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An Experimental Autoethnography of Mobile Freelancing

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Abstract

This piece discusses an experimental ongoing research that began with my experience as an academic freelancer. It focuses on my experience of moving frequently within and between cities under specific work/life conditions. An autoethnography provides insights not observable in quantitative research designs; and allows for access to embodied experience, along with reflections on emerging topics going beyond the purely personal, namely, mobility, advantage, and (work)place-making. This strategy allowed me to delineate the boundaries of the fieldsite across online and offline settings, including the digital technologies I share with other research participants. Personal maps of geolocalised trajectories overlapped with experiential accounts (photos, audio-notes, interviews, and hand-drawn maps) are included. An interpretational thickness emerges from this association of materials. The research process has inspired the development of a smartphone mobile application for documenting such experiences of mobile freelancing, yet to be created with developers, who are, in turn, participants in this research.

Introduction

At the end of my scholarship and university contract, I had to find a new space for continuing my work. At first, the flat I shared with my partner seemed suitable; it had "everything" I needed, and working there would keep my expenses low. My partner had a full-time contract in another university; I would have the required peace at home to develop my work. These conditions would channel all my time in my priority: finishing my thesis.

But I felt increasingly isolated and locked up at home while life continued outside. I began to move through the city everyday to get work done, including meeting with colleagues to learn about funding opportunities and new publications, or to help disentangle my mental processes. This experience made clear to me we are mistaken in believing that with the internet and digital tools, work can be done from anywhere and that reduced commuting times and increased comfort

in working from home automatically translated into an improvement in one's life conditions.

While I was on scholarship, I could take some days to work away from colleagues, if necessary (e. g., while doing fieldwork or meeting a writing deadline). However, as an academic freelancer, I had no such choice. As isolation became my default, I took any chance to meet with colleagues and supervisors, attend seminars, and visit my research institute. I composed a mental map of "good" public libraries, "good" cafés (i. e., those with vs. without Wi-Fi – the former being useful for obvious reasons, and the latter when I needed to work undistracted). In these places, I noticed I wasn't alone in this situation; many mobile workers seemed to stay at a café for some hours with their laptops and/or having work meetings. I saw this transpiring in Lisbon, Brussels, Madrid, Bogotá, or Aarhus.

While this semi-stationary approach to finding a workspace each day originally felt like a routine adapted to my circumstances, it felt like a burden after some weeks – even physically, as I had to carry all my work equipment along, packing and unpacking each time I settled in to work somewhere else.

In December 2015 I began documenting these movements, taking pictures of my semi-stationary workplaces.

I present a methodology based on an autoethnographical approach (Ellis/ Bochner 2000; Pensoneau-Conway/Toyosaki 2011) applied to the investigation of work/life conditions not bounded to a determined location and happening both online and offline. This approach includes personal circumstances not registered in macro-approaches to contemporary labour conditions. Acknowledging that the "fieldsite" is actively constructed and not just entered (Amit 2000; Burrell 2009), autobiography and embodied first-hand experience are the starting points to this delimitation.

I contextualise this research within social anthropology and mobile methods, I then provide a preliminary analysis of three emerging dimensions of this study: mobility, privilege, and (work)place-making. I finally present materials currently included in this project, with a summary of its potential future development.

1. Autoethnography and Mobile Methods

1.1 Constructing the Fieldsite through First-Hand Experience

The autoethnographic approach (Ellis/Bochner 2000) and, specifically, a reflexive and "complete-member ethnography" (Pensoneau-Conway/Toyosaki 2011: 388) includes self-narratives as a way of turning the analytic lens towards oneself, to connect the researcher's own experiences to wider sociological concerns.

