

RETHINKING ‘HOME’ AND ‘FIELD’  
Patchwork research experiences as mothers  
and ethnographers on the move

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*ABSTRACT.* This contribution broadens the tight circles in which motherhood and ethnographic research are being discussed. Our experiences as mothers and ethnographers on the move with affective attachment to different beings and places, including those in which we grew up and those in which we decided to conduct accompanied and unaccompanied research, question the hegemonic anthropological categories of ‘field’ and ‘home’. Our aim is to reassemble these spaces through the lenses of affective relations with people and territories. Criticisms of ‘field’ and ‘home’ are not new, but the specificity of our contribution lies in our positionality as mothers and ethnographers doing accompanied research while being embedded in transnational families and mobility practices. Our fragmented and patchy research and life experiences have led us to think of new vocabularies. After introducing our patchy, transnational and entangled accompanied and unaccompanied research experiences, we discuss how these were shaped by and contributed to our continuous process of making a ‘home’, allowing for the construction of bridges and tunnels, and therefore repairing and mending our feelings of fragmentation. Rethinking the concept of ‘home’ led us to critically revisit the notion of ‘field’ and how it has been constructed through colonial imaginaries. We propose to refer to research experiences (D’Amico-Samuels 1997) as a pragmatic and epistemologically fruitful alternative.

1. *INTRODUCTION: AFFECTIVE ATTUNEMENT, ‘HERSTORYING’ AND  
PATCHWORK ETHNOGRAPHY*

During a panel on accompanied fieldwork at the 2024 conference of the German Anthropological Association,<sup>1</sup> one participant recalled that other peer male anthropologists commented to him: ‘Ah, you’re in this mommies’ pan-

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<sup>1</sup> The panel ‘From “lonely hero” to accompanied research: professional expertise and family interconnections in ethnological fieldwork settings’ was organized by Sophia Thubauville and Judit Tavakoli, both members of the working group ‘Family in the field’ of the German Anthropological Association.

el!’ The anecdote reminded us that parenthood remains a women’s concern, even in anthropology. The term ‘mommies’ clearly reveals how the discipline denigrates and silences accompanied research practices and its dimensions, such as care and love. In Europe, accompanied research is often treated as a methodological issue that is marginal to theoretical and epistemological discussions in anthropology. Questions about ethnographic research and the researchers’ family are mostly absent from anthropology curricula of European universities (Tavakoli and Thubauville, this collection). As Janina Dannenberg asserts, ‘the assumed “normality” of a researcher’s life is still that of a person doing field research alone’ (2019: 167). Ethnographic research continues to be based on professionals that do not have to assume care for others.<sup>2</sup>

We, Amanda and Claudia, met in person for the first time in front of the impressive university building in Munich to participate in the panel on accompanied fieldwork. During the previous months, we had exchanged ideas by email and phone calls on our experiences of motherhood, accompanied and unaccompanied ethnographic research and mobility between Switzerland, Portugal, Colombia and Peru. After a few salutations, we quickly jumped into a bar to discuss our joint presentation in the panel in front of a beer. We soon switched to an informal and affective space to share our personal paths and political thoughts, and both felt amazed by the numerous similarities in our trajectories. We shared a strong affective attachment to the contexts of our ethnographic research, a connection that was constantly nourished by our transnational family mobility.<sup>3</sup> We felt fragmented and ‘on the move’ between shifting spaces, thus challenging the ethnographically established categories of ‘field’ and ‘home’: our private lives were so intimately entangled with research that we felt the impossibility of making a clear distinction between these concepts. We felt the impossibility of ‘objectifying’ others, as the Other is both those we love and us, as family. We had to sort out creatively how to do ethnographic research amidst the ‘limits’ imposed by our families, our jobs and our economic conditions. We felt our research experiences were ‘out-of-the-box’, both having been taught at university the existence of a neat separation between ‘home’ and ‘field’, and having been

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<sup>2</sup> Yates-Doerr (2020). Academic research still depends greatly on the caring work of relatives, and we argue that this should be a central issue for gender equality in academia.

<sup>3</sup> Our mobility and feeling ‘on the move’ are somehow privileged; despite precarity, we could cover regular flights, were able to cross borders legally, and stay and work in different countries.

trained with the idea of the lone (heroic) ethnographer conducting research 'in a faraway field site for a year or longer, detached from their ordinary familial, university, and other responsibilities' (Günel and Watanabe 2024: 132).

Red River Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd (2012) asserts in a blog, 'When your body, and your body of work, do not fit neatly into the categories provided, you become a problem', as you can only occupy the interstices (Spillers 2003), the betweenness or in-between spaces of academia.<sup>4</sup> We began to feel our marginal space, our interstices in academia, the ones we inhabit through our fragmented experiences as mothers and ethnographers on the move, as epistemologically productive and potentially growing. We started 'rethinking from the interstice' (Paing 2020), seaming together our patchy experiences.

