



ETHNOGRAPHIC SNAPSHOT

Common Grounds**Life and Ethnography on the Möbius Strip**

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This snapshot is a reflection on the nature of mobile ethnographic research where the ethnographer herself is a (hyper)mobile subject, with multiple, at times conflicted, belongings. It explores the role of wavering intimacies in establishing new relationships in the field especially during the early stages of new research, as it emerges from the legacies of previously conducted fieldwork. By introducing the metaphor of the Möbius strip, this snapshot reconsiders the meanings of home and field, and argues for the continuity between fieldwork life and other lives, with the line between them increasingly blurred. The ethnographic material for this piece is the result of research conducted for the past two years among Cuban dancers in Italy and Germany.



Non-linear Journeys Into and Out of the Field

Rather than a rite of passage or a journey through a tunnel where there is no going back, only forward (Behar 1996), I think of my ethnographic journey as most accurately represented by the Möbius strip. A Möbius strip¹ is a one-sided surface with no boundaries, resembling an infinite loop. One of the most common thought experiments that demonstrate the strip's unorientable quality involves the imaginary journey of an ant. Because the Möbius band has only one side, the ant crawling on it would wind along both the top and the bottom, unlike in a normal loop, where it could only crawl on either top or bottom. One apparent loop would bring the ant not to its starting point, but upside down, as its mirror image. Although it appears to be crawling on only one side, after another full circle the ant will ultimately have traveled the entire length of the strip before coming back to where its journey began.

The visual appeal of the Möbius strip as a metaphoric representation of my fieldwork life and my other lives, and the perpetual motion between them, was strengthened by what I perceived to be a pleasing symmetry between its applications in mathematics and the process of writing ethnography. The Möbius strip helped develop the field called topology, the mathematical study of the properties preserved when objects are moved, bent, stretched, or twisted. Tearing or cutting, however, is not allowed. A circle is therefore topologically equivalent to an ellipse, much like the field preserves its properties when moved and bent and stretched into writing.



Figure 1: The continuum of crossing – a visualization of the Möbius strip, as presented by the artist Ana Maria Dudu.

¹ Perhaps its most famous visual representation is the work of the Dutch artist M.C. Escher, *Möbius Strip II* (1963).

Similar to the ant crawling on both sides of the strip in an infinite loop, my in-the-field persona and out-of-the field persona resided together in one coherent whole reality, moving from one side of the strip to the other, without a fixed beginning or a fixed end. As a Romanian-born, Polish-trained, Italy-based anthropologist whose research interests are related to Latin America and the Caribbean, I lived a considerable part of my life on the road. I set out to study Cuban dance in 2011, when I first traveled to Havana to study the politically motivated heritagizing processes of Cuban rumba. For the next three years, my experience of fieldwork was aligned to a rather “traditional” view, although increasingly marked by multisitedness (Marcus 1995) as the years went by. This was due to the Cuban dancers’ mobilities and the transformations in my field of study on the one hand, and my own (hyper)mobility as a young scholar on the other.

My later returns to the field rarely followed a linear path. By 2018, before traveling to Cuba, I had already spent almost a year living out of a suitcase between the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and the Sinai Peninsula. There was no stable ground under my feet to count as a departing point from which I “entered the field”. When I returned from the field, I did not do so to a specific place but continued to move across countries for a few months before going back to Cuba for another seven months. This kind of mobility and lack of stability rendered change and back and forth movements the only constants in my life. Consequently, long before the Covid-19 pandemic forced most of us to resort to online forms of socialization, I started relying heavily on technology in order to stay in touch with most of the people in my life. And that included my research participants, who existed simultaneously in the same (virtual) space as my family, my partner, my friends, and my colleagues. Rather than following the classic scenario of the ethnographer who comes back from the field and re-establishes her relationships with the world she departed from, I found myself in a situation where I connected to and disconnected from everyone in the same way. This was further complicated when I started researching dance labor in migratory contexts, and followed my research participants in Italy and Germany, while Poland remained my academic home. Like the ant, I was crawling along the strip without a fixed beginning or a fixed end.

The spatial and temporal conditions of conventional ethnographic methods (long term immersion into the field, processing the material upon return) are commonly assumed to ensure the (physical, emotional, intellectual) distance required in order to think about and rethink the ethnographic material, yet multiple displacements are arguably a different source of insight than one produced by time (Lucht 2017: 133). Born out of multipresence, simultaneity forges adaptability, overcoming the uncertainty and the lack of a common ground that characterize the early stages of research. Constantly moving in and out, crossing increasingly blurred lines, creates the grounds

for understanding different social experiences, and while perhaps it hinders traditional data collection it allows for shared experiences and bonds especially with mobile subjects. Albeit tiresome and marked by insecurity and the overproduction of imagined, potential futures, both in professional and personal terms, this perpetual movement back and forth creates an immersive experience that retains the much-treasured anthropological thickness, made possible by the ethnographer's own mobility and her connectedness.