This is the methodology that delimits the boundaries of this research. First, as a reflexive exercise, it foregrounds the material conditions of the researcher with

respect to financial and temporal constraints, personal circumstances and social conditionings that might impact her work and experience. Second, academic 'freelancing' has provided me with independence to think about the topics that interest me and apply an experimental methodology, as opposed to the topics and methodologies I would be required to choose within an institutional setting, with its hierarchies and particular cultures. Third, this work/lifestyle has also allowed me to experiment with the divisions between objectivity and subjectivity, and between researcher and participant, in a way not always possible within formal academic settings. Fourth, the fact that I have been self-funding this project also has an impact on its design (Pink, 2000): making my personal life the starting point for the fieldwork allows me to reduce research costs, which makes this project viable.

Detractors of autoethnogaphic methods claim, as Sara Delamont (2007), that autoethnography contradicts the basic principle of the social sciences, which is intended to give a voice to the powerless. However, I find this opportunity relevant for the social sciences. By bringing to light a situation that goes beyond personal circumstances and is, rather, connected to broader societal changes in the meaning and role of work, this project potentially locates a discussion of what 'power' and 'powerlessness' mean in the context of the current precariat (e.g. Standing 2011) – one in which the difference between manual and intellectual labour is not clear-cut.

1.2 A "Fieldsite" encompassing the Online and the Offline

Since the 1990s, discussions in social anthropology about the nature of the fieldsite have prompted going beyond the study of place-bounded cultural units (Gupta/ Ferguson 1992; Amit 2000). Empirical works are multi-sited (Marcus 1995; Coleman/von Hellermann 2001) and their boundaries drawn as they develop. Geographical boundaries need not be construed as the natural containers for a project. Place is still important in multi-sited fieldwork, albeit treated from a different perspective, as a product of people's constant movement and connections (Cresswell 2006).

Our lives are interconnected with internet-based digital technologies (IBDTs from now on), and this has pushed this discussion even further (Burrell 2009). In this project I can track not just my own physical mobility – e.g., when I move from workplace A to B – but also my digital mobility, as when I follow a conversation through different digital platforms or follow weblinks. All mobile freelancers in this study use smartphones and laptop computers in their daily life and work, which means my fieldwork must account for their own mobility, both online and offline.

Such digital practices are embedded in everyday work and life along a continuum and should be understood together with the offline (Hine 2009; Miller/Slater, 2000). The result is a "scattered and sporadically connected 'field'"

(Amit 2000: 14). Indeed, my field is multi-sited; I am contacting participants in as many sites as I can, across different cities and events. I am interested in the processes generating a common social condition, that of the "mobile freelancer" in creative/intellectual fields. While united by research interests, we are not a collectivity attached to a physical location.

1.3 Mobile lives and mobile methods

Mobility is at the heart of this project. Devoid of an intrinsic meaning, movement becomes an object of study when associated with the uncertainties of navigating a precarious professional reality. Geographical mobility has traditionally been approached from sociology within the field of migration studies (Sheller 2014). Transnational migration studies are circumscribed by methodological nationalism (Wimmer/Glick-Schiller 2002), in that they construe movement as something happening into or out of nations or as a physical displacement between locations, forgoing what occurs in the in-between (Cresswell 2006). Finally, the field has systematically framed out the researcher's own transnational movements, and their impact in their research (Knowles 2000).

Mobility studies, eminently, is a "transdisciplinary field", which "brings together [...] sociology (inequality, power, hierarchies) [...] geography (territory, borders, scale) and [...] anthropology and media studies (discourses, representations, schemas), while inflecting each with a relational ontology of the co-constitution of subjects, spaces and meanings." (Sheller 20014: 47). The study of movement has evolved, then, from studying simply the displacement from a location to another, to a hybrid approach attentive to the historical, ideological, social constructedness of mobility.

Tim Cresswell distinguishes mobility from movement to highlight the meanings, experiences and practices of and surrounding movement (2006). He mentions three dimensions of mobility: 1) movement, i.e., moving between locations; 2) the meaning and narratives of this movement; and 3) the embodied experience of movement – as a way of being in the world. Mobility is generally conceived as flow, but in highlighting "movement + meaning + power" (Cresswell 2014: 108), Cresswell takes into account the politics of mobility, including questions about choice, rhythm, the experience of mobility as a burden or as a privilege, and friction – what slows or stops flows, and the redirection of these flows as a consequence. Even though power relations are transversal to my object of study, I argue its analysis cannot be simplified with the assumption that one can have more or less "mobility capital" (Kaufmann *et al.* 2004) or "network capital" (Urry 2007: 197). This hides the increasing degree of life precariousness characterising certain professional fields in specific regions such as academic research in southern Europe.

