Totem: The University of Western Ontario Journal of Anthropology

2014

"How Far Is It?" Of Geocaching and Emplacement in Athens, Greece

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Abstract

Geotechnologies are increasingly prominent, accessible, and interactive. Hand-held devices can localize one's current geographic position with an unsettling precision. With the emergence of such mapping apparatuses, GPS-informed practices have proliferated. They redefine our engagement with space/place in ways that anthropologists need to attend to. Geocaching, a popular activity happening across the world, provides an ethnographic example of interest whose resonance extends beyond its practice.

This paper focuses on the ways in which spaces have the potential to become meaningful in specific ways for those engaging in this practice. I adopt an autobiographical approach, which I carefully unpack, following my movement in the context of geocaching in Athens to gain an embodied understanding of the place-making possibilities afforded by the activity. It is argued that emplacement –that is, a situated body-mind-environment relationship– can result from a particular form of sensory and affective engagement with and negotiation of a device-environmental dialectic.

To this end, I sketch a critique of geographic apparatuses such as maps, coordinates, and GPS devices, informed by the ironic double-bind geocachers must navigate. While they require geotechnologies to situate the approximate location of a geocache, they also risk being deceived by incongruence between reductive and life-annihilating "map spatialities" and "the realities on the ground" (in all their sensuous and affective possibilities). My work also demonstrates, in part, that geographic apparatuses may be thought of as cultural technologies, as are the processes and practices by which we use, evaluate, and ultimately translate them. It is through this experience of movement and sensory negotiation between technology and environment, I contend, that places can meaningful for geocachers in new and specific ways.

"How far is it?"

Julien Cossette

860 m

On a warm afternoon of late June 2013, my friend Alexis and I were leaving a foreign embassy in Athens, Greece. My GPS device in hand, I was pondering the possibility of searching for a few geocaches before returning home. Alexis, in response to an invitation to join me in the activity, inquired about the distance separating us from my goal. As I determined the closest container to be Attiko Alsos 860 m "down the road," I naively reassured her that we could be there and back in no more than 10–15 minutes. Turning right on the street, however, we realized yet again the reality of the topography of Athens: far from being 860 m "down the road," the GPS compass was pointing instead towards the top of a steep hill. Proceeding in that direction, we slowly walked up the street, navigating with a necessary agility the narrow and ravaged sidewalks invaded by tree branches, scooters, and other obstacles, while simultaneously aiming for the route offering the most shade. At an intersection, as we were waiting for an opportunity to safely cross the road, we noticed a tall piece of art standing in the middle of a traffic circle, not far from us on our right. We were a little dispirited by how slow the distance separating us from the geocache seemed to decrease, however, so we ignored our curiosity and the desire to appreciate it more closely. The heat had made us sluggish, and we were self-conscious of each single movement of our bodies. So, instead, we braced ourselves for the last steep climb, which we assumed would be the last stretch of this physically challenging stroll.

65 m

At the top of the street, I took another look at my GPS device. There were only 65 m to the geocache, but unexpectedly, a major obstacle stood in our way. On the other side of the street, behind a fence and a large grey retention wall, a cliff unfolded before our eyes –a mixture of orangish rock formations, dry bushes, and heaps of olive trees. I was winded, and my back and forehead were drenched in sweat. I was hesitant to tell Alexis about the bad news. She had been oblivious of the GPS directions and therefore she was not aware of the remaining distance. We stopped in the shade of a wall to rest. It felt like my blood was boiling in my veins. In the unforgiving Athenian heat, any shelter from the sun, even if it was just as hot, was a relief. Thirsty, I drew a water bottle out of my bag, and offered some to Alexis, who was sitting on some steps in the shadow of a wall. I told her about my GPS-informed estimate of the geocache location, jokingly laughing at similar obstacles experienced on other occasions. Perhaps dramatizing this excursion, we shared our past hiking experiences around the world, as we were evaluating our options. Unwilling to walk further away from the subway station to find a way to the container, she offered to wait for me while I went for the geocache, but since I did not know how long it would take, we agreed to part ways. She went back towards the apartment, while I headed on my left towards yet another steep road that seemed to lead to the summit.

In the end, 860 m turned out to be no mere linear walk in the park. If I ultimately found the geocache on top of the hill about twenty minutes later, wisely camouflaged under a small rock, it had been at the expense of several water breaks, much walking on a number of paths, and precarious scrambling on uneven rock formations. In retrospect, this excursion cannot be epitomized by the finding of the geocache Attiko Alsos, which was instead only one element of the journey. In the

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process, I discovered multiple breath-taking views of the city and a beautiful park, and I had the opportunity to explore a new neighbourhood off the touristic beaten path. Joined by Alexis, affective and sensory memories were forged, both in ourselves and the spaces we moved through. We laughed and grumbled. We recalled past memories and learned more about each other. We were winded, thirsty, and warm. We enjoyed the cooling effect of shadows and water. We felt our calves and thighs tense as we hiked up the street. We negotiated our direct environment. We enjoyed the view, felt the pain of a wiping tree branch, smelled flowers, and heard the roaring sound of the few automobiles driving past us in that otherwise deserted mid-afternoon atmosphere.

Unacquainted territories became meaningful places.

