Chile, October and November 2019

'Feel' and field-work in times of crisis

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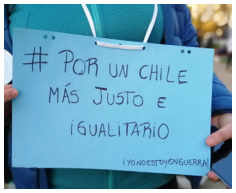

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Fig. 1. *'For a fairer and more equalitarian Chile. I am not at war', Cañete, October 2019.*

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1. An example of this is the image of a young student being crushed between two water tanks (https://www.adnradio.cl/nacional/2019/12/20/graban-momento-en-el-que-un-manifestante-es-atropellado-y-aplastado-por-dos-vehiculos-de-carabineros-3994090.html); Another example is the video showing people walking and being randomly harassed by the commando police (https://www.24horas.cl/regiones/valparaiso/video-muestra-fuerza-desmedida-por-parte-de-carabineros-3684675).
2. Marjorie and Manueli both gave us their consent to publish their words and names.
3. When popular demonstration against Pinochet's dictatorship rose.

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Vignette 1 – Aline

I was in Santiago de Chile when 'it' all started. It was business as usual on Friday 18.10, then, in the afternoon, the subway closed for some demonstrations. Most buses stopped going into the inner city. That night, a massive protest took over the city. I went out and the city centre was literally burning, as buses had been set on fire, as had barricades that had been erected on the streets. President Piñera declared a state of war, and imposed a curfew on many cities across the country. That weekend marked the beginning of the most numerous and creative mobilizations in decades, but also of the harshest repressions since the return of democracy in the early nineties. I remained locked up in my apartment for days, anxiously following events on Twitter and FB, hearing gunshots, fire engines and ambulances, and the sounds of demonstrations – *cacerolazos*, slogans, chants.

Popularly known as *la revuelta* – the revolt – the demonstrations, described above by one of us, went on for months. People were demanding radical changes. Many of them were driven to the streets by the scornful declarations of political elites, such as Minister Juan Andrés Fontaine, who stated that people could easily avoid the fare increase by getting up earlier. The impressive human tides during these protests were also a counterpoint to President Piñera's statement, issued the day before on 17 October, in which he declared that Chile would be 'an oasis of stability in Latin America'.

The *revuelta* affected the fieldwork that we, four female anthropologists, were conducting in Chile. It jeopardized our access to people and places, completely disrupted our scheduled meetings and redefined our priorities and interests. Once it was finally possible to leave the city, Aline joined Céline and Denisse, who were conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Cañete, a small town located about 640 km south of the capital. After a few days, Aline and Céline decided to leave Chile earlier than planned to join their supervisor, Anne, in Switzerland. Denisse remained in Chile to participate in marches, feminist performances, meetings and popular assemblies.

While disruption is part of the very nature of fieldwork, we argue that this unprecedented social and political 'crisis', stemming from the massive protests and repressive measures implemented at the time, provides insightful reflections on the role and meaning of emotions when taking part in the series of events from different locations. Our analysis of fieldwork as 'feel-work' draws on feminist epistemology. This means, first, recognizing knowledge production as a situated process related to one's positionality (Harding 1991).

In regard to this concept, we all have entangled personal and professional relationships with both Chile and Switzerland, which implies our respective family stories and mobility trajectories. None of us considers Chile as a mere remote fieldwork location; rather we each feel bonds of an emotional structure of meaning (Åhäll 2018). Secondly, drawing on feminist epistemology provides the framework for taking both affects and emotions seriously, not simply as objects of inquiry, but as a methodological tool that sparks curiosity and thus opens up space for renewed thinking, acting and knowing (Ahmed 2014).

Following these conceptualizations, we argue that taking (our) affective experiences into consideration not only documents the nature of 'the event' (Bensa & Fassin 2002; Cretton 2002), including its effects and the scope of structural violence in shaping people's experiences, but also helps us to understand fieldwork as embodied feel-work that might bridge the gap in situations of remoteness.

The *revuelta* as event

The level of social protest in October 2019 demonstrated the range of people's dissatisfaction with the neoliberal economic model implemented during General Pinochet's military dictatorship (1973-1990), and bolstered during the country's 'transition to democracy' that followed this. Protesters demanded in-depth reforms of the privatized health and education systems, and of pension programmes. They also demanded the writing of a new constitution – the current one dates back to 1980 – including a role for popular assemblies. The scale of social mobilization was unprecedented, and so was the deployment of police and military forces, which were the strongest use of state repression since the end of the dictatorship (Araujo 2019).