Patchwork ethnography (Günel and Watanabe 2024) acknowledges the challenge and even impossibility of conducting long-term fieldwork for many researchers, considering their multiple commitments and entanglements and their real economic and working conditions. Gökçe Günel and Chika Watanabe stress that ethnographers are relational subjects, conducting research in places to which they are often connected through family and diasporic ties, as well as political activism (2024: 135). They take up the many works that criticize the trope of the 'disembodied scholar' (Fabian 2000: xii), the 'lone heroic detachment' (Lambek 2015: 273) or the ideal of 'the head on a stick', that is, 'a bodiless intellectual who could simply perform as required in the classroom' (Gruner 2009: 126). Patchwork ethnography also sustains critics of 'academia being projected as an abstract, universal place' (Manzi, Ojeda and Hawkins 2019: 357), and provides room to acknowledge family support, emotional attachments and friendship ties as crucial in both academic careers and ethnographic knowledge production. Patchwork ethnography therefore constitutes 'a call for being honest about how the personal and the professional, the "domestic" and the academic, intersect and inform each other in all knowledge production' (Günel and Watanabe 2024: 135).

Our mutual affective attunement (Willink and Shukri 2018) allowed us to connect and share our feeling of being out of the box in academia. Affective spaces are essential to ethnographic knowledge production (Stodulka,

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<sup>4</sup> Ulf Hannerz (1997) reflects on keywords of (transnational) anthropological research, showing that betweenness is a central dimension of the contemporary world. In this 'vocabulary of betweenness' (Hannerz 1997: 21), he mentions concepts such as flows, boundaries, borders hybrids, margins, or interstices.

Dinkelaker and Thajib 2019). Indeed, they ensured the continuity in our collaboration, resulting in the present conversational text based on active listening between us and inspired by collaborative autoethnography.<sup>5</sup> Our conversations enabled ‘room to breathe’ (Günel and Watanabe 2024: 132) to recognize how our experiences as mothers and ethnographers doing a PhD are embedded in transnational families and ties, and how our academic interstitial positionality relates to knowledge production.

Our approach followed the practice of ‘herstorying’, meaning to care for our stories that complexify research experiences and ‘make openings for new kinds of stories to tell’ (Yates-Doerr 2020: 240). The concept of ‘herstory’ has been used since the 1970s as a feminist approach to history, ‘to give value to an experience that had been ignored (hence devalued) and to insist on female agency in the making of history’ (Scott 1988: 18). This focus on women in history entailed a rewriting and an epistemologically rethinking of history (Scott 1988: 17). Here, ‘herstories’ are narratives of ordinary, daily, unfinished, fragmented, life-sustaining and often collaborative practices (Yates-Doerr 2020), such as those of motherhood and of the inclusion of broader relations of friendship and love in research and life. Emily Yates-Doerr (2020) draws on Ursula Le Guin (1989) to propose narratives that do not reproduce the heroic, masterly stories of the hunters, but focus on the mundane, the relational, the daily repeating, life-sustaining and caring activities of the gatherers.

We broaden the reflection to evade the tight circles in which issues about motherhood and research experiences are being discussed, and to enlarge the interstices we inhabit. Our experiences as mothers and ethnographers on the move with affective attachment to different beings and places, including those in which we grew up and those in which we decided to conduct research, challenge the hegemonic anthropological categories of ‘field’ and ‘home’. Our aim is to reassemble these spaces through the lenses of affective relations to people and territories. Such discussions are not new,<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Our aim was to explore how our experiences as mothers embedded in transnational families, marked by mobility and multiple attachments, inform and complexify ethnographic research and knowledge production. We proceeded on a collaborative autoethnographic path by meeting online and in presence, writing e-mails, WhatsApp texts and audio messages to each other and transcribing them. Our meetings and our collaborative writing allowed for mutual probing, questioning and deepening of insights (Hernandez, Chang, and Ngunjiri 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Clifford (1997), D’Amico-Samuels (1997), Gupta and Ferguson (1997), Hill Collins (1991), Narayan (1993).

but the specificity of our contribution lies in our positionality as mothers and ethnographers doing research while being embedded in transnational families and mobility practices. Our fragmented and patchy research and life experiences led us to think of new vocabularies.

We first share our patchy accompanied and unaccompanied research experiences and their entanglement with family, affective ties and transnational mobility. We then discuss how these embodied and transnational experiences were shaped by and contributed to our continuous process of (re)making a 'home', allowing for the construction of bridges and tunnels, and thus repairing and mending our feelings of fragmentation. Rethinking the concept of 'home' is leading us to critically revisit the notion of 'field' and how it has been constructed through colonial imaginaries. We propose, instead, to refer to research experiences (D'Amico-Samuels 1997) as a pragmatic and epistemologically fruitful alternative.

