rectangular shapes instead of the traditional round ones, together with a cumulation of "fashionable objects and consumer goods" (p. 70). In the same manner that the rooms of the young Kasena women talk about their travels, my research has left its mark on my room. The space where I live also says something, not only about the external influence of the congregation I am studying, but about my ways of learning from them as well. For example, the book *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1998 [1946]) was not on my bedside table before I started reading it and I did not have a DIY meditation corner. Consequently, it is possible to say that my project spun an entire new web of significations in this particular space (Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 1995 cited in Morton, 2007, p. 159) that impacts not only organization in terms of time, but also in the spatial distribution of my field. After all, dwelling and social life are interconnected (Morton, 2007).
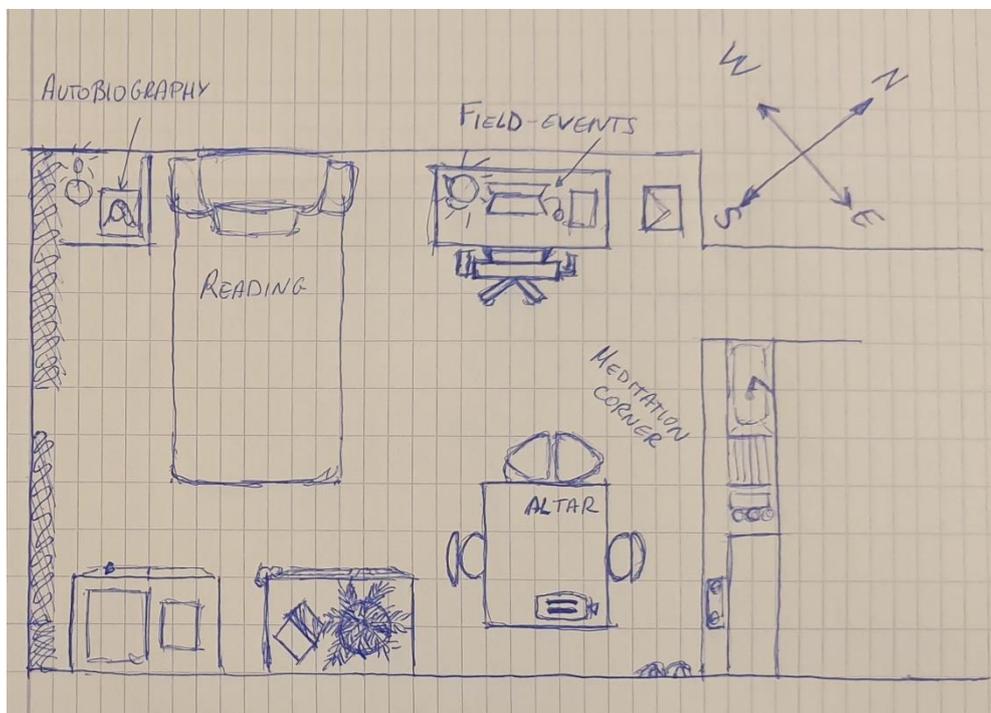

Figure 6: *Cartography of my field.*

Final dot.

While I was composing the collage presented in Figure 1, I thought of my room as a vessel (as the "carrier bag" of Ursula K. Le Guin mentioned by Clarke et al., 2020), as a ball of wool on which all kinds of yarns can be wound. There were 20 square metres hosting a considerable amount of information. 20 square metres where a silent breath is more meaningful than words, where the fragmented finds a way to come together, where movement can be explored through the static, where different daily routines are connected and the trust between strangers emerges. I travelled through my room, as Xavier de Maestre did in the eighteen century and as HBO represented, and together with a larger number of anthropologists, in these quarantined times. I experienced how my quotidian was shaped by my project, changing me, and observed how my room kept track of all the modifications. De Maestre was right, so much can happen in the place we call home, which is a location, and much more.

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