N 45° 17.460 W 122° 24.800

On May 2, 2000, the US government abolished "selective availability," an intentional accuracy limitation applied to Global Positioning Systems (GPS), a decision that resulted in a dramatic instant improvement to the precision of this technology (Editors & Staff of Geocaching.com 2009:8–12).[1] As Internet forums populated by GPS aficionados celebrated the news, a certain Dave Ulmer posted online shortly after a brief description and the geographical coordinates N 45° 17.460 W 122° 24.800, challenging his peers to find a container he had hidden and to share their experiences. It became effectively the first official geocache ever. By making public the access to several satellites, the government had made precise geolocalization, and thus GPS-related

activities such as geocaching, possible. In the following months and years, geocaching developed into a highly popular world-wide community of participants engaging in this outdoor activity that significantly resembles treasure hunting. It consists of hiding and hunting for (usually small) containers, called "geocaches" or "caches," placed by other participants at specific geographic coordinates posted online. Upon finding a geocache, players are asked to authenticate their discovery by signing the logbook, and they may even exchange small artefacts if space is available. They are also encouraged to post a note on the website confirming their finding and, ideally, describing their adventures. Today, following the creation of a free personal geocaching account online, virtually anyone equipped with a GPS can hide or attempt to find a geocache.[2]

Geotechnologies are increasingly prominent and accessible. Hand-held devices, such as mobile phones, can track one's movement and locate one's geographic position with an unsettling precision. With the emergence of such mapping apparatuses, GPS-informed activities and practices have proliferated. Such technologies and their diverse applications redefine our engagement with space/place in new ways and present rich ethnographic contexts that anthropologists need to attend to. In this case, geocaching presents an example of interest. Undertheorized in the anthropological literature, the intricacies and possibilities afforded by the game and its practice offer researchers a plethora of topics to explore.

In this article, I will engage ethnographically with some of those possibilities, specifically in the context of

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[1] For more information on selective availability, see http://www.gps.gov/systems/gps/ modernization/sa/ (accessed April 26, 2014).

[2] In order to obtain the GPS coordinates of one geocache, a user is required to complete a free registration on the official geocaching website. See www.geocaching.com (accessed April 26, 2014).

my practice of geocaching in Athens, Greece. I will ask how specific places, previously unknown, become meaningful to geocachers through their activities in that community. As such, this essay will seek to answer Feld and Basso's (1996) call, in their edited volume *Senses of Place,* to "explore in close detail cultural processes and practices through which places are rendered meaningful – through which, one might say, places are actively sensed" (7). In particular, a special attention will be devoted to the re-embodiment of abstract two-dimensional maps and geographical coordinates, and its role in place-making. By following my own autobiographical journey through multiple sites –a methodology I will carefully unpack– I will explore how people's perceptions and experiences of a city as a place can be influenced by, and constructed through, the practices of geocaching and the sensations and affects they can derive from it. In this light, the form of sensory attunement necessary to wayfare across the sensuous materiality of particular sites and to find the geocaches will also be central to my examination. The paper will add, in part, to the argument that geographic apparatuses may be thought of as cultural technologies, as are the processes and practices by which we use, evaluate, and ultimately translate them.

Methodology

    I conducted fieldwork in Athens, Greece from June 4 to 25, 2013, as part of an assignment for a third-year undergraduate course abroad focusing on anthropological research methods. During that period, I searched for a total of 25 geocaches –19 of which I found– but I did not hide any myself, however.[3] In the context of a short-

term fieldwork with limited possibilities of movement outside the Greek capital, studying geocaching excursions with a particular interest in the body, movement, and the senses inevitably presented some constraints.

    For one thing, while conceiving my project, I realized that most interactions between geocachers happen online. Other asynchronous interactions are usually mediated through the medium of hidden containers –especially logs and objects left behind as traces of passage– but rare seems to be the encounters with unacquainted geocachers "on the ground." This is especially the case, perhaps, in places like Athens where the density of geocaches (and geocachers) appears lower, so that such an occurrence did not happen to me once during my research.[4] For a short-term research, I came to the conclusion that relying on the contingency of such unplanned meetings would have been risky. While community geocaching events are held daily throughout the world, none (that I

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[3] Out of the 19 geocaches, 17 were traditional caches (a physical container hidden at a particular location), one was a virtual cache (a geocache focusing on finding a location rather than a cache; it typically

involves taking a picture and/or answering relevant questions about a particular site), and one was a multi-cache (involving more than one location and/or container, which eventually lead to a final container which has the logbook).

As some colleagues suggested, by hiding a geocache I would have been a great opportunity to reciprocate to the "Athenian geocaching community." In the end, I decided to get accustomed to the game first, and eventually hide some geocaches myself in the future. As the game spans across borders, the chosen location(s) would not matter in this regard, as I feel that I am indebted to the whole world-wide community, rather than an "Athenian community" alone.

[4] I did meet once, however, street vendors that quickly identified me as a geocacher after witnessing my irregular movements near thick bushes and a fence. After purchasing caramelized nuts from them, they explained to me that one man had taken the container away a few weeks earlier. Geocachers, as it seems, were a common presence in their everyday lives.

was aware of) happened in Athens during my stay.[5] In this regard, since the possibilities for participant observation and interviews with consultants were (likely to be) limited, I decided to commit to an experimental autobiographical approach, multisited and ethnographically-informed by a derivation of participation observation that anthropologist Elizabeth Hsu (1999) named "participant experience" (15–17). In what follows, I explain and discuss further this methodological choice.[6]

Autobiographical, my research is a reflection of my own, usually solitary, engagement with the practice of geocaching, and more particularly with the attempts to find hidden containers.[7] A typical excursion would start with an online survey of the geocaches listed on the official website of the game, based on certain criteria like status (e.g.: "active," "archived," "needs maintenance," etc.), geographical location, difficulty level, accessibility, and recent log entries (e.g.: When was it last found? Have previous users reported it as presumably missing?). Each geocache has a dedicated webpage on which participants can find its GPS coordinates, a description, potential additional hints and pictures, and a logbook containing the previous finders' entries,

among other things. Selecting from one to multiple geocaches at once, I would then upload the coordinates on my GPS device and sometimes locate the area on a map. Since I did not have access to the benefits of a premium membership, I would also write down relevant information about each geocache, like important details from the description and additional hints.[8] Once all of this material was at hand, I would undertake to find the hidden containers, either voluntarily by leaving for an excursion or opportunistically on my way to other activities. Once a container was found, I would sign the paper logbook authenticating my finding, occasionally trade an item (e.g.: a Canadian dollar for a Portuguese piece of one euro), and then hide the geocache back at the same location.[9] Later, at my apartment, I would write an online log entry to make my finding official, share my experience, and thank the owner. In the case of unfound geocaches, the process would be slightly more complex, however. At times, I returned to the location once or even twice to finally find the container. On other occasions, I simply abandoned the hunt. While there is an option to log an unsuccessful attempt online, I shied away from such proceedings a few times, uncomfortable with the thought of confessing my failure.[10] Sometimes,

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[5] Such planned gathering are most often organized by local geocachers or associations to meet and discuss about the game, and sometimes hunting caches as a group, among other things.