## 2. RESEARCH, FAMILY AND TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY: OUR PATCHY EXPERIENCES

### *Claudia*

Claudia pursues PhD research on the memory practices of Afro-Colombian youth in Quibdó,<sup>7</sup> a city located in the Pacific region of Colombia. She also embarked on her PhD project in 2019 to go back 'home'. Quibdó is where Claudia conducted ethnographic research for her Master's thesis on forced displacement in 2011. There she met her husband Miguel, an Afro-Colombian youth leader in Villa España, the neighbourhood she was working in. He himself, having been forcibly displaced from where he grew up, was interviewed by Claudia. Their conversation slowly grew into a love relationship, changing Claudia's positioning in Villa España, where she was now felt to be 'insider'. The relationship also contributed to her research by providing access to new contacts, constant exchanges of opinions and his feedback on her interpretation of data.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Claudia's PhD research is supervised by Marisa Ramos Gonçalves, University of Coimbra (Portugal).

<sup>8</sup> Kuiper and Schönebeck's analysis in this collection reveals the key role played by romantic partners in data collection and interpretation.

Claudia migrated from Switzerland to Quibdó right after graduating in 2012, and the couple bought a house in Villa España. She started teaching and researching at the university on different issues such as ethnicity, forced displacement and gold-mining. Ever since, Miguel has continued to be a key person for the discussion of issues related to her research projects, as well as a guide to interpreting daily situations. Miguel and Claudia became the parents of two children in 2014 and 2016. In her academic activities, Claudia often took one of her children with her to university classes in rural areas, as well as to interviews and meetings linked to her research projects.

In researching gold-mining, Claudia partly relied on Miguel's family in a rural village; his grandmother, father, sister and nephew have mined gold throughout their whole life as a way of sustaining the family. Being part of the family helped Claudia access gold-mining sites and miners, but it also allowed her to assess cultural and ordinary dimensions of the activity, as well as to speak openly about sensitive issues such as armed groups, money, territorial rights and conflicts. Later, she also travelled to the village with her first daughter, still a baby. Research stays were also family visits, and the child's aunts were happy to take care of her. As Claudia was breastfeeding, she was not supposed to go to the forest or the mines because she would be affected by negative energies.<sup>9</sup> She therefore stayed in the village caring for her baby, talking with family members, other women and older people, and gaining 'ordinary' perspectives.

A few years later, Claudia began research on 'urban' issues in Quibdó, such as urban conflicts and youth realities, in order to integrate her work and childcare better, sometimes doing interviews with her children around. Her life in an urban marginalized neighbourhood was key, since she could contribute as an insider and mobilize her social networks. Miguel, who was active in the neighbourhood youth organization, as well as in working with young people involved in gangs, drug consumption and trafficking in the city, was a key, yet informal research partner, contributing data and shaping her perspective. Miguel constantly appears in Claudia's ethnographic texts; he is aware of his role, but refuses to collaborate formally in her research projects by jokingly revindicating autonomy in his job. Years later, during

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<sup>9</sup> In the Colombian Pacific region, medicine, food, body and places, among others, are thought of in terms of cold and hot, two opposite energies that must be balanced for a good life (Velásquez 2000). The forest is a cold space and could negatively affect the body of a woman who is pregnant, has just given birth, is breastfeeding or is menstruating.

doctoral studies, the informal collaboration with Miguel was acknowledged in a jointly written article (Howald and Ramirez 2020).

After years of living in Colombia, the family moved to Switzerland in 2018 due to the rise in armed confrontations between youth gangs,<sup>10</sup> which was affecting their daily life. This challenging move was significantly supported by Claudia's parents, but still marked by precarity due to a lack of funds and difficulties in accessing a decently paid job. Claudia simultaneously started to work part-time as an assistant at the University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland and began her doctoral studies at the University of Coimbra, in Portugal. To manage her different commitments, she travelled (both physically and virtually) between Switzerland, Portugal and Colombia.

Building on Miguel's previous job and on her previous research with young people, Claudia's doctoral research addresses youth memory practices to understand what it means to be young in Quibdó amidst historical violence and exclusions. Issues that were affecting Claudia's family daily life in Quibdó became her research priorities for the PhD. Claudia's research is also very much influenced by her motherhood. As she wrote in a draft version of the methodological chapter of her thesis: 'Sometimes I think that my children were robbed of the possibility of becoming young Quibdosenos. They would have been the urban youth of the future. How will their friends grow up young? What youth is opening up for them?' Research on youth was inspired partly by Claudia's children and their friends, imagined as the youth-to-be in Quibdó. Such writings led a colleague of Claudia's to comment that her PhD project echoed a uterine ethnography: a feminist affective researching and writing practice based on topics that intimately afflict and affect her and her family, embodying a sort of intellectual and emotional cleansing.<sup>11</sup>

For her PhD, Claudia carried out ethnographic research in Quibdó intermittently between 2021 and 2024, integrating remote ethnography (Postill 2017) and digital ethnography (Pink *et al.* 2016). During most of her research

<sup>10</sup> The 2016 peace agreement between the FARC-EP (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army]) guerrillas and the government meant a reassessment of powers in the country, triggering armed confrontations between other guerrilla and paramilitary groups and the state, as well as between gangs as local armed actors.