The situation altered the country and its inhabitants well beyond the protests by its profound impact on many aspects of everyday life (disrupting transportation and access to healthcare, causing job losses and food shortages, etc.). As one of the countries with the highest inequalities (World Bank 2017), Chile has been facing demands for social justice, in particular from indigenous people, students and teachers, since the end of the military dictatorship in 1990. Still, nothing suggested that in October 2019 these sectorial demonstrations would become a wide-reaching collective outcry, with a strong new participation by middle-class people demanding in-depth change, and the emergence of spontaneously organized popular assemblies.

Information, social networks and affects

How to refer to the 2019 social outburst is still an ongoing negotiation. President Piñera quickly started using the term 'war', a denomination refuted by the people demonstrating (see Fig. 1). Numerous other words were used in the media, by scholars, in political circles and on social networks, indicating one's political positioning and ideals (Butler et al. 2017). 'Revolution' (Rebolledo et al. 2019) depicted the hope or conviction that the urgent demands for in-depth structural reforms would lead to effective changes. 'Unrest' espoused the views of the political elite and upper-class sectors of society, anxious about seeing their privileges questioned, and their dominant positions challenged. 'Crisis' was related to the idea that Chile's neoliberal system was experiencing an unexpected and sudden collapse.

Following Bensa and Fassin (2002) and Hertz (2009), 'event' is a disruption with irruptive and processual features that rearticulates temporality and meaning. The event often becomes collectively perceived through discussions in the public sphere (Fassin 2002): mediatizing the event has the effect of interpreting it in a relational manner (Vautier 2018), thereby constructing it through competition to impose one meaning over the others.

Vignette 2 – Céline

On 22 October, I was in a small restaurant in Cañete that was broadcasting Mega, one of the main Chilean TV channels. They were playing a video loop about a young couple stealing a TV, subtitled 'Plunders in Santiago'. Earlier that same day, I participated in a protest and witnessed an impressive array of repressive measures – tanks, tear gas, numerous police officers in anti-riot gear charging at the protesters. From Santiago, Aline was describing similar scenes of repression. There was a gap between TV news and these direct and indirect experiences – hundreds of videos and testimonies of police violence were flooding our phones – and it was deeply disturbing.

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Like Mega, most TV channels were silencing the gigantic, overwhelmingly peaceful demonstrations and, above all, their demands. This raised dis/continuities, in which access to reliable and diversified information became crucial. The role of social networks became critical in spreading news about when and where to join demonstrations, documenting the demonstrations themselves and circulating shocking incidents of the actions of the police and armed forces, in particular the gratuitous violence.[1] 'Connected citizens' (Manrique 2011) – not only 'official militants' – were also generating alternative discourses. Social networks became a central tool for reporting human rights violations (INDH 2019). The dialectical relationship between official narratives and counter-discourses generated confusion and intense affects: joy and excitement at the prospect of ongoing social change got mixed up with feelings of fear, discomfort and concern about how the situation would evolve, and how our friends, colleagues and relatives would be affected.

When affects disrupt spatiality

This situation reconfigured the taken-for-granted frontiers between what it means to be in the field and to be at home.

Vignette 3 – Denisse

I felt I should be 'doing' something, instead of just writing about what was going on. Even when I wanted to write field-notes, it was impossible for me to focus because I felt so restless. Thus I decided to take pictures, to tweet information to my colleagues and friends both inside and outside Chile, and to record audio messages to describe my experience of the demonstrations. My active participation in marches, feminist performances, meetings and popular assemblies blurred the lines between what is personal and what is professional, which was exhausting and distressing.

Denisse's account made us realize that, independent of our respective physical location(s), the four of us all experienced anxiety, helplessness, joy, anger, guilt, sadness, hope, fear – most of the time all of these emotions mixed up in quickly shifting proportions. Following her colleagues' posts and reports from Switzerland, Anne felt involved in Chile, despite being located thousands of kilometres away. She experienced outbursts of anxiety, insomnia and difficulty in focusing, as did Aline and Céline once they returned to Switzerland. Friends, relatives and field partners' accounts on WhatsApp, as well as the flow of social media reports about people who were shot, wounded, murdered, tortured and/or missing, proved to be an experience that was sometimes more vivid than that of our immediate surroundings, leaving the one of us 'abroad' in an in-between space.