[6] Online interactions are undoubtedly an important aspect of the practice of geocaching, and call for anthropological attention. Such an analysis falls outside the scope of this research, however.

[7] Far from being an idiosyncratic approach to the game, it is worthy to note that there was no restriction on the number of people engaging in the action of seeking the geocaches I selected. At times, I have been joined by a friend. My decision not to interview her was partially motivated by my commitment to my methodological choices, but also by the low number of times it occurred, and the varying degree of (dis)engagement with the game she demonstrated.

[8] For a semestrial or annual fee, a basic member can upgrade to a premium membership and obtain a series of benefits, such as exclusive geocaches, trip planners, statistics, custom searches, advanced maps, and detailed information about geocaches directly uploadable on one's GPS device.

[9] Some informal rules govern the asynchronous trade of objects. The most important is probably the request for exchanged items to be of equal value. If the Portuguese euro was worth more than my Canadian dollar at the time, I thought the exchange of currency of similar value was an interesting way to track movement of geocachers and things.

[10] Since silence is a puzzling form (or lack) of expression hardly accessible to ethnographers, it is

however, I joined wholeheartedly the voices of other users who reported their lack of success in searching for a geocache, thus contributing to the user-generated nature of the game.[11]

With more than two million active hidden containers worldwide (Geocaching 2014), geocaching is a transnational activity that unfolds across time and space, and in both virtual and embodied settings.[12] Exploring movement and journeys in relation to the game, my ethnographic research, though grounded in Athens, has been mobile and multi-sited. Multi-sited ethnographies, according to Marcus (1995), derogate from conventional ethnographic methodologies by withdrawing from single sites "to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space" (96). This movement of people, things, or ideas is at the basis of multi-sited ethnographies. It is tracked "around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations" (105) in an effort to focus specifically on the "posited logic of association or connection about sites" (105). Following rhizomatic journey paths negotiating an assemblage of geocache locations, my aim has been to track peoples (myself, in this case) and their practice of geocaching as it is manifested in and through hidden containers all around the world.[13] I wanted to explore how such

movement could have an effect on its practitioners' sense of place. In the spirit of the game, I consistently sought new paths and sites, instead of returning to the same places over and over again.

Throughout my fieldwork, a strong commitment to an anthropological study of sense and sensation has underpinned my methodology. In the mid-eighties, Howes (2005) argues, the discipline of anthropology has been the theatre of an emergent sensory revolution. Unhappy with a linguistic approach to the world as a text, anthropologists have answered a call for analyses of sensory ways of knowing with a gradual proliferation of ethnographies focusing on the body and the senses. This attention has not been limited to detailed descriptions of embodied lives, however. Analyses have also focused, and perhaps more importantly, "on the social ideologies conveyed through sensory values and practices." (Howes 2005:4) Important ethnographic research presenting historical and cultural studies of a myriad of diverse sensory models –the particular configuration of the senses in a cultural context, including varying quantity, quality, and hierarchical ordering– has challenged the putative universality of a Western ocularcentric five-sense model.[14] Some anthropologists were indeed prompt to question their

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difficult to know to which extent my behaviour was idiosyncratic (see Hine 2000:25 on lurkers).

[11] The unsuccessful attempt entries ("Did not find") can be particularly instructive in regards to the status of a geocache. During my fieldwork, two geocaches I could not find were later declared missing, thanks to users' reports.

[12] In fact, that number also includes virtual and earth geocaches that do not present a physical container per se, but does not record the preliminary containers leading to the final cache of a multi-cache, which usually holds the logbook.

[13] For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), the methodical demarcation of trips as ways of travelling from point

A (beginning) to point B (end) reflects "a false concept of voyage and movement" (25). Thinking about the rhizome, they write of ways of moving that "[proceed] from the middle, through the middle, coming and going rather than starting and finishing" (25). The rhizome is an interesting figure to think about movement in the context of the practice of geocaching. Constantly in motion and becoming, the geocacher's experience of space is far from being linear, predictable, or easily trackable from an origin point.

[14] See Howes 2005 (and the whole Sensory Formations Series published by Berg) for an edited volume covering a broad range of sensory ethnographies and theoretical work on the senses.

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universalistic assumptions. They began to realize how such a model, which had informed their thoughts, approaches, and theories for the longest time, did not always allow to comprehend or to adequately represent the reality of people's experiences of the world in various contexts and situations, both within and across cultures (Potter 2008:445). Consequently, they demonstrated the sociocultural construction of sensory models. Long considered as mere biological organs, the senses are now conceptualized less as separate entities than as a complex synesthetic assemblage that affects bodily perception and is culturally-influenced (Howes 1991:17; Potter 2008:444). In this, Howes (2005) reads a reciprocal dialogic relationship. He suggests that as "culture mediates sensation, sensation mediates culture" (ix). Such modelling of the senses in historically- and culturally-specific ways shapes sensory experience and the meanings attached to them. As such, "learning a perceptual practice," for Downey (2007), "means living, perceiving and coming to know *through* it" (228, original emphasis), so that people's experiences of their environment is contingent upon their own sensory model. As Howes (2005) writes, indeed, sensory models are not just textbook material, but rather "something one lives" (3).

