Phakathi Kwezindlela Zokubuka Nokuthula: The Paradox of the Anthropologist in the Field

Phakathi Kwezindlela Zokubuka Nokuthula: O Paradoxo do Antropólogo em Campo

Phakathi Kwezindlela Zokubuka Nokuthula: Ipharadoxi Yesazi se-Anthropoloji Ensimini

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Recebido em: 30 de abril de 2025
Aceito em: 08 de junho de 2025

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Abstract
In this article, I reflect on the inherent paradox of my practice as a field anthropologist, highlighting the tension between observing and participating, and between translating and distorting alterity. Drawing on my personal experiences in Brazil and South Africa, I demonstrate how my presence—with its unique sensory, emotional, and cultural dimensions—simultaneously transforms both the field and myself. By adopting a dialogical and immersive approach, I challenge the imposition of predefined theoretical categories in representing the "other," emphasizing that anthropological knowledge is, relational, hybrid, and incomplete. Thus, I invite the reader to rethink ethnographic methods and boundaries, acknowledging my unavoidable influence in the production of knowledge.

Keywords: Anthropological Field; Ethnography; Anthropological Flânerie; Field Reflections

Resumo
Neste artigo, eu proponho uma reflexão sobre o paradoxo inerente à minha prática como antropólogo em campo, evidenciando a tensão entre observar e participar, entre traduzir e distorcer a alteridade. Com base nas minhas experiências pessoais vividas no Brasil e na África do Sul, demonstro como a minha presença, marcada por particularidades sensoriais, emocionais e culturais, transforma, simultaneamente, o campo e a mim mesmo. Ao adotar uma abordagem dialógica e imersiva, problematizo a imposição de categorias teóricas pré-estabelecidas para representar o "outro", enfatizando que o conhecimento antropológico é, relacional, híbrido e incompleto. Assim, convido o leitor a repensar os métodos e os limites da etnografia, reconhecendo a minha influência inevitável na produção dos saberes.

Palavras-Chave: Campo Antropológico; Etnografia; Flanar Antropológico; Reflexões de Campo;

Isifinyezo
Kule ndatshana, ngicubungula iphharadoxi elingaphakathi emsebenzini wami njengomcwaningi wezamasiko ensimini, ngigqamisa ingxabano phakathi kokubuka nokubamba iqhaza, kanye phakathi kokuhumusha nokuphambuka kolunye uhlangothi. Ngokusekela ezifundweni zami zomuntu siqu ezithathwe eBrazil naseNingizimu Afrika, ngiveza ukuthi ubukhona bami—obuphawulekayo ngemizwa, ezinzwa nakwamasiko—bushintsha ngokufanayo isimo senhlangano kanye nami uqobo. Ngokusebenzisa indlela yokuxoxisana nokujoyina ngokujulile, ngiphikisa ukusethwa kwezigaba ezimiswe ngaphambilini ukuze ngimele "olunye uhlangothi," ngigcizelela ukuthi ulwazi lwe-anthropoloji ngemvelo luhlobene, luhlanganisiwe futhi aluphelele. Ngale ndlela, ngimema umfundi ukuba abheke kabusha izindlela nemingcele ye-ethnography, evuma umthelela wami ongagwemeki ekwakhiweni kolwazi.

Amagama aphambili: Insimu ye-Anthropology; Etnografi; Ukuhambahamba kwe-Anthropology; Imicabango yensimu

THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AND THE DRIFT OF THE FIELD

I have conceived this article in a different manner. I know that every article is a dialogue with the Other, but I wanted this to be, in fact, a dialogue. That is why I will not be overly constrained by formal structures and conventions, although I respect the ABNT standards and other academic requirements. However, I believe that a scientific article, especially in anthropology, should be an intimate conversation between the anthropologist and the reader—whether they belong to the field of anthropology, another area of knowledge, or no academic discipline at all. Of course, this is done with respect for ethics and scientific organization, as well as the processes through which science itself is constructed.

Yet science is neither given nor final; it is a constant and dynamic construct, as Chalmers (1997) wrote in *What Is This Thing Called Science?*. Therefore, to think of other possibilities for doing science, to forge a path, or to craft a scientific article is, in itself, an act of science. After all, to reflect is already a movement, and movement is essential if we are to discover other forms of knowledge.

In this article, my main aim is to present my own paradox as an anthropologist in the field—a paradox that emerges from my experiences both prior to (in Brazil) and during my research in South Africa. The encounter with the Other produced a collision between my culture, my gaze, and my perception of the world, set against the perceptions of the Other. This led me to recognize the complexity of these encounters, as being in the field within one's own territory is a different experience from being in the field within someone else's territory. I am referring here to linguistic and cultural differences, habits, and many other nuances that shape this experience.