<sup>11</sup> As Claudia's colleague explained, his comment was inspired by the work of Luzia Gomes Ferreira (2018), a Brazilian feminist poet who wrote a PhD on Afrodiasporic artistic circles in Lisbon.

trips, she decided to leave the children in Switzerland with Miguel.<sup>12</sup> In 2022, the family went on holiday to Colombia, after which Claudia would stay a few weeks longer for her research. In 2024, carrying out a small, funded project on youth and theatre in Quibdó,<sup>13</sup> she went to Quibdó with her older daughter and arranged for her to go to school during the month-long stay. In these different research arrangements, Claudia felt her children and Miguel were always present, experiencing the non-exclusive and non-dichotomous dimension of absence and presence (Farrelly, Stewart-Withers and Dombroski 2014). People would constantly ask for them, and Claudia was thought of as being related to them.<sup>14</sup> Even if faraway, she continued to share news and insights with Miguel. Claudia entangled her research with extended family relationships,<sup>15</sup> drawing a lot from her sister-in-law, as well as from her long-standing neighbours and friends. Some family members participated in collaborative workshops or interviews, helped with contacts, or just contrasted data with their own perspectives.

Epistemologically, Claudia's experience of patchiness made her aware of the uncertainties and fragmentation in the lives of (young) people in Quibdó, often marked by violence and displacements, and sustained through patchwork endeavours. Her displacement and comings and goings provided her with a more sensible understanding of (forced) displacement and circular mobility in Afro-Colombian families. Claudia's back and forth also gave her a deeper and thicker comprehension of changes and continuities in the context. She slowly gained a sensation of 'history repeating itself', which also emerged in interviews with young leaders.

### *Amanda*

Amanda's research focuses on sustainable agrarian development programs that promote cocoa in agroforestry systems in the department of San Mar-

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<sup>12</sup> Research trips lasted from three to six weeks.

<sup>13</sup> The project 'Staging doctoral research insights: fostering dialogue between academy and society', was funded by the Early Career Grants of the Leading House for Latin America of the University of St. Gallen.

<sup>14</sup> As Julia Pauli notes in the conversation on accompanied fieldwork in this collection, anthropologists' positionality can transit between being perceived as a 'single' or a 'with', even if apparently alone during research.

<sup>15</sup> In the Quibdó Afro-Colombian context, neighbours and friends are sometimes considered family (De la Torre Urán 2011).

tín in the Peruvian Selva Alta ('upland jungle').<sup>16</sup> She reveals how the relations that cocoa farmers and agronomists weave with cocoa trees, fruits and beans navigate forms of coloniality (González Casanova 2006, Quijano 1992) that persist under the postcolonial economic and political conditions of the different cocoa value chains and sustainable development programs in San Martín. As she is interested in the trajectories of agronomists and researchers, between 2018 and 2021 she conducted different interviews with cocoa farmers and auto-entrepreneurs, agronomists, cooperative managers and employees. Her main methodology was based on formal and informal interviews and participant observation in various cooperative and research projects in different places in San Martín. She completed her research by assisting to the International Symposium of Cocoa Research in Montpellier, France, in 2022 and conducted online interviews with agronomists and researchers until 2023.

Amanda's choice to conduct research on cocoa in San Martín was highly motivated by her life before PhD. She first came to this region through her husband who had grown up there. She feels a strong and diffuse connexion to different territories of Abya Yala<sup>17</sup> such as Ecuador (where her daughter was born), Bolivia (where she first tried roasted cocoa beans), Peru (where her husband and his family are from) and Brazil (where she wrote a part of her thesis). This awareness of affective relations to people and places impacted her way of understanding cocoa, notably through the lenses of feminist geography: affective relations that cocoa farmers establish with their trees and lands became central to her research. These corporal experiences of cocoa made her aware of the 'visceral politics',<sup>18</sup> that connect bodies and plants to politics through food consumption.

Amanda's husband was present and influenced these corporal and affective (pre)research steps, as well as the whole research. His presence had a significant impact on the way she understood these connections in terms of political engagement with different territories of Abya Yala and with the different people with whom they both exchanged moments of life beyond

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<sup>16</sup> Amanda's PhD research is supervised by Jérémie Forney, University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland).

<sup>17</sup> Since 2007, the term 'Abya Yala' is used by North and South American indigenous peoples to refer to the whole American continent; it is an epistemic decolonial strategy (Almeida and Silva 2015) that attests the common history of the continent.