Research methods were at the forefront of this sensory revolution and its somewhat innovative ethnographic approaches. Hallmark of the discipline of anthropology and token of fieldwork since the pioneering work of Bronislaw Malinowski, participant observation has recently come under fire (Howes 2009:31).[15] In the attempts to understand various people's ways of knowing and sensory

engagements with the world, many have argued that the inherent ocularcentrism of this research method can suffer from perceptual limitations.[16] This point also extends to methodological underpinnings as Feld (2005:182), for example, asserts that the ocularcentric Western concept of landscape has dictated, despite the undeniable multisensory quality of our lives, ethnographic research on senses of place. Since the mid-1980s, however, some researchers have contributed to the diversification of anthropological fieldwork by pushing the limits of participation and setting beyond its traditional venues, matters of interest, and methodological and theoretical approaches (Murchison 2010:8–14).[17] Caroline Potter (2008), for example, registered in a professional dance training program in London, UK, for her ethnographic fieldwork on "the process of becoming a dancer" (445). Her positionality allowed her to gain access to her consultants as "somewhat of an insider" (446) entirely sharing the physical (sensory),

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[15] This critique of participant observation is not meant to delegitimize such a method, but rather to contextualize the data it produces in particular ways.

[16] While Murchison argues, for example, that observation should not be limited to vision and instead rely on "all five senses" (2010:88), he refers elsewhere to observation as "in the background" (2010:87), which pose limitations for the perception and comprehension of different sensory experiences. For Clifford (1986:11), participant observation implies a removed standpoint from where objectification is possible. Some critiques of anthropology, he explains, have rejected the form of "visualism" –a cultural emphasis on vision as the highest sense in a hierarchy of perception– reflected in some assumptions inherent to participant observation. In this light, Murchison's reference to the "five senses" is problematically ethnocentric, for this sensory model does not make "sense" in all cultural contexts (for a discussion of this realization, see, for example, Clifford 1986:11; Geurts 2002).

[17] In terms of research on specialized knowledge, for example, Murchison (2010:42) refers to apprenticeship as a productive method for learning more about particular skills and processes of enskillment through the ethnographer's own experiential embodied learning and involvement in the practice.

psychological, and emotional experience of dance training, for although she was conducting research, her participation in the competitive program still had to be earned through the official audition process. In short, during her fieldwork, she simultaneously embodied the identities of an anthropologist and a soon-to-become professional dancer. While another researcher could have explored the same topic through a more traditional form of participant observation, spending time with the dancers and observing their classes, Potter argues that Hsu's (1999) "participant experience" (15–17) better accounts for her own "highly participatory methodology" (Potter 2008:446).

If such approaches emphasizing participation have also received, for example, the names of "'radical participation' or 'participant sensation'" (Howes 2009:31) elsewhere in the literature, they nevertheless demonstrate the same, or at least similar, similar methodological commitment. Despite the nomenclatorial discordance, indeed, they all seek to emphasize an undisputable and vicarious form of participation through which anthropologists have the potential to access "non-verbal meanings" (Howes 2005:4), affects and sensations that are not perceptible through observation or easily communicated by consultants during interviews. Such methodologies highlight the fact that, in order to relate to the sensory (and affective) experiences of consultants, anthropologists must be "attending to and with [the] body," as Csordas argues (1993:138). Moving away from the status of mere observer to "becom[e] a sensor" (Howes 2009:31), they must consequently learn a new sensorium, that is, they must learn to sense and feel in new ways, which potentially means refining or developing

new perceptory skills.[18] In the process, researchers can develop an aptitude for feeling contrasts between ways of sensing. Consistently, these methodologies share common theoretical beliefs in the inclusion of the researcher's body in the ethnographic text (see Sklar 2000:71).

In the seminal volume *Writing Culture*, the invisibility of anthropologists in ethnographies is a preponderant critique (Clifford and Marcus 1986, see also Anderson 2006:383). A testament to the inclusion of the researcher's body in texts, participant experience responds to this criticism with a high degree of auto-ethnographical self-reflexivity. Autoethnography is a recent direction in anthropology. It acknowledges, at the very least, the inevitable mutually-transformative relationship that links researchers with their consultants, and its effects upon the data collected (Anderson 2006:382; Davies 2002). As such, it recognizes the impossibility of "a truly uncontaminated point of view" (Young and Meneley 2005:3) and rejects positivist claims of pure objectivity (Anderson 2006; Davies 2002). Since knowledge is always situated (Anderson 2006:382-383; Davies 2002; Haraway 1988:583), anthropologists must necessarily locate the parameters of their research –that is, the conditions in which the knowledge was produced, which includes their own personal background and

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[18] This notion stems from the argument that the senses can be trained and that sensory models are not all learned from birth. Dancers, for example, are likely to develop some of their specific sensory skills later in life through training. See also Downey 2007, and Latour 2004 on becoming a "nose" –a perfumer with an acute sense of smell. Undoubtedly, such a process takes practice and time, which is not always available to anthropologists. Yet, it would also be a mistake to think that sensory perception is homogenous within a society. An enhanced appreciation of another sensory model, I would argue, even if basic, can be radically insightful.

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identities– for all accounts are "inherently partial –committed and incomplete" (Clifford 1986:7) and must be conceptualized as such. From a simple recognition of one's positionality to a thoughtful evaluation of one's own experiences in the field in dialogue with consultants, auto-ethnography encompasses a variety of reflexive possibilities (Davies 2002). While participant experience does not have to be reflexive to the extent that I envisioned it, I have adopted an autobiographical approach for this research, possibly the highest form of auto-ethnographical self-reflexivity and involvement in anthropological writing.