Since my arrival in Africa, I have struggled to write about these experiences, and perhaps, even if I managed to do so, I would not do justice to the reality I am living. I have come to understand that my role is not to ensure that the reader fully comprehends what I have lived through, for comprehension is only possible through direct experience. Only I can grasp the totality of my experience within its own minute and minuscule framework, because it was I who lived it, who felt it. The anthropological field is precisely this: it consists of all that I am and all that I am not.

In the field, the food, the people, the smells, the geography, and the organization of time and space are different. And these elements constitute the field, as it is directly shaped by everything that is not me, whether that Other is a stranger or someone familiar. In any case, I am influenced by everything around me. This understanding became much clearer to me after my arrival here. Fieldwork is an immersive process, where everything is intertwined—what constitutes and constructs me, and everything that is not part of me.

My food selectivity as a 37-year-old autistic man, my struggles with sleep, and my challenges related to anxiety and depression are all elements that form part of this experience. My journey to South Africa and the communities I have visited—whether during the Ukutwasa ritual in the Zulu Village of Thafamisi in Ndewdew, located in eThekwini, or in the settlements of the townships—are fundamental aspects of this experience, as they directly influence how I perceive the field and how I relate to it.

I have not been conducting interviews; instead, I have been engaging in conversations. I believe that when conducting an interview, the interlocutor, often unconsciously, feels the need to offer answers that they consider correct or aligned with what they imagine I am looking for. This can lead to responses that, in some way, reinforce an expectation or, conversely, attempt to contradict it. This dynamic, in my view, impairs analysis because I end up interpreting not only the other's answer, but also how they chose to formulate it within that structured context.

That is why I have chosen to have conversations. During a conversation, issues arise spontaneously that would hardly be expressed in a formal interview. This format allows for a more natural flow of information and experiences. Furthermore, I believe that conversation breaks down the symbolic barrier between researcher and interlocutor. I do not sit down with a list of predefined questions to conduct what would be almost an "interrogation"; instead, I let the interaction develop organically.

This approach allows the Other to approach me without the pressure of having to provide direct or targeted answers. My goal is not to obtain precise responses, but to allow my interlocutors to speak freely about whatever they wish. In this way, I can capture elements that would not be revealed in a rigid interview structure. Only afterward do I make the necessary cuts within the analytical categories I already have,

or preferably, I create categories from these conversations themselves, respecting the dynamic nature of the field.

Here, I have learned that being in the field means both modifying and being modified by the field itself. There is a circular movement—almost a vortex of constant change. The anthropologist who enters a settlement, a community, or a ritual is not the same anthropologist who leaves. Likewise, these places are altered by my presence, for I am an outsider. In this sense, we can never fully comprehend everything that happens. Our understanding is always a construction, mediated by our own perceptions.

This impossibility of total apprehension leads me to reflect on the process of writing. My objective, in writing, is not to make you, the reader, fully understand what I have lived, because understanding is a personal and non-transferable experience. The most I can do is to offer elements so that you may construct your own interpretations.

This is how I have structured this work and how I have reflected on this paradox. It is not an entirely new idea—many have discussed these issues before, though perhaps not with the same entanglements—but for me, it emerges as something new and deeply compelling. I see this experience as intimate, unique, and it is this perspective that I wish to share.

I am not here to reinvent the wheel. My aim is that people might understand a little of what I have lived, and that my text might inspire other reflections, explore new perspectives, and raise new questions. I want this to be a dialogue between me and you, who are reading this now—between me and anyone who may read this text in the future.

Thus, this text is a grand dialogue with you. I hope it helps you reflect, even minimally—whether to contradict what I have written or to agree and say, “It makes sense.” I have spent a long time developing these ideas, but I do not mind if my perception is deconstructed in a matter of minutes. That is not a problem for me, because science is made this way: through dialogue, through revision, through constant learning.

Since arriving in South Africa, I have learned so much that it is difficult to separate it all. Everything seems connected somehow to spirituality, as if the very air carries this interconnectedness. It took me several months to begin shaping this paradox that accompanies me. These were months spent revisiting what I had read, revisiting what I thought I knew, and realizing that understanding something in theory is never the same as living it. This paradox arises from the unease that the field has brought me, from the things I could only learn by being here.

I think it was in the first week, November 2024, that this realization began to take shape. It was the first time I truly found myself immersed. Since then, I have been trying to understand: what does it mean to be an anthropologist in the field? And what does this say about who I am in this context?

The experience has been transformative, but it still eludes me. At times, it feels as though I am living something I cannot fully decipher. It is as if I am here, yet I do not completely understand what "here" means.