<sup>18</sup> 'Visceral politics' emerged from feminist geography and was developed by Allison Hayes-Conroy and Jessica Hayes-Conroy (2008). The concept connects the intimacy of the body to general politics, notably through food consumption.

research. Even though ‘her husband is not from the cocoa world, so [she] does not have direct familiar relations to [her] research topic’,<sup>19</sup> he had lived in rural areas where cocoa was cultivated. He supported deep analysis of the local context with his insights into the political and economic contexts of the region and of Peru, arising her awareness of considering the importance of the trajectory of the rural population in San Martín and in Peru to grasp the contemporary national political debates and conflicts that influence cocoa cultivation.

During the cocoa implementation strategies in the early 2000s, tourist- and market-oriented projects were encouraged. Thus, organized visits to chocolate factories or cocoa plots that made their own chocolate and were open to the public were particularly adapted to accompanied research with children and relatives. Amanda sometimes conducted interviews accompanied by her children and her stepfamily, such as her teenage stepsister at a chocolate exposition, or with her stepbrother during the visits to chocolate factories. Instead of disturbing the interview, the accompanied interviews provided additional informal information between jokes about the local political situation and the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The presence of her husband, and of his sister and brother, opened up new avenues for research.

However, even though the presence of her child(ren) was tolerated, and although these encounters were central to her research, Amanda often felt uncomfortable simultaneously playing the challenging roles of researcher and mother, each needing particular attention and emotional management. She had to focus on both interlocutors and her child(ren) and this affected the fluidity of the interviews. In the transcription of one interview, she notes: ‘Towards the end of the interview, I lose the track because I have to take care of my daughter who wants to catch the kitten that walks towards her. I can no longer follow the discussion with attention, and the rhythm gets lost’.<sup>20</sup> Due to the entanglement of ethnographic practice and personal life, Amanda thought beforehand that she would manage her children’s presence during in-depth interviews.

On one occasion the children stayed several days with their father in Tarapoto, the central city of San Martín, while Amanda was visiting an isolated community of cocoa farmers. Those days, she felt incredibly efficient, conducting two or three in-depth interviews daily, spending time in infor-

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<sup>19</sup> WhatsApp audio message from Amanda to Claudia, 20 March 2024.

<sup>20</sup> Amanda’s note during the transcription of an interview, October 2021.

mal exchanges, visiting cocoa plots, and taking detailed notes at night. She finally felt that she was conducting 'real' ethnographic research. However, her staying alone reinforced people's perception of her as a *gringa*, as she occupied a position generally occupied by men or white women.<sup>21</sup> Mostly because of the absence of her children and husband, she lacked more informal connections to people and information on their (political) positions.

To start a PhD, the whole family moved from Peru to Switzerland, facing challenges linked to obtaining a residence permit for her husband and economic precarity. Moreover, Amanda was one of the first among her friends, colleagues and close relatives to become a mother. It was difficult for her to share concerns about energy and time management during research while being on the move between two continents. Even though not felt as an obligation, the frequent mobility the family wanted to maintain between Switzerland and Abya Yala also limited their possibilities for childcare. Childcare in mobility while completing a PhD and teaching was lived as a 'challenge of juggling paid work and care work' (Ayele 2022: 27).

Amanda constantly felt that her research was not adapted to a family life with two very young children, but she could not find practical support on accompanied research, nor advice on how to adapt her methodology and topic. What is more, she thought that her discomfort and her 'juggling' between unpaid care, (un)paid research and paid labour were her concern only, and that she had to adapt to the ideal of the efficient lone ethnographer she had been taught at university through classical ethnographies. She felt compelled to be 'productive', that is, to produce data, contact as many people as possible, and adapt to the realities of others while being challenged by her own situation as a mother and ethnographer on the move.

### 3. THE RECONFIGURATION OF 'HOME' AND 'FIELD'

Our experiences are marked by cross-border mobility and multiple attachments through our embeddedness in transnational families (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). Theorizing a transnational social field approach to avoid a nation-state container view of society, Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller (2004: 1006) reveal a difference between 'the existence of transnational social networks' – ways of being, or what Janine Dahinden calls 'network transnationalism' (2009: 1367) – and 'the consciousness of being embedded

<sup>21</sup> 'Gringa' or 'gringo' is a term used to refer to foreigners, mostly 'white' people.

in them', or ways of belonging, also called 'transnational subjectivity' by Dahinden (2009: 1367). In that sense, not every migrant is transnational, while non-migrants can be (Dahinden 2009). For our families to be transnational 'involves a mode of acting and performing' (cross-border moving and weaving transnational social networks), 'as much as it does thinking, feeling and belonging' (Dahinden 2009: 1367).