Ethnographic fieldwork does not entail anymore an exile to some "exotic" or "bounded" locations. As research closer to home grew in significance, however, the possibilities of a deep familiarity with the cultural processes at hand became inevitable. The accessibility of geocaching – that is, it's apparent openness to any new registered member– has allowed me to claim a status of "somewhat of an insider" (Potter 2008: 446), even as a beginner with little (practical) knowledge or experience of the activity. But, unquestionably, my insider's knowledge, and consequently this ethnographic article, was limited to my particular perspective of a beginner geocacher.[19] Communities are rarely, if ever, homogenous, and geocaching is no exception. Despite some assumed shared commonalities, "group members seldom exhibit a uniform set of beliefs, values, and levels of commitment... [, and] significant variation may [indeed] exist even among members in similar position" (2006:381), writes Anderson. In other words, one event can be interpreted in varying, or even contradictory, ways by different individuals within the same group. In this regard, as Panourgia (1995) reminds us, being an insider does "not automatically guarantee infinite and interminable self-knowledge" (11), as one's positionality is always a "partial vantage point" (Anderson 2006:381), a figure of the researcher's background, identities, experiences, actions, encounters, consultants met, and more.

By being my own key consultant, both researcher and researched, my aim has not been to seek the 'truth' or enter a quest for the grail of all knowledge. Instead, this essay seeks to explore possibilities. It reflects my own experience of geocaching. While it focuses on my perspective, however, it still tries to unearth certain commonalities and patterns that may be shared by others. Undoubtedly, an extended fieldwork would have produced a very different ethnography. For example, access to consultants for interviews would allow for a methodological diversification of my methodology. In this regard, and in retrospect, I think of this month of fieldwork as exploratory. The acquired embodied understandings of some of the intricacies and possibilities afforded by the game could eventually allow a better sympathetic relation with consultants. This point should not delegitimize the present work; however, as I think that participant experience and autobiographical vignettes can be productive methodological tools in particular contexts such as this one. "Autoethnography", writes Anderson (2006), "does contribute to a spiralling refinement, elaboration, extension, and revision of theoretical understanding" (388), a contribution that, I hope, I have not escaped from in this present essay.

Arguably still radical as a genre, autobiography faces limitations and is subject to criticisms, like any other methodology (Anderson 2006:390). Davies (2002:179) warns that that the most acerbic

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[19] This is not different, however, from the information collected through the method of participant observation.

commentators are likely to ridicule such a method as "self-indulgent and narcissistic"; this is a serious concern that must be kept in mind. Yet, when well-thought, an autobiographical ethnography is not just an autobiography; it must instead "embrace a traditional ethnographic agenda of seeking to understand the topic under study by placing it within a solid analytic context" (Anderson 2006:378; see also Davies 2002, Young and Meneley 2005:2–3). It has no interest in the sole narration of personal stories (Davies 2002), and rather focuses on experiences to combine micro- and macro-analysis, in an effort to "seek connections to broader social theory" (Anderson 2006:378). In this regard, it is similar to a form of participant observation with privileged (otherwise inaccessible) insights, "the ultimate participant in a dual participant-observer role" (Davies 2002), or in this case participant experience. Carried and written as such, autobiography can avoid accusations of excessive self-absorption (Davies 2002) and "solipsistic dwelling on one's own experience" (Young and Meneley 2005:7). For Anderson (2006), anthropologists are also "constrained from self-absorption by the ethnographic imperative of dialogic engagement with others in the social worlds they seek to understand" (385). While our lives are inherently social, it should be noted that this "dialogic engagement" does not have to be limited to "others" understood as human beings. Material environments, animals, and other non-human things, I would argue, also present a dialogic, though non-verbal, potential with researchers, as exemplified in this essay through my interaction with environments and things.

Participant experience might also result in limited access to particular groups because of the researcher's recognized engagement in a specific activity or with certain people.[20] For example, Potter's (2008) relationship with her teachers was restricted, even as a researcher, because of her involvement in the dance program (447). She just could not remove herself from her official status of a student. The participatory character of participant experience and autobiographical ethnographies, moreover, poses a higher risk of a naturalization of one's experiences, making the familiar "too familiar" over time, and thus impeding reflexivity. As Young and Meneley (2005) argue, it can be undoubtedly challenging, for it requires the application of the same form of critical analysis reminiscent of participant observation to oneself and one's most intimate world (2–3). This primacy of participation also renders note-taking interruptive, at best.[21] While those pitfalls can hardly be avoided, they can usually be engaged with and countered by diversifying one's methods (adding interviews, for example), multiplying "reflexive days," and training and developing of one's own memory and visualisation skills. For this research, however, such a diversification has been limited. Occasionally, geocache log entries from other users have been integrated into my research, but although it could offer a valuable source of data for further research, it did not constitute the bulk of my methodology. In fact, a discursive analysis of geocaching log entries online could easily stand on its own as an anthropological research topic.

On Obstacles

> "My desire is to illuminate a
> doubly reciprocal motion:
> that as place is sensed,
> senses are placed; as places

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[20] Such a difficulty is not necessarily limited to participant experience, however, as participant observers can also face similar challenges.

[21] As a result, my fieldnotes were written post-facto, upon my return to my apartment.

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make sense, senses make place." (Feld 2005:179)

"Thus, I had to choose: left or right?" (Fieldnotes on searching for The Runner, June 14, 2013)

Obstacles encountered along the way, like the cliff described in the opening vignette of this article, were common occurrences. I narrate here two other moments that strikingly defied, in different ways, the direction suggested by my GPS compass.

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On an afternoon of mid-June, as I was increasingly accustomed with the game, I had optimistically set out to find a dozen geocaches. The fourth on my list was named Parko Eleftherias, located about 2 km away from my apartment. Unlike other parks I had visited, the space was dominated by an unobstructed hilly grass field, with only a few trees and bushes scattered around. In the middle of the park stood the large statue of a man on whose head a pigeon had elected office. Here and there, a few people were gathered in the shade of the trees, while two women were sun bathing.