My aim is to adapt the methodologies to the study of mobility (Büscher/Urry 2009; Büscher et al. 2011). Facilitated by the autoethnographic approach, the

researcher's mobility becomes a tool and a way of seeing (e. g. Knowles 2000; Pink 2000; Gómez-Cruz 2015). Annette Markham and Simon Lindgrem (2014) suggest to think creatively the adaption of the methods we apply to our current environment with IBDTs, allowing for constant connections, movement, and information generation. For instance, the photographs in Figure 1 were taken with my smartphone and laptop camera; meanwhile, maps showing trajectories are a feature built in by Google, which, though activated without my consent, I later started to use as well, to generate information for my research (see Map 1, 2, and 3).

2. Emerging questions

FRA-MAD. April 30, 2016.

This is at least the 6th plane I take in 4 months.

I have a horrible headache, and I know it is related to the pace of work this week: teaching a 5-hour class each day, and spending more hours after that preparing specifics for the next day. 4 hour-sleep nights, 2 coffees a day, fast meals. I had to do it, it is only a week, and it depends on my performance that I am called again next year to teach that same class. It does not only depend on that really. There is also the decreasing budgets for education in Denmark, even if these don't get close to the cuts made in Spain. But my performance is the only part I can control. I had to give it all and would do it again.

I'm heading to Madrid for a week to translate for this market research company. I don't like it, but I got some mental peace out of this job as my savings are over. I also have to write my article on young migrants. No idea how I will organise the week after, as my translation job will be finished, I am going to Lisbon Friday to Monday with my partner and I don't know what will the priority be between writing articles, preparing a seminar for my visit to Barcelona, crafting my postdoctoral project, or, if I decide to go to Colombia for a 6-month teaching gig, preparing the trip.

2.1 Mobility and immobility

Technologies relate movement and work. I focus here on semi-stationary work-places (Felstead et al. 2005) (working in places such as cafés or train stations). Though seemingly opposite, mobility and immobility unfold in my everyday life along a continuum.

Frictions, in my experience, slow down or momentarily stop my movement, such as when I must stay at home for several days in a row due to a computer breakdown or when my itinerant workplaces are not suited to the type of work I must do (e. g., a remote meetings while at a café with bad Wi-Fi).

IBDTs allow me to communicate with others, sometimes even in real time; however, the feeling of isolation persists. As noted in the introduction, I have expe-

rienced that the tension between isolation and interaction influences the motivations for moving as a freelancer. Also, mobility means instability, both locational and professional.

2.2 Privilege and disadvantage

Most of my family lives in Bogotá, and my partner's family in Brussels, so I make trips to be with them yearly. I enjoy travelling for leisure. Furthermore, the nature of my work as a researcher entails mobility, even for non-freelancing academics (e.g., attending conferences).

High mobility between cities is usually associated with white-collar professions and lifestyle choices, conceptualising such movement as 'privileged'; however, such a generalisation doesn't consider what physically moving implies. While my own frequent mobility is related to lifestyle and circumstances, it is also situated within a broader contemporary process of general precarisation of working conditions.

Even though it has been discussed that privileged workers don't know what real hardship means (Gregg, 2011), I cannot identify as privileged when encountering situations where my worth is not recognised and I experience un- or under-employment. My doctoral degree is not enough to secure a job in Spain. I currently have an income earned along my chosen professional trajectory, but that income is insufficient to cover basic expenses and cobbled together from various teaching gigs and translation jobs. My advantages fall very short of allowing me to reach my own expectations. The sociological question of downward mobility, understood as status loss (Sheller 2014), is a constant threat.