Embracing a transnational perspective, we show how our mobilities and embodiments in transnational families, as well as our political commitments and affective attachments to places in Switzerland, Peru and Colombia, are disrupting the categories 'field' and 'home'. The dichotomy of 'field' and 'home' as clearly defined opposite spaces still permeates most ethnographic literature, including the literature on accompanied research.<sup>22</sup> As Kaushik Sunder Rajan observes, it is the persistence of 'a disciplinary genealogy that assumes the metropolitan ethnographer to be "here" and the social object of ethnography to be "elsewhere"' (2021: 2–3). The dichotomy evokes images of the 'field' as a place marked by cultural differences and 'otherness', spatially separated from 'home', assumed as a place of cultural sameness and where one's university is located (Clifford 1997, Gupta and Ferguson 1997). However, today few young researchers are actually living in a place they would call 'home' (Manzi, Ojeda and Hawkins 2019: 358).

### *The making of 'home': repairing the fragmentation*

Transnational families often forcibly embody borders and fragmentation in daily and intimate life, while also investing energy in (re)making and (re)conceptualizing 'home'. For Amanda, home is not linked to a specific place, but rather resonates with a process of 'dwelling', as 'a way of being at home in the world' (Ingold 2005: 508). As she explains, 'I don't feel like having any [home] now because I am moving a lot. [...] The truth is that I never had this feeling of feeling at home in one [specific] place'.<sup>23</sup> To Amanda, 'home' means where her children are and wherever she could build her own space, with social ties to the people living there and benefitting from nearby cultural and financial opportunities. Becoming a mother has accentuated the need to satisfy the material aspects and to feel safe, to assure her children's health, material, emotional and mental well-being.

<sup>22</sup> Braukmann *et al.* (2020), Cassell (1987), Dannenberg (2019), Farrelly, Stewart-Withers and Dombroski (2014).

<sup>23</sup> Personal communication of Amanda to Claudia, July 2023.

Claudia's experience of 'home' is, for now, more related to specific places: southern Switzerland, where she currently lives, and Quibdó. As she writes in her diary, 'My home in Quibdó. It is still my home [but] I relive it in another place. Here [southern Switzerland] it is the same home. It transmutes, migrates with us'.<sup>24</sup> 'Home' could be everywhere, but Claudia needs familiarity and affective attachment to places and people to feel at home. As she remarks to Amanda, 'that is probably how we feel after longer fieldwork'.<sup>25</sup>

We (re)make 'home' through patchiness, fragmentation and mobility, and we describe both our families and our research activities as connections (bridges or tunnels) between the different locations we call 'home', but in which we also carry out research. Our families would connect places, but also establish other relations to the research context, sometimes opening and maintaining access to research. Claudia writes in her diary: 'I am not always connected to my research topics. I try to keep a thread, an open door, but there are days when the here and now demands so much that any bridge is in vain [between Switzerland and Colombia]. Then the only bridge is the family'.<sup>26</sup> In a similar way, Amanda writes in her notes: 'Our family is our tunnel between the seas. We bring a whole world with us, we bring what we live [...] we bring what we hope'.<sup>27</sup> She underlines the presence of the Atlantic as a unity that connects more than divides,<sup>28</sup> a unity of which her family is an example, but which is deeply embedded in colonial history.

Research, then, helped to repair the feeling of fragmentation between places, times and people. As Claudia writes:

Home. It felt very nice to be able to come and go. Very healing. Repairing. [...] Now I am in Switzerland, two worlds so different. Will they ever integrate for me? What do I need to do in order not to feel so fractured inside? Rupture. Schizophrenic. In both places I feel at home.<sup>29</sup>

PhD research mobility was also an experience of reconnection for Amanda and her family, providing emotional stability as well as professional fulfilment: 'Going to the field is then more than to be able to construct data and

<sup>24</sup> Claudia's diary, 3 March 2022.

<sup>25</sup> Personal communication of Claudia to Amanda, July 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Claudia's diary, 24 September 2021.

<sup>27</sup> Notes by Amanda, 17 November 2021.

<sup>28</sup> James Clifford, Paul Gilroy and several Black intellectuals thought of the Atlantic as a unity, for instance under the concept of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993).

<sup>29</sup> Claudia's diary, 24 August 2021.

go on with my thesis. It is about reconnecting to myself and to allow the members of my family to reconnect with each other'.<sup>30</sup>

The different borders we crossed while making 'home' and doing research reveal that our bodies and intimate relations are carried across national borders. The concept of *corps-frontière* (border-body) refers to the embodiment of the border that migrants carry along within their own bodies, the migrant becoming a living border (Guénif-Souilamas 2010). This resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa's (1991) self-positioning as a border-woman, always crossed by a border, neither-nor, always bridging differences. It is about transnationality as a conscious way of belonging, an interstitial state, a 'state of "in-betweenness"' (Basch, Glick Schiller and Szanton Blanc 2006: 8). Belonging to transnational families traversed by historically assigned differences of class and 'race', we experienced borders in our bodies and in our research: our family mobility was sometimes limited, we experienced precariousness, and we often felt simultaneously insiders *and* outsiders in the different places we transited and inhabited. Indeed, through our mobility and multiple attachments as part of transnational families, we constantly shifted between locations (cf. Gupta and Ferguson 1997) that the anthropological discipline would call 'home' and 'field', actually also carrying along with us and embodying the 'borders' between these categories. We inhabit the seams, as proposed by patchwork ethnography, between 'home' and 'field', 'here' and 'there' (Günel and Watanabe 2024: 131). To reproduce the dichotomization of these categories in our ethnographic texts would reinforce borders and tear apart the seams we made.