Following the direction of the GPS compass, I walked up the hill. In the heat of that Athenian summer, shade had a welcoming cooling effect on me.[22] The grass, slightly spongy compared to the sidewalk cement, felt soft and relaxing, yet my calves were tensing in reaction to the change in ground density. As I kept walking, I reached an apparent dead-end, while the device still indicated a distance of 64 m

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[22] In fact, chasing shade, and thus sometimes deviating from the direction of my goal, was perhaps one of the defining experiences of my geocaching journeys in Athens, a figure of the particular environment or space I found myself in.

northeast. I paused for a moment. At that location, the vegetation was denser and a line of thick bushes and trees was restraining my ability to move forward. On my right, a shed was surrounded on three sides by construction fences. A few kittens had found refuge underneath the structure and were silently staring at me, in a tense stillness. Uncertain if the bushes hid a metal fence, I moved forward and squeezed in. Unexpectedly, I reached an open space, finding myself right in the middle of a small soccer field where some kids were testing their skills with a ball. Not far from there, two police officers eating lunch on a park bench looked at me with puzzlement, but swiftly returned to their conversation. I had little idea of where I was, except that I was inappropriately occupying the soccer pitch, but the distance displayed on my device was shrinking.

Trying to get closer to the geocache, I promptly left the playing surface to move straight ahead, before bypassing a yellow building. With fences blocking the way on my right, I faced yet another cliff. I followed a road out of the area and back to the park, with the idea to attempt to reach the geocache by another route. From then on, the following hour was a tale of innumerable obstacles. Turning left past the park, I walked up a road and turned left again. A series of fenced buildings (including the U.S. embassy) protected by security guards were restricting my access, however. I found myself wandering on different sites, questioning myself about the legitimacy of my presence and drawing puzzled facial expressions from the rare people I encountered. For a while, I literally walked around a 200–300 m radius half-circle inaccessible without a security check. Finally finding a narrow park between a wall and an apartment block, I followed a path and reached the site of a hospital. Tracking the indications of my GPS compass, I

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walked on the site and bypassed buildings with the hope of finding an entrance on the other side. I encountered a tiny chapel and a decayed school, but no gate, however, so that I remained captive. Remembering a user's log entry posted two weeks earlier, I decided to temporarily abandon this geocache, and I returned to my apartment.[23]

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On a Saturday towards the end of my fieldwork, Otylia and I were walking on the sidewalk of an avenue, in a previously unvisited part of the city. The weather was hot, the sun was burning our skin, and I could feel the tiny drops of warm sweat forming on my forehead. I was craving for a

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[23] On June 9, 2013, Orangetree-Turtles posted "No idea how to get into the park!?" Other insightful and reflexive log entries were also posted on the geocache webpage. For example:
- On February 15, 2013, Sqic wrote "My GPS didn't really show where the park entrance was so I ended up walking around the entire naval hospital before I found a way in.
- On September 15, 2012, Faxesyd wrote "Coming down from Lycabetus Top [another geocache] we turned into the park. Just 30 meters from the cache there was a big fence! Out again to the street, finding another approach."
- On May 8, 2012, BeSmi wrote "The whole day walking and caching through Athens, slowly the legs are hurting, but this one has to be found! Unfortunately we took the wrong intrance, fortunately we found an amazing view from this artistic building NEXT to this location but unfortunately there is a WALL between us and our cache! F...! So Be says: Let's jump down the wall!" and Smi says: "NO! Don't do this! That's too high! " but Be says: "No! That's NOT to high!" and jumps and Smi jumps, too, only the left leg of Be gets a big egg..."
- On March 15, 2012, Geospaap wrote "Getting here from Petraki Monastery –NIMTS [another geocache] was the most difficult. I thought I could cross the hospital terrain, but there was only one way in and no way ouut at the other side (in the evening). So I had to walk around."
(The spelling and grammar mistakes were preserved as they were published.)

cold beer, water, food, and some rest, but there was no apparent restaurant around. We were at a walking distance from our respective apartments, maybe three or four kilometers, but the temperature impaired our perception of that fact. In search for the geocache named National Glyptoteque, we left the National Technical University of Athens campus where we had been looking for another container, and crossed the street. A few meters down the road, we saw the likely entrance of a large park. A black metal fence surrounded its perimeters, and army officers were patrolling the main road. Since the geocache was essentially 600 m straight ahead, we followed the GPS directions and entered the park. The shade of the trees was greeted with feelings of relief and enjoyment. About 175 m before the container, however, we met a major obstacle which impeded our ability to move forward. Unexpectedly, the park, which displayed a monument commemorating the Olympic Committee Members of the 2004 Athens Summer Olympics, was smaller than we thought: a fence and a ravine stood in our way. Slightly annoyed to turn around and retrace our steps in such a heat, we followed the fence to find the closest exit, but finally found ourselves back at the main entrance. Ultimately, after bypassing the previous park and finding an unadvertised entrance in the fence further down the road, we found the National Glyptoteque –a national museum surrounded by a gigantic sculpture garden– and the geocaches located on its grounds. We had to walk and wander around, however, much longer than we had initially hoped for.

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Never in my life had I been so conscious of fences and other obstacles. Such an awakening to the three-dimensional sensuous materiality and spatial arrangement of places was visceral. Also rooted in the

impatience, frustration, ironic laughter, exhaustion, or even excitement of unexpected and forced detours, this deep awareness is reminiscent of the affective states of anthropological astonishment described by Shweder (1991:1): productive ethnographic moments that shed light on otherwise unnoticed social organization or relations, and I would argue, spatial and/or sensory configurations. Geocaching is a cultural practice that relies on visual geotechnologies such as maps, coordinates, satellite imagery, and GPS devices. Participants work their way from coordinates –a set of abstract numbers referring to a precise point on Earth– to an indexed location, with the ultimate goal of finding a hidden container. However, the role of GPS devices in the activity should not be overstated, for it would risk the failure to account for the sensory experience of geocachers that must mediate, "on the ground," a device–environment dialectic. That is, they must constantly verify the indications of the device against their direct environment. Geocaching, I would like to argue, presents a potential for the reconnection of body, mind, and environment, an interplay generally lost or forgotten in the development and use of abstract geographical apparatuses. In the process, places acquire meanings for participants as they interact with the dynamic sensuousness and unfolding social and natural histories of chosen paths and sites.