TO FLOAT, TO SINK, TO BE TRANSFORMED

The "Paradox of the Anthropologist in the Field"

> In order to understand the Other, I had to immerse myself in the field. When I became integrated into it, I realized that my very presence there somehow transformed the relationships within the field—and I recognized that I, too, began to be transformed by it. When I sat down to write an article, I drew on my own analytical categories, because I wanted to interpret my experiences through them. Yet it became clear, as I wrote, that I was, in some way, shaping the Otherness itself by "translating" it. Thus, everything I learned and understood is a kind of knowledge that is at once necessary and insufficient, relational and limited, immersive and partial. *(Excerpt from my field notebook, December 2024)*

Anthropological practice constantly confronts me with the inescapable tension between observing and participating, interpreting and transforming. Throughout my incursions into the field, I have become both a spectator of the phenomena I seek to understand and an inevitable agent of change, whose very presence alters the dynamics I initially set out to study. This immersion in the Other, often shaped by cultural and historical experiences so distinct from my own, compels me to question the boundaries between what is defined as researcher and what is identified as an implicated subject.

This journey has led me to recognize the complexity of translating the voices and practices of Others into my own conceptual and academic universe. No matter how faithfully I attempt to convey lived experiences, the mediation through my language and theoretical categories inevitably shapes these narratives, creating a hybrid space between the singularity of the "other" and my own attempt to represent it. In this interaction, the field, myself, and you—who receives these translations—are mutually transformed.

Reflecting on these challenges has led me to consider how my presence—the presence of the anthropologist in the field—not only influences but also renders impossible the attainment of a completely objective understanding. Our relationship with the field is always situated, relational, and incomplete, revealing both the limitations of anthropological knowledge and its intrinsically dialogical nature. This has a philosophical consequence: the attempt to capture alterity results in what I call a state of "being-becoming"—a knowledge in constant negotiation, as transformative as it is incomplete, reflecting the inevitable relationship between subject and object of inquiry.

It is at this point that I become lost, and begin to realize that my own understanding of the field has always been a paradox. When I recognized this, I saw that my attempts to comprehend the dynamics, behaviors, and culture here on the African continent did not align with the knowledge I previously held. However, this immersion has brought other questions with it. It became evident that there were aspects that were not spoken, silences that escaped direct observation.

Another factor is language. From the moment I arrived in South Africa, language was initially a significant challenge—until it ceased to be. Yet this overcoming of the linguistic barrier gave way to another unease: the notion of translation in anthropology. This idea troubles me, because I cannot accept the notion that anthropologists translate cultures, or that they possess the capacity to translate anything beyond what is already familiar.

This is not merely a personal discomfort; it is a logical perception that seems inescapable to me. Translation presupposes knowing, and it is only possible to know something by comprehending it; and to comprehend, it is necessary to live it. However, the anthropologist lives only a small fragment of the field, a limited slice of its

complexity. If, as I believe, my very presence in the field inevitably alters what I observe, then access to the nuances of anthropological experience—those that remain unsaid—becomes unattainable.

When I began to write, to narrate and reflect on what I had lived, I ended up using categories derived from my own cultural context. These categories, shaped by my interpretive frameworks, inevitably filter and transform the alterity I encounter, diluting its singularity. I do this because I need to validate my experiences within the academic sphere, but I do not agree with the process. This requirement—to fit alterity into universal or contextual standards—seems to me inadequate to describe the essence of what I experience in the field.

Nevertheless, I recognize the contradiction: my presence in the field is, at once, indispensable for relational knowledge and the very reason why neutrality and objective understanding are impossible. Every account I produce from my experiences is, by definition, hybrid and situated. It is co-authored by me, the anthropologist, and the field itself—which includes everything that I am not: the climate, the streets, the languages, the clothes, the shoes, the food, the music, the images, the knowledges, the spiritualities, and many other elements. In this way, what I construct is never purely "of the other" nor exclusively "mine," but rather emerges from and is perceived through the interactions between the two. This relational knowledge is at once limited and enriching, carrying the marks of encounter, exchange, and mutual transformation.

Thus, the Paradox of the Anthropologist in the Field consists of three interdependent propositions that generate a tension which, in my view, illuminates the intrinsic nature of anthropological knowledge. I refer to this as Immersion and Transformation, where, in order to understand a culture, the anthropologist must immerse themselves in the field and live it as an active participant. However, our immersion transforms both the field and ourselves, altering the original dynamics we seek or intuitively aim to observe.

The second proposition I call Translation and Distortion: it addresses the fact that, when communicating our encounters, we translate the experience of the "other" into categories that make sense to our audience. However, this act of "translation" shapes the alterity according to our own conceptual and cultural frameworks, diluting the singularity of the "other."

The third proposition is Simultaneity and Incompleteness: our presence in the field is simultaneously essential for the production of relational knowledge and the primary reason for the impossibility of achieving a fully objective or "neutral" understanding. The relationship between observer and observed creates a situated and hybrid knowledge that is never entirely "of the other" nor fully ours.