### *The 'field' and beyond: research experiences*

Patchwork ethnography acknowledges 'that many ethnographers have already been recombining "home" and "field" for a long time' (Günel and Watanabe 2024: 131). However, the rethinking of these categories has not been discussed in accompanied research. We question the concept of 'field' starting from our patchy experiences of 'home' as mothers and ethnographers embedded in transnational families.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Abstract written by Amanda for participation in the online workshop 'Emotions and responses in the field: lessons from feminist anthropology and psychology', organized by the Swiss Graduate Program in Gender Studies, 30 November 2020.

<sup>31</sup> We refer to 'field' when used as a phase of ethnographic research and as the context where research takes place ('terrain' in French). We do not criticize the notions of social, political or disciplinary fields ('champs' in French).

In Claudia's case, the 'field' became 'home', a place where she would continue to do research. Later, 'home' turned to be again the 'field' for her PhD project. As she wrote to Amanda, 'my "field" was changed through the purpose I had, it was not just "home"'.<sup>32</sup> Amanda's experience is marked by constant movement. 'Going to the field' was not associated with just one place, since she moved between different cities and rural places to conduct research in Peru and meet family needs in Switzerland.

Our patchy, ordinary and interstitial experiences between 'home' and 'field' are herstories of ethnographic research that challenge the concept of 'field'. We felt awkward with the word 'field', which was also central in the panel discussions on 'accompanied fieldwork'. In our view, 'field' puts people we love in a space of otherness, and reinforces the colonial division between Europe, where our 'home' university is based, and South America, our 'field', thereby reproducing colonial relations<sup>33</sup> and a male-oriented perspective on research. It echoes James Clifford (1997), who links the notion of 'field' to the colonial and gendered concept of 'travel', showing how its origins rely on Western male experiences and understandings of the world. The anthropological 'field' is not only related to colonial enterprises: it evokes a place of confrontation. The English term 'field' has been borrowed from natural sciences and allowed anthropology to turn into an empirical social science, underlining its scientific character through 'fieldwork', the 'field' being 'a kind of open-air laboratory' (Kohl 2016: 163). The term has also a military connotation, much more evident in the French 'terrain', designating the site of a battle (Pulman 1988). Moreover, 'fieldwork' establishes a division between ordinary life and research, between academia (supposed to be placed at 'home') and the rest of the world (the 'field'). Indeed, the term 'field' has a strong evocative power that works normatively inside the discipline:

the word 'field' itself conjures up mental images of cleared space, cultivation, work, ground. When one speaks of working *in* the field, or *going* into the field, one draws on mental images of a distinct place with an inside and outside, reached by practices of physical movement. These mental images focus and constrain definitions. For example, they make it strange to say that an anthro-

<sup>32</sup> Personal communication of Claudia to Amanda, July 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Chu May Paing (2020) felt similarly when conducting research in Burma, once her 'home': 'Burma, once my home, now feels somewhat foreign, when it's framed as a field site. It is as if the stories I tell of the people were not "lived" but only details to contemplate some intellectual theories upon'.

pologist in his or her office talking on the phone is doing fieldwork (Clifford 1997: 187; emphasis in the original).

The concept of ‘field’ has been subject to critics in the social sciences,<sup>34</sup> mainly racialized scholars calling for the decolonization of research (D’Amico-Samuels 1997). Many have tried to ‘purge the discipline’s exoticist travel legacy while sustaining its intensive and interactive styles of research’ (Clifford 1997: 216). Indeed, several anthropologists have been doing research ‘at home’,<sup>35</sup> or have proposed a reverse anthropology (Wagner 1981), ‘homework’ (Visweswaran 1994), or an anthropology of the West (Trouillot 2003).

Amidst the critics, thinking about the ‘field’ as a ‘purposive space’ has been useful and pragmatic (Farrelly, Stewart-Withers, and Dombroski 2014: 7). As such, the ethnographic ‘field’ is socially constructed by the research intention, rather than defined by a particular place and time. More than a specific place, ‘[w]hat makes a field experience distinct from a personal event is that it is recorded as scientific data-to-be’ (Lavanchy 2014: 9). This purposive space can be anywhere, anytime, and allows the categories of ‘home’ and ‘field’ to be thought of as contiguous and shifting.