2.3 Workplace-making

Workplace-making encompasses seeking suitable places to work and creating a good environment on that site (in- or outside the home), including the transformation of those places we will occupy for just a few hours, to feel at ease and be productive.

Finding the right place to work – with conditions varying depending on the tasks to get done that day – constitutes part of my work routine, as imperative as any other activities of my job. The collage in Figure 1 illustrates that my frequent mobility is characterised by several semi-stationary workplaces. These photos show how the space is equipped with needed objects – laptop, mobile phone. The experience of constant workplace-making and changing routines implies the multiplication of variables to consider – Depending on the task at hand, where to go? What materials to take? –. My laptop and mobile phone are staple objects that provide me with an illusion of desired stability; meanwhile, the only other consistent feature in my workplace, besides these movable objects, is my own presence.

Figure 1: Mobile phone/laptop computer camera photos, in selected itinerant workplaces in Barcelona, Madrid, Aarhus and Bogotá. 2015–2017.

3. What's been done and future work

To date, the materials gathered include personal objectified geolocalised trajectories maps, overlapped with experiential accounts (e. g., interviews, audionotes and hand-drawn maps), all of which inform each other and the broader analysis. This approach will be applied to all research participants, including myself.

Geolocalised digital information, gathered through mobile devices, stimulates the process of meaning-making of mobility. Relying on this information has the advantage of collecting materials *while* being produced and then allowing for visualisations. Google's built-in tracker includes timestamps and visualisation tools at different scales (see Map 1, 2 and 3).
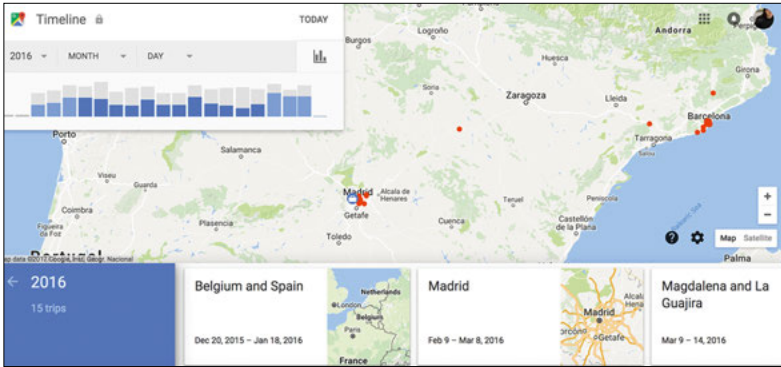
Map 1: Dots representing where I have been ("trips"), Spain. Hotspots: Barcelona – my former city of residence – and Madrid – my current one. 2016.
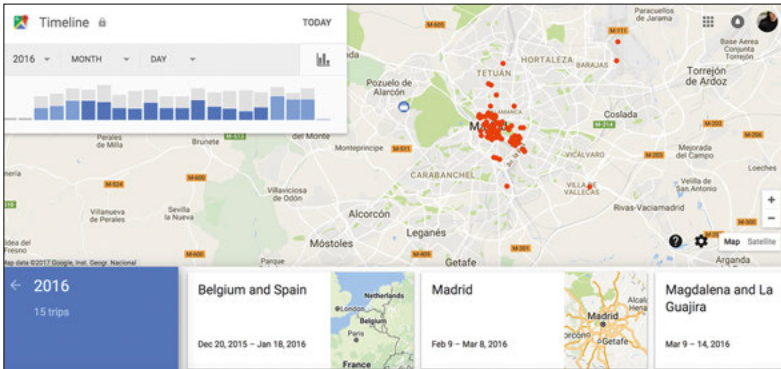
Map 2: Dots representing where I have been, Madrid. Working hotspots. 2017.
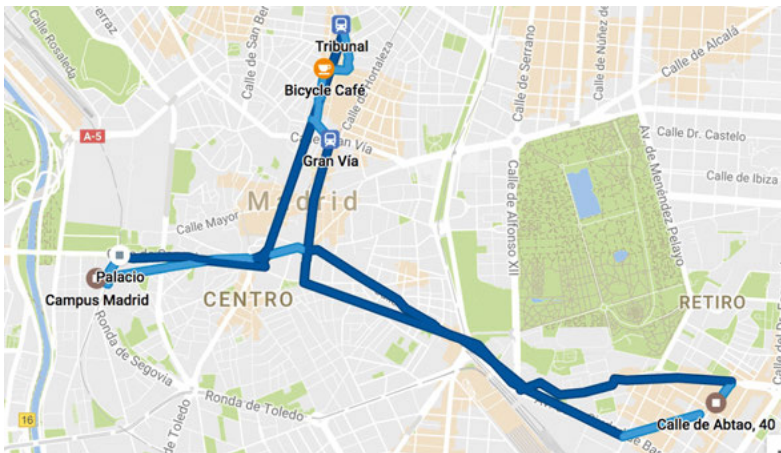
Map 3: Two-coloured line trajectory differentiating means of transport (bus/metro in a darker shade, walking in a lighter shade) linking the workplaces visited. February 20, 2017.