My Anthropological Gaze

Thinking anthropologically, this paradox is precisely that: a set of complex, dense tensions and difficult questions, but ones that reveal the very essence of what we do. To understand a culture, I must live it, immerse myself in it, allow it to pass through me. Yet it is precisely in this process that I become the "Other," and the field itself is transformed along with me. Being in the field means losing and remaking myself at the same time; it means being touched by alterity while simultaneously touching it back. There is no way to emerge unscathed.

Nyamnjoh (2006) speaks of processes of exclusion and inclusion through belonging, and I realize that my own anthropological practice is traversed by this same logic. The field receives me and transforms me, but I can never fully belong to it. And when I try to narrate what I have lived, I find myself caught in another dilemma: to translate without distorting, to tell without erasing. Writing about the Other will always be an act of power, an imperfect mediation between worlds that intersect but never fully merge.

Then comes the weight of simultaneity and incompleteness. The field exists only because I am there, and yet I can never capture it in its entirety. There is always something that eludes me, a detail that dissolves in the moment I try to capture it, whether in my notes, photographs, or memories. Behar (1997) speaks of anthropology

that divides our hearts, and perhaps that is precisely it: this science that compels us to feel, to be affected, to admit that neutrality is never possible.

Thus, anthropologically, I feel challenged to think through this structure of anthropological knowledge, for my presence is never neutral and my gaze is never free of context. Abu-Lughod (1991) argues that traditional ethnographic writing reinforces hierarchical dichotomies between the "Self" and the "Other," naturalizing distinctions that should be questioned. By entering the field, I actively participate in its transformation, making any pretense of absolute objectivity impossible. Likewise, when I write about these experiences, I employ categories that, even if unintentionally, frame alterity within paradigms that make sense to my own universe of reference, challenging the possibility of a faithful sharing of experience.

Favret-Saada (2012) highlights that the anthropologist cannot remain untouched, for they are inevitably affected by the field, becoming part of the very network of relations they investigate. This involvement, essential for the production of knowledge, precludes any pretense of neutrality. Yet this transformation does not occur only at the level of sensory experience—it also manifests in the way I write and communicate what I have lived. Peirano (2014) emphasizes that ethnography is not a rigid method, but a continuous process of estrangement and reconfiguration of the gaze, in which the translation of the Other is never free from distortions. In attempting to share the ethnographic experience through writing, it becomes clear that my narrative is a reflection of what I have observed, a construction that inevitably filters alterity through my own cultural and conceptual frameworks.

Moreover, this relationship between immersion and transformation is inseparable from simultaneity and incompleteness. Ethnography demands my active presence, my attentive listening, my furtive and in-between glances, and my affective engagement with those who share their stories with me. Yet the closer I come, the more I realize there are aspects that elude me, nuances that I cannot fully understand. This is one of the anxieties of anthropological writing: any attempt to write in a way that allows my peers and others to understand what I have experienced results in a narrative that is never entirely mine, nor entirely that of the Other.

The field is not a static space that I expect to unravel, but rather a set of relations in flux, where my presence produces effects I cannot anticipate. This movement of mutual affectation, as Favret-Saada (2012) argues, implies that being an anthropologist is also about being subject to transformation by the field itself. Recognizing this incompleteness does not invalidate anthropology; rather, it makes it more honest and ethical, for it reveals that the knowledge I produce is not a pure reflection of reality, but a space of negotiation between myself and those with whom I engage in dialogue.

In this way, we build a mutual interaction—myself as anthropologist and researcher, and my interlocutors. This relationship not only modifies my perception but also redefines the meanings we both attribute to the research and to our own practices. However, when I enter the field, I cease to be an external observer and become part of the web of relations I am studying. My gaze is not neutral, and my presence produces effects, even if unintentional. Favret-Saada (2012) argues that the ethnographer cannot remain at a distance; they are traversed by local affects and dynamics, becoming an agent within these relations, such that my experience in the field will never be a mere reflection of reality.

In trying to translate these experiences into writing, I realize that ethnography is not a fixed method, but a dynamic and subjective process. Ethnographic writing, therefore, carries the tension between making what was observed intelligible and avoiding the domestication of alterity. The challenge is to create a text that does not reduce experience to predetermined categories. Ntarangwi (2012) emphasizes that anthropological writing reflects not only field experiences but also the structures of power and the contexts in which the anthropologist is situated. Thus, this interplay of simultaneity and incompleteness means that my presence is both the starting point for knowledge and its main limitation. There is no moment in which I can claim to have fully understood the field; there is always something that slips away, that transforms, that reconfigures itself as my relationships deepen. This instability does not invalidate the knowledge produced, but rather makes it more honest and situated. As Peirano (2014) points out, ethnography is, above all, an exercise in estrangement, an attempt to see the world from multiple perspectives while simultaneously acknowledging the limits of such an endeavor. In the end, anthropology does not seek absolute truths but situated narratives, imbued with subjectivities, marked by relations of power, and by the

indelible traces of the encounter with the Other. It is in this tension—between what I can know and what will always escape me—that the beauty—and the challenge—of anthropological practice is sustained.