The ethnographic ‘field’ thus refers to ‘a mode of study’ (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 37), an embodied practice based on interactive and intensive ‘embodied dispositions and practices’ (Clifford 1997: 199) and on a certain sensibility (Pandian 2019), or activation of the senses, that enables affective attunement (Willink and Shukri 2018). Anand Pandian (2019) suggests thinking of ethnography as a method of experience, embodied and relational, and as an attunement to the world. According to him, the ‘ways of being as much as ways of doing’ (Pandian 2019: 3) that are usually associated to ethnographic ‘fieldwork’ permeate all the activities that are inherent in the anthropological discipline. This ethnographic way of being and doing, which puts experience and sensibility at the centre, is the key contribution of anthropology to the contemporary world.

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<sup>34</sup> Similar critics exist in development practice. A recently published guideline on ethical vocabulary in international cooperation suggests avoiding the use of ‘[i]n the field, fieldwork, field visit, on the ground, on mission’ (Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule [ETH] NADEL 2023: 6). These terms are ‘[m]ilitary-style language’ and they ‘[m]ay be demeaning or imply danger or otherness’. The guideline points out that these terms are ‘[o]ften used to refer to trips to lower income countries, while work trip or business trip is used to refer to trips to higher income’ (ETH NADEL 2023: 6).

<sup>35</sup> See, among others, Hymes (1972), Jackson (1987), Messerschmidt (1981), Narayan (1993), Teaiwa (2015).

Despite these critical perspectives on the 'field' and the attempts to re-define it, which we do not want to dismiss, the term 'field' still has a disciplinary function and carries assumptions of difference and locality. It continues to evoke what 'real fieldwork' should be like (Clifford 1997: 192, 202), that is, experiences 'out there', separated from our affective and intimate contexts. Even when considered a purposive space, even when brought home, it lacks the ability to grasp the imbrication of intimate, family, research and professional spaces. As Jasmijn Rana points out, there is a continuous need 'to problematize the exoticizing and colonial tendencies of defining "the field" in anthropological research' (2018: 78), since decolonizing anthropology is a continuous process. In such critical approaches, the word 'field' often appears in quotation marks; these are used because the 'field' is being questioned, but also to signal discomfort with it.

We question why we still speak about the 'field' if many anthropological practices do not fit into the images this term evokes.<sup>36</sup> If the ethnographic 'field' mainly refers to two interrelated aspects of research – a specific phase in ethnographic research (data-collection) and a specific place or context where this phase takes place (Lavanchy 2014) – we could also name this phase and these contexts more specifically. We suggest going beyond the term 'field' and appeal for a new term to speak about the real and multiple embodied ethnographic practices and experiences; a term that would maintain the anthropological contributions to an immersive, interactive, intersubjective method based on experience. In our search for a new vocabulary in which we would feel our patchy experiences included, we follow Deborah D'Amico-Samuels (1997), who questions why we still differentiate so radically between 'fieldwork' and other research activities. We propose the use of 'research experiences', a fitting concept that englobes different academic activities that make up the often multi-situated, entangled and patchy work of anthropology.<sup>37</sup> This accounts for the diverse, multiple and often patchy ethnographic practices and entanglements, without constraining other possibilities. It allows us to repair the fragmentation and patchiness of our personal and academic life, building bridges and inhabiting the seams.

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<sup>36</sup> In their attempt to denaturalize 'field' practices, Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1997) show that heterodoxies, however marginal, have always existed.

<sup>37</sup> Remote ethnography (Postill 2017) raises similar tensions between intimacy, daily life, and research, also questioning the meaning of 'being there'.

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS

Through our experiences as mothers and ethnographers doing a PhD, embedded in transnational families, weaving intimate relationships with partners, families and contexts, we felt that our ethnographic research was a family enterprise as well as a transnational practice, echoing Sunder Rajan's idea of ethnography as a 'diasporic praxis' (2021). The challenges inherent in building 'home' and continually connecting family through mobility is at the core of our life experiences as parents. Our trajectories are marked by the entanglements of ethnographic practices and personal lives.

Our experiences are not merely part of a women's conversation or of a 'mommies' panel', but affect knowledge production at large. Starting from our interstitial positions, we broadened the reflections on our research experiences and questioned the hegemonic and dichotomic categories of 'home' and 'field', rethinking them through the concept of 'research experiences', which acknowledges the different immersive, interactive and intersubjective ethnographic practices that take place in anthropological work. 'Research experiences' acknowledge entanglements and allow us to repair the fragmentation and patchiness of our personal and academic lives, building bridges and inhabiting the seams. When we focus on the accompanied, affective, relational and embodied dimensions of research, when we recognize our herstories in ethnography, we contribute to the move towards 'a possible anthropology', despite its ambiguous colonial heritage, one that opens up a space for 'a humanity yet to come' and that traces 'the outlines of a possible world within the seams of this one' (Pandian 2019: 4).

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