Virtually essential for the practice of geocaching, modern maps are disassociated from bodily movement and sensory involvement, argues Ingold (2000:233-234). This was not always the case, however. It used to be that maps were predominantly stories; they comprised and represented events, "fragments of stories, mark[ing]... the historical operations from which it resulted" (de Certeau 1984:121). In other words, they were more like "history book[s]" than "geographical map[s]" as we know them today; they were "a memorandum prescribing actions" (120). Drawing medieval maps as an example, de Certeau (1984) explains that they only included paths and routes, "the rectilinear marking out of itineraries (performative indications chiefly concerning pilgrimages), along with the stops one was to make" (120). This may have included rest stops, religious duties, and important information about the direct territory one had to move through, for example. Distances, he adds, were "calculated in hours or in days, that is, in terms of the time it would take to cover them on foot" (120).

Maps and geographic representations of space have drastically changed over the last five centuries, however (de Certeau 1984). The birth and rise of modern science resulted in the erasure of "the itineraries that were the condition of [their] possibility" (120). In modern maps, texture is lost as the social and sensory practices at the basis of their production are suppressed or limited to a distanced form of vision (Ingold 2000:230). But life in the streets, notes de Certeau (1984), happens "below the thresholds at which visibility begins" (93); the poetic spatializing practices of walking "elude legibility" (93). This form of vision that both Ingold and de Certeau refer to is the so-called "bird's-eye" perspective of maps, obtained through one's figurative or literal elevation (such as on top of a skyscraper) and removal from a scene.[24] In

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[24] Marks (2004:82) cautions against a positivist discarding of such scientific practices. As she points out, "optical visuality," or detached vision, is helpful, if not necessary, in many situations (80). After all, as highlighted by its history, geocaching would be virtually impossible without such technologies. For Marks, what is important is instead "a lively dialectic or mutual deterritorialization" (82) of both

such position, the "voyeur" is anesthetized, "disentangle[d]... from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and ma[de]... alien to them" (de Certeau 1984:93). In this sense, de Certeau (1984) asserts that maps are the result of acts of forgetting (97). They are reductive. The unlimited potentialities of walking simply "cannot be reduced to their graphic trail" (99) without suffering from considerable representational limits, he argues. As Robinson and Petchenik (1976) write, modern maps, in the distanced vision they allow, represent "spatial 'reality' only by agreement, not by sensory testability" (53). In other words, they are alienated from the worldliness of everyday lived experience (Ingold 2000:210).

When surveying potential geocaches online, I rarely knew what to expect on the ground, despite the support of background information such as satellite imagery, user comments, and map visualization.[25] An element of tangibility, or sensory immersion, was simply inaccessible. This displacement of life from the environment, a "disconnect[ion] from one's physical and social environment... [,or] existence in an immaterial world of abstraction... a desensualized world" (Howes 2005:7), culminated in the compass function of my device.[26] A simple design indicating the direction of a selected geographical coordinate and one's distance from it (from a bird's-eye view perspective), it represents Earth as a static, lifeless, and flat planet. The

GPS compass thus disregards the topography and composition of terrains, and the movements of their occupants. In this regard, faithfully following my device could have been dangerous, as I could have walked into walls, fences, or people; tripped on rocks (it happened a few times); fallen off cliffs; crossed busy roads at undesirable moments; or even slipped on the wet rocks of a spring, for example. Fittingly, a popular t-shirt sold on the official geocaching website alluded to the dangerous possibility of one's inattention to one's immediate surroundings. Reading "Focus," it displayed a walking stickman, distracted by its GPS, on the verge of falling over a cliff.

Yet, in the use of this functionality for geocaching purposes, I simultaneously "reposition[ed] [myself] in relationship to the sensuous materiality of the world" (Howes 2005:7). As a technological support, it provided a general overview of the direction and distance of a desired goal, but it did not dictate my way. As exemplified earlier in the ethnographic vignettes, it has been fairly common in my experience to face obstacles and to have to find a way to bypass them, sometimes even ironically walking in the opposite direction from a geocache, because of a cliff, a building, a fence, or a public gathering, for example, to eventually find a way to get closer to it. In the end, this emplacement, an interaction with the sensuous materiality of my surroundings, necessarily prevailed over the GPS displacement.

An emergent paradigm in the social sciences, the concept of "emplacement" posits the "sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment" (Howes 2005:7, Feld 2005:181). Feld (2005) further argues that "because motion can draw upon the kinesthetic interplay of tactile, sonic, and visual senses, emplacement always implicates the intertwined nature of sensual

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embodiment and disembodiment. Geocaching may be considered as an example of such commitment.

[25] Some users had visibly put exceptional efforts in the description of the geocaches they had hidden. This would include, for example, visual representation, some written contextualization or history, and/or a description of the container.

[26] It is important to note that while there might be other ways to engage in geocaching, I have always relied on my GPS compass, thus locating my research in relation to this functionality.

bodily presence and perceptual engagement" (181). It contextualizes the notion of embodiment by highlighting the necessary positioning of one's body-mind in settings that are both material, historical, and sociocultural (Howes 2005:7). The practice of geocaching, particularly in its negotiation of a device-environment dialectic, reflects this paradigm. As participants build on life experience and sensory attunement to "'feel [their] way' towards [their] goal[s], continually adjusting [their] movements in response to an on-going perceptual monitoring of [their] surroundings" (Ingold 2000:220), wayfinding skills are indeed necessary. Rather than assuming a straight line to a destination, wayfinding, "a skilled performance," accounts for the nonlinear sensory immersion of "actor-perceiver[s]" in their environment –their emplacement (Ingold 2000:220).