Such static information, however, as interesting as it is, provides no clue as to how to interpret the movement patterns (now) rendered visible, unless a contextual thickness is provided (Ferguson 2011). The same happens for other kinds of materials collected "on the move", such as photographs or audiovisual recordings.

In addition, we don't control the definitions of key concepts in the software gathering this geolocalised information. For instance, only long-distance movement, and not movement within a city, registers in GoogleMaps as "trips." in specific visualisations.

Besides, static information frames out aspects of intimate experience. As a first strategy to "contextually thicken" the subjective experience of my own mobility, I started collecting videos, photos, and texts while moving. It will be interesting to combine this multimedia content within scholarly-acceptable publication formats. For now, let me share 2 screenshots of a video of myself walking home from a public library (Figure 2). I explain that:
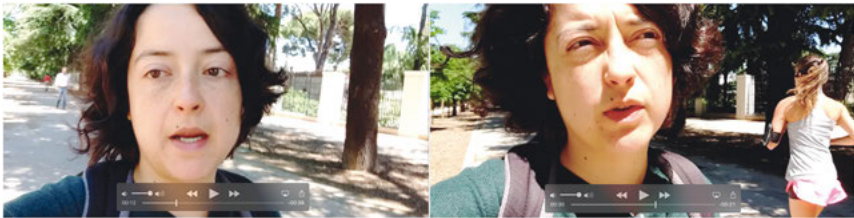

Figure 2: "I had to change work locations four times, but I am happy I left the apartment and got things done."

It is desirable to develop a technological application to collect geolocalised information for the participants, anchoring their photos, videos and audio notes on the map with tags produced while in movement. Interestingly, some of these participants are developers; mobile freelancing is common to them. They gave me ideas awaiting further funding for collaborative development. As it is materially impossible to follow the participants physically, I will instead intercept their flows (Burell 2009), wherever I am able, through this anchored information.

Conclusion

An object of study emerged from observing my situation and its similarities to that of many workers in the creative/intellectual fields. Suspecting my personal circumstances reflect a broader phenomenon, I chose to analyse them as part of a study on structural precariousness. Autoethnographic methods have proved powerful in drawing the boundaries of a study that cannot be delimited by geographical locations or place-bounded groups, but rather necessarily combine following connections with the interception of the experience of movement through anchoring personal accounts to geolocalised trajectories. I have suggested a coherent meth-

odology encompassing personal experience, conceptual frameworks and specific techniques. Adding layers for greater contextual thickness is a work in progress, open to creative methods.

This research offers for now more questions than answers, but hopefully productive ones. What is the relationship between mobility and immobility, and between these two, IBDTs and privilege? What are "privilege" and "disadvantage" in our current labour markets? What is the difference between being mobile forcingly vs. willingly? What role mobile workplace-making plays in the search of stability and connection in freelance work?

Acknowledgements

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