My Philosophical Gaze

My presence is not limited to a passive position of observation; it unfolds in layers of meaning. By engaging with the communities and environments I move through, I came to understand that I was in a constant state of Field, which I have called "being-becoming." Now, with my thoughts more organized, I see that this state of Field reveals the essence of anthropological practice, in which knowledge does not arise apart from the dialogical and reciprocal movement of mutual transformation.

In this way, "being-becoming" manifests as a fluid and dynamic state, where being and being-there intertwine inseparably. Just as Merleau-Ponty (2018) argues that the body is the privileged medium for experiencing the world, I have learned that my own corporeality—marked by my singularities, such as the nuances of my autistic condition and the emotional difficulties that accompany me—becomes an essential instrument in apprehending the field. My body is an active interlocutor, dialoguing with the smells, sounds, and textures of environments, configuring a knowledge that is both visceral and reflective.

This led me to realize that this state in the field implies a constant intersubjectivity, in which my presence transforms and is transformed by interactions with the Other. The attempt to translate and categorize this alterity—inevitably mediated by my conceptual frameworks—always results in a tension between what I wish to represent and what ultimately eludes me.

This understanding deepens when I consider the ethical and philosophical dimensions of the encounter. I have taken up this perspective as an invitation to ethical responsibility, calling us to rethink the limits of knowledge, to question neutrality, and to admit that all knowledge is, by its very nature, relational and situatedly mediated. It synthesizes the coexistence of being and being-there, of knowing and transforming. It invites me to abandon the illusion of final or absolute knowledge, recognizing that each encounter, each conversation, and each silence constitute fragments of an always

unfinished whole. By allowing myself to be touched and transformed in the process, I learn that knowledge is a living experience—a dance of meanings unfolding at the intersection between my singularity and the vastness of the Other.

This leads me to point out that the relationship between researcher and field, and their social, human, and non-human interactions in the process of knowledge, has been extensively debated by different philosophical currents. Here, I draw upon readings I once encountered and have since revisited, in an attempt to understand how alterity—the "Other"—challenges the boundaries of total apprehension and results in a knowledge that is, simultaneously, transformative and incomplete.

In the essay "Subject and Object," Adorno (1969) critiques the rigid separation between researcher and field, which he identifies as a feature of the idealist tradition. He argues that knowledge resides in a dialectical relationship, in which both mutually constitute each other, where the object is never fully captured by the subject—making knowledge something unfinished and always in motion. This dynamism prevents the "Other" from being fixed in a static concept, reflecting a process of continuous transformation. Kant (1781) reinforces this notion by asserting that we only know phenomena, for the "thing-in-itself" remains inaccessible, making knowledge always partial. Habermas (1981) expands on this by highlighting intersubjectivity, where knowledge emerges from communication between interlocutors. Thus, understanding the "Other" is a dynamic process, mediated by language, always unfinished and subject to revision.

In *Ideas to Postpone the End of the World*, Krenak (2019) adds another layer. He looks at the relationships between humans and nature, showing that knowledge is never isolated. It is relational, always in exchange, always in flux. How can we imagine knowing everything when the world is constantly changing around us? Thus, I understand that "being-becoming" is both an idea and a practice, a way of living in the world—much like Indigenous knowledges, which do not see the world as something to be dominated but as a partner in existence, manifesting in interdependence, with no hierarchy between the knower and the known.

Amerindian perspectivism, as Viveiros de Castro (2002) articulates, reinforces that knowledge is always perspectival, never universal, because every being—human or

non-human—carries a singular point of view. Deleuze and Guattari (1980), with their metaphor of the rhizome, dismantle the linearity of knowledge, highlighting fluid and multiple connections. Bhabha (1994) proposes the "third space" as a territory of hybridity, where meanings emerge in cultural negotiation. Ricoeur (1990) introduces narrative as a way of comprehending alterity, an always unfinished process. Thus, knowledge is an entanglement of perspectives, a story in constant rewriting.

Levinas (1961), in addressing alterity as an ethical event, proposes the encounter with the Other as a rupture that destabilizes our certainties, forcing us into a radical openness. Although they proceed from distinct premises, these authors converge on the impossibility of fully capturing the Other, for alterity always eludes definitive apprehension. It is precisely in this friction—between resistance and openness, between the impact of the colonizing gaze and the ethical demand to recognize the Other—that knowledge remakes itself, always unfinished, always displaced from any conceptual fixity.

