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### Panel – Afterlife of anthropological fieldwork: nostalgia in crisis contexts

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Over the past decade, Saharo-Sahelian countries in West Africa have faced a rapidly deteriorating security situation accompanied by democratic backsliding and military take-overs in the wake of mounting jihadist and armed insurgencies, displacing more than 5 million people in the Sahel according to the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency<sup>1</sup>. International military interventions and multiple international peace enforcement operations have contributed to the militarization of the region and reinforced tensions between local actors. The retreat of the state from the areas controlled by armed groups has severely reduced access to education, health care and livelihood. As a result, the subregion's populations are facing overlapping crises. Images of danger are used by Western states and international organizations, with a helping hand of African States and organizations, to depict these countries, reshaping so this part of the world into zones of insecurity that produces a 'political geography of fear' and 'no go' areas for Westerners (Andersson 2022).

The region's escalating security crisis has impacted the possibility and the modalities of conducting anthropological research. Given the formal restrictions on research mobility imposed by Western research agencies and ministries, many non-national qualitative researchers have opted for safer countries and places, and/or have reoriented their fieldwork towards African diasporas or to archives studies, *de facto* becoming historians. Many of our colleagues are involved in commissioned consultancy work, which often goes to the detriment of in-depth qualitative and longitudinal work. Research agenda has evolved to focus more on security-related issues and has reinforced a masculinist bias in a male-dominated field of conducting anthropological research in potentially violent and remote contexts (Wibben 2016). Meanwhile, female researchers are expected to study sexual and gender violence, children, women, victims, and vulnerability in conflict-affected contexts, reinforcing an unspoken gendered division of research labor. In addition, national researchers are also put at risk in these contexts, challenging the international supply chain of research and the questionable outsourcing of data collection by 'local' researchers often presented as a 'solution' to compensate for inaccessible fieldwork from a Western centric perspective (Deridder, Ménard, Eyebiyi 2022; Marchais, Bazusi, Amani Lameke 2020). At the same time, we observe that nostalgia for earlier long-term in-depth fieldwork in these contexts is flourishing.

According to Angé and Berliner (2014), the complex fabric of nostalgia relies on affects, discourses and practices related to the longing for what is lacking in the present as a reaction against the irreversibility of a vanished past. Politically subversive, nostalgic tropes are anchored in present contexts and expectations and reflect more on contemporary sociopolitical configurations than about the past itself. The authors stress that, depending on the situatedness of the speaker, the nostalgic longings are multiple and engaged a variety of actors, interests, forces and locations.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/sahelcrisis> consulted on April 17, 2023.

Moreover, important for our thinking, these authors argue that nostalgia lies at the heart of the foundation of anthropology as an academic discipline that was originally framed by a moral opposition between tradition and modernity, as well as by diagnoses of loss (culture, identity, traditions, roots...), and disruptions causing the disappearance of Otherness. This nostalgia still impregnates the actual pattern of ethnographers' training and career-making. However, anthropology is also renowned for its critical reflexivity, always rethinking the methodological, ethical and epistemological challenges of ethnographic research, the meaning of fieldwork, and the role of ethnographers (Faubion & Marcus 2009; Vidal 2021).

In this panel, we invite contributions that explore nostalgia of ethnographers about no longer accessible fieldworks due to multiple crisis contexts, such as, for instance, in the Saharan and Sahelian region. As 'a negotiation between continuity and discontinuity', 'a bond between our present selves and a certain fragment of the past' (Atia & Davies 2010: 184), nostalgia invites us to reflect on our understanding of the experience of temporality in our anthropological practices and scientific career. We are looking for contributors with reflexive attitudes grounded in empirical experience who will engage with their own research processes, while also interrogating the assumptions and relations of power embedded in the politics of knowledge production. Here are some of the questions that could be addressed. How to engage with the interrelated dimensions of security, methodological, epistemological and ethical challenges of conducting research when 'crisis' become the 'new' normal on your field (Vigh 2008, 2011)? What impact does the inaccessibility of the field have on early- or mid-term career and/or in an intersectional perspective? What are the transformative and prefigurative aspects of nostalgia for the future of anthropology and social sciences in general?

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