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Covid is over! shouts the man on stage as he swings his pelvis to reggaeton rhythms and the crowd in front of him cheers, copying his steps and his movements during a Cuban party at the beach, somewhere on the outskirts of Rome. Social distancing was a thing of the past, masks were off, miniskirts and strappy tops were on, bare-chested male dancers animated the party while meat was sizzling on the outdoor grill, ready to be washed down with ice-cold mojitos. Once again, dance floors were powered up in a collective burst of energy that could be neither contained nor resisted. *Do not be afraid of the black man!* the man continues into the microphone, pulling the women in the audience up on stage next to him for an impromptu twerking session.

I instinctively reach for my phone to jot down a note and take a video. The phone camouflages this work perfectly, almost everyone is on their phones constantly, posting stories on Instagram, going live on Facebook, sharing videos on WhatsApp, video calling with friends – if anything, being on the phone every now and then during a party helps to fit in. And so do tags, shares, reels, likes, and comments, even more so after two years of “distdancing”² which, out of necessity, increased dancers’ online presence. I unlock my phone to try to capture at least some seconds, although in ten years of research on dance I still haven’t perfected the art of rendering in videos the immersive experience and the joy it instils. And there it is: latest updates on Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In a split second, I find myself crawling on the other side of the Möbius strip. Glancing at my social media accounts I find at least one debate I want to follow in the commentary section of a friend’s post, a few links to open and discuss later, fundraising campaigns, webinars I know I won’t be able to attend because I will be out dancing. For the past months, my friends and colleagues in Poland have been involved in volunteer work helping Ukrainian refugees, they have organized seminars, debates and research groups, they have taken up new projects along with their old ones,

² A term popularized by a project of the Royal Ballet initiated during the lockdowns: https://www.instagram.com/_distdancing_/ (accessed April 27, 2023).

and I witnessed all that on Facebook and Instagram, torn between the desire to belong, to share my work, and the realization that it would be almost impossible to find that one picture, that one video, which could render the nuances and complexities of my fieldwork without being inappropriate.

As a consequence, I have chosen to take a step back from the very space that allowed me to function in this perpetual loop. I have not posted (or reposted) anything since I started doing research in the spring of 2022. The inner turmoil of those early days led me to send pictures and videos from parties exclusively in private messages or WhatsApp groups, never on Facebook and Instagram, and I kept a low profile for both me and my research grant – to this day, there is almost no institutional trace of any kind of public engagement. As the first year of my research project ended, I came to the bitter realization that my perpetual movement created both connectedness and disconnectedness at the same time. My movement in the infinite loop and my multiple belongings complicated perceptions of the different orders of priorities for the people in my fieldwork life, my professional life, and my personal one. I was confronted with a vision of “everywhere and everything”, rooted in physical spaces and online spaces equally.

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After a salsa lesson with Rafael on the terrace of his ground floor apartment in Rome, his mother comes out with a freshly brewed pot of coffee and a laundry basket.

“Just like in Cuba,” I say, foreseeing a Proustian moment.

“If only!” she replies with a sigh as she starts hanging the laundry.

Rafael is already editing the video of our lesson, ready to post it on TikTok. We have been dancing for months now, so he is well aware of my no-posting-policy, but he still informs me regularly on the number of likes and comments “we” get under “our” video, so I figure I’m way more useful to him when we make these videos than I could be if I were to share them with my two hundred followers on Instagram.

There is something about the smell of washing powder, about the freshly brewed coffee, and the sight of bright white towels under the spring sun that takes me back to my friend Isabel’s house in Habana Vieja, and I can almost feel the scent of laundry drying out on her balcony, mixed with the smell of gasoline, cigars, dust, and fried food – a smell I thought I would never get out of my clothes, my hair, and my skin, and yet I find myself wishing it surrounded me once more.

“Coffee is nowhere to be found,” Rafael’s mother continues, seemingly unimpressed by our growing popularity on TikTok.

“For months now,” I reply, and I think just how odd our conversation could sound to their Italian neighbors.

We are both painfully aware of how difficult it became to get access to even the most basic supplies in Havana. The reality we are talking about has nothing to do with our day-to-day Italian reality. In a country where national, regional, and local identities are built around coffee, where the ritual of espresso is a candidate for the Unesco heritage list, where tourists form endless lines for the experience of the authentic Italian coffee, we are using the gestures, the tones, the vocabulary of shortages and struggle in Cuba. Our puzzle of fragmented realities is not complete, yet we see the same image through the missing pieces.

Then I remember I still had a small package of Turquino coffee hidden somewhere on a shelf in the kitchen, my emergency stock, precisely for situations like this. It feels like owning one hundred grams of a small treasure. I make a mental note to bring it with me for the next lesson.

“Nowhere to be found,” she sighs and goes back to hanging the laundry.

Y cada suspiro / Un remanso / Del grito (And every sigh / The remains / Of a cry) wrote the Spanish writer, Federico García Lorca in 1921 and I can’t help but think once again about the infinite loop and the ant crawling on both sides of the strip, from cry to sigh to cry, moving through different realities almost imperceptibly. It feels frustrating and tiresome, this longing for a sense of belonging in the multitude of places I call “home” or “field”. But simultaneity becomes a source of knowledge and liminality a source of agency: unlocatable, malleable, free from longing. Perhaps it is these infinite loops, our multiple belongings and incomplete puzzles that make up our common grounds: not so much where we are, but *how* we are where we are.

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