As embodied emotional experience of the event (Okely 2007), affects contribute to reframe understandings of fieldwork as a spatialized practice. Since Malinowski, participant observation, as 'being there with them', has been the hallmark of anthropology and of its authority (Clifford 1983). While anthropologists, especially when working on digital or medical issues, agree to understand anthropological inquiry as a process rather than a place (Besençon and Bozzini 2020), fieldwork tends to be presented as connected to a geographical site – even the buzz expression 'multi-sited ethnography' (Marcus 1995) puts the emphasis on sharing a common spatiality (Gupta 1997).

However, this fails to acknowledge 'the field' as reaching beyond geographical sites to constitute a relational process emotionally imagined and experienced (Spencer 2011). Fieldwork as embodied experience entails physical engagement, but such an engagement might happen even in remote locations. Our sensation of 'feeling out of place' – to paraphrase Hume and Mulcock (2004) – and of affective dissonance (Åhäll 2018) reflects an often illusory *grand partage* between insider and outsider, between being in the field versus being at home.

Feeling across distance …

Ahmed has shown that 'emotions create the very effect of the … boundaries that allow us to distinguish an inside and an outside in the first place' (2014: 10). She stresses that emotions shape – and take the shape of – contact with others, but do not themselves circulate: sharing feelings is not about the sharing of the same feelings, or feelings-in-common, but about how emotions can move through the movement of objects.

Amongst such objects are items – texts, images, songs, sound-bites, etc. – that circulate through social media and generate strong affects for a large number of people. In some way, we were undergoing an 'embodiment' of a collective (heterogenic) affective experience, circulating in the Chilean streets and on social networks, thus generating feelings of emotional proximity and a sense of common belonging (Luka & Millette 2018).

At the same time, the immediate and daily experience of Aline, Anne and Céline in Switzerland was fundamentally distinct from those experienced by Denisse and our friends and relatives in Chile. The political situation had a deep impact on people's lives in Chile. Soon after the uprising, most public transportation stopped working, as did cars, taxis and Ubers after curfew. From then until the break at the end of the year, commuting times for many people – who had no other choice but to go to work – increased dramatically. Schools and universities closed, as did most supermarkets. People started stockpiling in fear of shortages, actually emptying grocery stores and supermarkets, which led to price increases.

The strain generated by emotions and events took a toll on people's well-being in Chile, as illustrated by Aline's friend and poet Marjorie Huaiqui, who WhatsApped[2] her in mid-November:

> With such mental exhaustion, with such subjective violence, it is not possible to create, you can't do anything [referring to her writing practice]. Not to mention that my whole surroundings are destroyed! Everything, everything, everything, everything. Everything, like my everyday life, such as where to buy things, where to take the bus, everything is destroyed … Look, I had to start using … to regulate myself with some medication because I was so sensitive and unstable.

Concern for the safety and well-being of colleagues, family members and friends turned into a heavy mental burden. For her part, Anne worried especially about Manueli, a 24-year-old relative who took part in the daily marches with enthusiasm and determination until November. Manueli shared shocking WhatsApp pictures of rows of police officers in anti-riot gear, pointing arms at the crowd that she was part of (Fig. 2). After a few weeks, Manueli described how 'her body and mind' suddenly

MANUELI

Fig. 2. *Protestors facing the police in the streets of the city of Concepción. 'Go away from the streets, soldiers #Chilewokeup', October 2019.*

Fig. 3 (top right). *'Opening the wounds of dictatorship is another method of torture #Chilewokeup #ResignPiñera', Cañete, October 2019.*
Fig. 4 (below right). *'No again', Cañete, October 2019.*

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Fig. 5. *The 1988 rainbow logo symbolizes the plurality of views of the opposition the reestablishment of a democratic state and the hope for a better Chile.*
Fig. 6. *'Chile woke up, they lie to us, they steal from us, they kill us, together we win!', Santiago November 2019.*

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'collapsed'. The stressful situations she had been exposed to constantly caused an outbreak of severe eczema a strong and persistent cough, due to breathing in tear gas, as well as crippling flashes of retroactive anxiety.