Mudimbe (1988) highlights how Africa was historically constructed through an external gaze that distorted it, imposing meanings foreign to its own dynamic. He calls for an epistemology that allows Africa to define itself, recognizing its unfinished and constantly negotiated character. Hountondji (2008) reinforces this need by warning against the essentialization of Africanness, emphasizing that understanding the Other requires a critical and dynamic knowledge—one that is remade in movement, like a dance of meanings. Macamo (2002) deepens this critique by denouncing the dangers of applying Eurocentric epistemologies, which not only distort African societies but also reduce their alterity to caricature. In common, these authors challenge any claim to totalize knowledge about the Other, insisting that knowledge is constructed in the tension between perspectives, in a process that is always open and unfinished.

AMONG FRAGMENTS

Being in the field is an experience that escapes linearity. If there is one thing my time in South Africa has taught me, it is that the anthropologist's presence is always a fissure in the fabric of alterity. It is neither passive nor innocent. At the same time that I seek to understand the Other, my own presence transforms what I observe. After all, we

only know the field because we are there, but by being there, we are no longer the same—and neither is it what it was before our arrival.

The problem, then, is not merely methodological, but ontological. What does it mean to "know" the Other when the very idea of knowledge is a relationship of affectation? My "being-becoming" in the field is not a simple geographical displacement but an immersion that modifies me in ways I did not anticipate. Yet this crossing carries with it a dilemma: if knowledge is always situated and relational, can it be fixed? Moreover, can it be shared?

Anthropology, in some way, has always sought to erase the traces of its own materiality. The anthropologist presents themselves as an observer, a mediator between worlds, someone who records, "interprets," and reports. But being in the field requires more than simply seeing, hearing, and writing, it requires feeling. And this sensory and bodily dimension of anthropological experience is rarely thematized as legitimate knowledge.

In the field, my body is not neutral; it is affected by the climate, by the smells, by the texture of clothes, by the soundscape of languages I do not master. What does it mean to be present in a ritual when the smoke from burning herbs seeps into my clothes? What does it mean to walk through the streets of a settlement when my hesitant steps reveal my position as a foreigner?

In this way, I understand anthropological knowledge as not only intellectual but visceral. The idea that understanding the Other comes exclusively through discourse ignores the sensitive dimension of experience. There is something in the glances, the gestures, the silences that escapes words that inscribes itself in the body before it is translated into text. This realization leads me to an epistemological dilemma: if field experience is, above all, embodied, how can it be shared without reducing it to narrative?

Another aspect that traverses me in the field is the presence of silence. In anthropology, analysis has traditionally focused primarily on what is spoken, but this is changing. During this process of construction, the field has shown—and continues to show—that the essential does not lie in words, but in pauses, in interrupted gestures, in

averted gazes. Silence here is not an absence of communication, but a space of meaning that resists translation. When my interlocutors hesitate, look away, or abruptly end a conversation, what is being communicated?

The problem intensifies when I attempt to transpose this experience into writing. How to write silence? How to narrate what was not said but weighed on the encounter? Anthropology, in transforming lived experience into text, risks domesticating and superficializing alterity, fitting it into interpretative categories that make it more familiar than it really is.

If my field experience is necessarily relational, then my writing should be as well. However, academic structures place me in a dilemma: how to narrate an encounter without crystallizing it? How to prevent anthropological writing, in attempting to describe alterity, from freezing it into a fixed and definitive portrait? Perhaps with fragmented, inconclusive ethnographic writing that is open to contradiction—a reflection of the field itself, which never presents itself in a linear or orderly fashion.

But this leads me to another question: to what extent can writing truly convey the ethnographic experience? In trying to organize what was lived into a text, I am forced to make choices—what to include, what to exclude, what to emphasize. These choices are not neutral; they carry the marks of my own positionality, my theoretical references, my subjective preoccupations. Thus, anthropological writing is, above all, a field of negotiation, a space where the alterity of the Other and the subjectivity of the researcher meet and transform one another. The challenge is not merely to write about the Other, but to recognize that such writing will always be partial, situated, and incomplete. And perhaps this is the greatest lesson anthropology can offer: that to understand the Other is never an act of possession, but of openness. Knowledge does not lie in the fixity of answers but in the potency of what remains unsaid. In the silence that insists, in the body that feels, in the writing that fails—and precisely because it fails, keeps trying.

AMONG RUINS, STEPS, TRACES, AND PATHWAYS — *The Anthropological Flâneur*

I walk through the field as one who gropes at a foreign language, a language that unfolds in diffuse signs, scattered sounds, and interrupted gestures. The field is indifferent to my presence; yet, being there redraws the space, inscribing within it an ephemeral trace. There is no precise destination, only the flow, the detour, and the drift. Observation alone is not enough; one must attune to the rhythm of the field, to feel what escapes sight, what hides in time.