… and time

While spectacular and abrupt, the event is also one of the possible logical sequences (Bensa & Fassin 2002; Vautier 2018) in a given time and space. *La revuelta* rearticulated temporal sequences by actualizing memories of past periods, in particular Allende's Frente Popular, abruptly stopped by Pinochet's coup in 1973. Many items circulating through social media, as well as at gatherings, contributed to the temporal resignifications: statements and the occupancy of the public space by representatives of governmental authority, which was aligned against the mobilizations, was also reminiscent of daily life during the military regime. This brought up personal and familiar memories of experiences under the dictatorship for the four of us, some of them painful and traumatic.

On the side of the mobilizations, a lot of the symbolism used took root in the national memory of political contestation (during the dictatorship and beyond). Numerous placards made direct reference to the dictatorship (Fig. 3). Others showed the same visual aesthetics as those used during the campaign against Pinochet's 1988 referendum on the question of whether or not he could hold power (Figs 4-5).

Slogans and songs also stemming directly from the history of social protests in Chile became widespread, complete with emblematic bands reuniting to give gigantic open-air concerts.

Vignette 4 – Anne

I needed to be included in Chilean networks, mainly the ones created by the dictatorship's political refugees. We circulated lyrics and videos, but also came together in Lausanne and Bern to express our support and concern. These gatherings culminated emotionally when we sang 'El pueblo unido' together – a popular and emblematic song of Allende's Frente Popular, which has been used in many contexts and occasions all around the world. At the same time, I didn't feel entitled to be affected by what happened 'there'. A close friend, a Chilean indigenous leader who was my houseguest for a few days in November, recognized these complex feelings as being in tune with his own experience of exile during the dictatorship: 'I know what you feel, because I was in Cuba in the eighties,[3] and it was like that.' Such validation was key to helping me feel like I had a right to be so profoundly affected.

This common repertoire creates and reinforces a sense of unity (Gongaware 2010) and affective belonging. Occupying the streets with hundreds of people, shouting and singing a shared repertoire together, knowing that many thousands of people were doing the same thing throughout the country, created feelings of joy, hope, exaltation and pride in being part of a historical event. References to the dictatorship asserted a newly formed continuity between past and present claims, as well as future projections, significantly disrupting the temporality of national narratives on 'transition' (Barton & Murray 2002) by questioning the reality of the 'post'-dictatorship period.

Conclusion: Doing community at a distance

As an embodied, emotional and physical experience of the event, affects contribute to reframe our understanding of fieldwork as a spatialized practice *in situ*. The idea of feelwork aims to capture the processual character of ethnographic experience. Beyond our respective geographical locations, the four of us experienced the Chilean social outburst on an emotional level through the circulation of information, images, videos, songs and sound-bites.

Analysing our emotions and how they created a sense of 'belonging' helped inform us about the event: the physical and emotional 'symptoms' we were experiencing were not merely an expression of individual affects, but collectively lived and intimately linked to the violence of neoliberal political structures and decision-making (Dorlin 2017). Our respective positioning in terms of national belonging and physical location created affective dissonance that raised uneasiness, while at the same time opening up a productive space to think about fieldwork as an experience of 'out-of-place' bodies and 'out-of-place' feelings.

Still, doing community from a distance and across time does not capture all the features of physical confrontation with such a prominent presence of armed, uniformed and authoritative forms – a corporal and mental experience that engenders feelings of powerlessness and fear. To that extent, being partially positioned in an 'out-of-place' location lets us stay with some trouble (Haraway 2016).

Beyond what appears to be 'crisis' momentum, the event does not erupt as an isolated and discontinuous phenomenon. It redefines the continuities between the past, the present and the future, and leads us to reconsider the opposition of being either in or outside the field. Affects also allow for a re-evaluation of the temporality of the 'crisis'. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, tthe plebiscite that President Piñera was forced to accept finally took place in October 2020. As a result, our reflections on the Chilean events and their broader significance have in turn been disrupted by the major uncertainties generated by the global pandemic. ●

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Fig. 7. *Santiago, October 2019.*

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