The experience of the Anthropological Field is made of layers, of overlapping stories that cross and fade, of narratives that never fully close, in the fragments of conversations captured by chance, in fleeting interactions, in unrepeatable encounters. I believe that to attempt to understand the field is to accept this oscillation, to allow oneself to get lost. Listening does not impose itself; it waits and follows the rhythm of the other. It is not about seeking answers, but about being willing to hesitate. If all knowledge is a displacement, I will never access the world without transforming it. It unfolds and withdraws, approaches and evades. The more I try to understand it, the more I perceive that there is always something that slips away, that hides in the corners like a silent shadow. Thus, I begin my journey without fully recognizing myself. In the city, in the streets, in the rituals, in the villages—everything that unfolds before me is the Field, replete with invisible inscriptions, traces of earlier footsteps and lives once played out there, but now concealed beneath the accelerated rhythms of the present. I walk aimlessly between spaces and times, between ruins and modernities, between words and silences. In this play of reflections, the Field returns to me a gaze that displaces and disorients me.

Walter Benjamin (1994) taught that the flâneur is one who reads the city as a text in motion, who finds in movement a method, and in drifting, a form of knowledge. And here I am, an anthropological flâneur, inscribing myself into the field as a tangle of signs and meanings that continually elude my comprehension. The anthropologist, like the flâneur, is never in a hurry. He lingers, not in search of a destination, but in acceptance of getting lost. In a world increasingly obsessed with speed and the production of useful knowledge, wandering without destination seems an anachronistic

gesture—a form of resistance against the immediacy that demands ready answers and rapid conclusions. Yet ethnography, if it is to be honest, can never be a definitive answer—it is, above all, a record of hesitations, ambiguities, and moments in suspension.

The field reveals itself as much through what is said as through what is silenced. There are stories told in markets, bars, crowded buses, kitchens, and circles of friends. But there are also stories that can only be read in the hesitant gesture of someone crossing an avenue with a lost gaze, in the way a group disperses at the sight of a police officer, in the way certain spaces are avoided after sunset, or in the conversations that fall silent as I approach.

I walk to know, but my own walking reaffirms that all knowledge is, in essence, a form of not-knowing. I have learned that ethnography is not a record of the real, but a continuous negotiation between gazes, memories, and noise. The flâneur, like the anthropologist, attempts to read between the lines of the world, to decipher the signs of modernity and its contradictions. Among glittering storefronts and shadowed corners, between imposing buildings and abandoned ruins, and in the forgotten alleyways filled with memories, I perceive that the field reinscribes itself in new layers of meaning, where the past never fully disappears.

And just as I continue with my anthropological flânerie—walking, conversing, laughing, and feeling the field—I transform my experience into a text to be read and reread, explored in its most subtle details. I do not limit myself to observing—I allow myself to be traversed, letting the Field inscribe itself within me as much as I inscribe myself within it. I insert myself into its flow without seeking a destination, embracing the accidental and allowing myself to get lost, for the Field is only truly lived when one renounces the illusion of control.

And this renunciation comes when we understand that the Anthropological Field does not reveal itself immediately. Its meanings do not arrange themselves in a linear fashion—they hide in the gaps, in the interstices, in the spaces between what is said and what remains silent. For the anthropologist, the field cannot be an object to be studied, but a voracious interlocutor, a territory to be traversed with sensitivity and attentive listening. It is a body that reacts, that modifies itself, and in doing so, also transforms

me. There is no script, only the willingness to meet, to be surprised, and to accept the frustration of not fully understanding—but to keep trying nonetheless.

The Anthropological "Being-Becoming"

The act of "being-becoming" transcends the boundaries imposed by geographical displacement and becomes an immersion that transforms both the environment and myself. After all, the anthropologist's presence is not a passive gesture; it inscribes itself as a fissure in the fabric of alterity, where each step and each silence become indelible marks of an unfinished encounter. Every Field re-educates me anthropologically to read it as a text in constant flux.

In this journey, the practice of "being-becoming" manifests in my willingness to drift—to walk without a predetermined destination, to engage with silences, and to allow the environment to transform me as I insert myself into its layers. By allowing myself to be touched by the smells, gestures, and pauses that escape the logic of formal discourses, I accept that the field does not yield itself entirely to the objectivity of the analytical gaze. This attitude of the anthropological flâneur, in which walking becomes a method to unravel the signs of the everyday, fosters a writing that opens itself to fragmentation and inconclusiveness, challenging the imposition of definitive narratives about alterity.

Thus, "being-becoming" entails recognizing the inevitability of my own transformation as an observer. My presence in the field generates a physicality that dialogues with the environment and its stories, allowing me to experience alterity in a way that is both direct and mediated by my own corporeality. This dialogical relationship underscores the impossibility of separating interlocutors from the field, demonstrating that the knowledge produced is inherently relational and marked by my condition as a flâneur—someone who, as Benjamin affirms, lingers in order to perceive the details and the underlying layers of apparent reality.

In this way, "being-becoming" is about sharing what has been lived without freezing the living dynamism of the field, in a narrative that seeks to register the ephemerality and constant transformation that characterize the field itself. It embraces hesitation and reinforces the idea that knowledge unfolds in a continuous dialogue

between myself, the environment, and the Other—a dance of meanings that never fully completes itself.

KNOWLEDGE IN SUSPENSION: AMONG STEPS, TRACES, AND RUINS — The Knowledge That Always Escapes

I do not see myself as someone whose intelligence manifests in the spontaneous creation of innovative and independent ideas, for I believe that nothing emerges from nothing. To me, the development of thought arises from a set of pre-existing conditions and interactions, and this idea does not exclude the possibility of natural, innate talents—though that is not my case. In this way, this text did not emerge in isolation from my mind as a stroke of genius; it was formed through the guidance, experiences, reflections, and anthropological fieldwork I have accumulated in Brazil and South Africa.

It is also constituted by the reflections and dialogues I have shared with my fellow Brazilian exchange students, partners on this journey of a sandwich doctorate funded by the Abdias do Nascimento project, under the coordination of the Brazilian Federal Agency for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education – CAPES, in partnership with the University of Johannesburg. Thus, this text is not an isolated product; it is a tapestry woven from experiences, learning, and interactions that have traversed me and inevitably transformed me.

I understand that mentioning names might seem overly personal, but I believe that giving voice and identity to those who contributed to the construction of this work is fundamental to acknowledging the richness of experiences and knowledges that ground it. In naming them, I do not only celebrate the importance of each contribution, but also invite the reader to recognize and value the web of relationships and dialogues that, in an intimate and transformative way, have shaped my academic and personal journey. It would, in fact, be a contradiction not to recognize, as an anthropologist, those who have contributed to my path—relationships and dialogues that form the foundation of anthropological knowledge.

But if there is one thing this path has taught me, it is that the anthropological field is not a space of total apprehension, but of continuous negotiation. The paradox of

the anthropologist in the field does not reside solely in the impossibility of fully translating the experience of the Other, but in the recognition that the knowledge produced is, by nature, relational, hybrid, and incomplete. My presence in the field not only transforms the dynamics I intend to observe but also alters myself as a knowing subject. Thus, alterity is not an object to be captured; it is an encounter, a space of friction, an intersection of experiences that challenge the boundaries between the "self" and the "other." My anthropological walking, then, is a continuous exercise in reconstructing not only knowledge, but also myself. By throwing myself into the field, I was transformed, and I transformed the environment around me in a process that is uninterrupted and inseparable from my being. This led me to question the epistemological foundations that, until then, had underpinned my way of understanding the Other and, consequently, myself.

This reciprocal exchange compels me to ask: How can I, as a researcher, construct a discourse that respects the integrity and complexity of the Other without succumbing to the temptation of reducing alterity to simplified and universal concepts? What methods should I adopt to capture the richness of silences, gestures, and meanings that manifest in non-verbal ways but that, for me, carry an immeasurable weight in the construction of knowledge? How to live and coexist with uncertainty, allowing transformation—both mine and that of the field—to be seen not as an obstacle, but as the very essence of a knowledge in constant evolution? How can I, as I allow myself to be transformed and, at the same time, transform the field, continue to build a knowledge that resists stasis and finality?

Anthropological immersion, far from being a transparent window onto the reality of the Other, is a construction permeated by tensions, by silences that refuse to be named, and by displacements that reconfigure both observer and observed, generating questions that help us to walk. If my writing bears the mark of these tensions, it is because the knowledge that emerges from it is not a point of arrival, but a movement. Subject and world are in perpetual entanglement, revealing that all knowledge bears the marks of its historicity. Thus, to understand is to engage in dialogue, where the relationship with alterity is also a struggle for recognition. Anthropology, therefore, cannot shy away from its own condition: a knowledge that is made in the "in-between," in the fold, in the interval—always fleeing from an impossible totality.

What does it mean, then, to be in the field? What does it mean to recount the lived experience? The very attempt to answer these questions reveals its own insufficiency, for every response is already situated, limited by my experience and my analytical categories. But perhaps the answer lies not in establishing a definitive method or in seeking absolute transparency between self and other, but in accepting that knowing is a process of constant decentering. If Deleuze and Guattari teach us that thought is rhizomatic, it is because the connections we make are never linear or definitive, but fragmented, multiple, and provisional.

This text does not seek to close an argument but to open pathways. My field experience in South Africa has taught me that knowledge does not arise solely from what is seen and written, but also from what escapes, from what refuses to be captured, from what resists translation. The anthropologist, after all, is a traveler who never reaches the destination, for the journey of knowledge does not end; it unfolds, remakes itself, is lost, and is rediscovered in new questions, new dialogues, new restlessness. And perhaps it is in this "being-becoming," in this unfinished movement, that the true power of anthropology resides.

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