Wayfinding produces trajectories and thrives in their potentialities. For Deleuze (1997), milieu, which he defines as an assemblage "of qualities, substances, powers, and events" (61), are dynamically explored by means of such trajectories and movement. He writes that "the trajectory merges not only with the subjectivity of those who travel through a milieu, but also with the subjectivity of the milieu itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it." (61) For him, "the map expresses the identity of the journey and what one journeys through. It merges with its object, when the object itself is movement" (61). In line with Deleuze's thoughts, Ingold (2000) argues that our perception of the environment arises during "the passage from place to place, and in histories of movement and changing horizons along the way" (227). Through my movements as a geocacher, places acquired (new) meanings –memories, interactions, and sensory experiences– as a different kind of cognitive map was produced, one that

accounted for the sensuous materiality of environments and my experience of them. Such a map encompassing my journey from sites to sites differ from conventional "birds-eye view" representations. Experienced from the ground, knowledge of places does not grow expansively in the manner of the wave effect of a pebble thrown in a pond. Rather, it evolves as a matrix, a web of interconnected paths and journeys that become something, and that is marked not by destinations or focal points, but movement.

The negotiation of the contrast emerging between the indications of my GPS compass and the materiality of my surroundings also stimulated the development of a new form of sensory attunement. My enhanced bodily awareness of my environment, developed through the practice of geocaching, played a major role in the transformation of unknown spaces into meaningful places in particular ways (Howes 2005:144). As mentioned earlier, Feld (2005) asserts that "emplacement always implicates the intertwined nature of sensual bodily presence and perceptual engagement" (181). Since sensory perception is culturally-specific, variation in people's perception of the environment and the meanings they attached to it appears inevitable. Undeniably, my awareness and experience of parts of Athens would have different without geocaching.

In this regard, Feld (2005) proposes a mutually constitutive relationship between places and the senses: "as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place" (179). In other words, one's sensory model both embeds and is embedded in one's sense of place. Moving away from the ocularcentric concept of landscape, he suggests the notion of sense-scape, which can encompass the multisensory potential of places. Sense-

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scape "is the idea that the experience of the environment, and of the other persons and things which inhabit that environment, is produced by the particular mode of distinguishing, valuing and combining the senses in the culture under study" (Howes 2005:143). Through wayfinding, geocaching appeals to a form of sensory attunement that is not strictly visual. In walking, avoiding obstacles, or even crawling in bushes, tactility, proprioception, and kinesthesia were inevitable aspects in my sensory experience of places, but other senses were also involved. Take the geocache named DIN V 4131, for example. Making my way up to the radio antenna that concealed the container, my sense of balance was essential as I jumped from rock to rock near the cliff. Or imagine the smell of lilacs that perfumed my journey along the neighbourhood of Anafiotika in search of the geocache of the same name. Think of the sounds of guitar and piano notes, and classical singing at the Athens Conservatoire, or even the taste of the sandwich and cookie sundae that impregnated my experience of the square hosting the geocache named Foka Negra, as we were having lunch at a restaurant close-by to freshen our geocaching searching skills. If we tend to think of landscapes and emplacement mostly in visual and tangible terms in the Western world, our experience and knowledge of places –"the idea of place as sensed, place as sensation" (Feld 2005:185)– have, nevertheless, the potential to involve a larger complex meshwork of senses (Howes 2005:8). Indeed, while the prominence of sight in our society appears overarching, "it is still knotted into the fibers of our multisensory existence," writes Howes (2005:12), and most importantly it does not reflect the sensory experience of everyone. After all, as he warns us, "no sensory model can tell the whole story" (12). The particular forms of sensory attunement that have the potential to emerge from the practice of geocaching open new possibilities in an ocularcentric society. Senses are modulated in specific ways and, in consequence, places come to make sense in relation to such dynamics, they become meaningful to participants in new ways.

For Casey, "place is the most fundamental form of embodied experience – the site of a powerful fusion of self, space, and time" (Feld and Basso 1996:9). In this regard, places have the potential to become meaningful not only socioculturally, but also individually, since perception has an inevitable individual component. As Bergson writes, "there is no perception which is not full of memories" (Feld 2005:181). Developing on this idea, Casey adds that

> "moving in or through a given place, the body imports its own emplaced past into its present experience: its local history is literally a history of locales. This very importation of past places occurs simultaneously with the body's ongoing establishment of directionality, level and distance, and indeed influences these latter in myriad ways. Orientation in place (which is what is established by these three factors) cannot be continually effected de novo but arises within the ever-lengthening shadow of our bodily past." (Casey 1987:194)

Hinting at the socioculturally- and individually-influenced ways of place-making, such an understanding of perception

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pervades Ingold's (2002) argument that "places do not have locations but histories" (219). Those histories may contrast from individuals to individuals and groups to groups, as their purposes and identities may be different. While geocaching, I often had the feeling that my particular use of the space differed, at least to an extent, from others'. In some cases, I was the target of curious stares. At some other times, misunderstandings emerged from such contrast. For example, on an afternoon of early June, I was looking for the geocache named Temple of Olympian Zeus. On its official webpage, the additional hint, once decrypted, read "not 200 m but 2 m."[27] Walking along the external fence enclosing the archaeological site of the temple, the sidewalk opened to a small square at the base of the Arch of Hadrian. Observing a series of trees, a large path leading to the site, and a fence blocking that entrance, I noticed a large blue sign indicating in both English and Greek the distance of the official entrance (200 m), complemented by an arrow pointing to the left. Walking towards the sign, I stopped for a second to allow a tourist, located on the other side of the fence, to complete her shot of the arch. Her camera focus was peeking between the metal bars. Noticing my act of courtesy, the man accompanying her told me that I had to walk down the sidewalk to find the entrance and visit the site. Smiling, I thanked him before quitting, reflecting on the assumption that our intentions must had been quite different, though not necessarily incompatible. As mentioned earlier, Deleuze (1997) thought that the identity of a journey and the perception of a particular environment reflected the identity of the traveller. Consequently, space becomes

place (becomes meaningful) in various ways for different people.

The particular form of sensory attunement typical of geocaching does not only result from a device-environment dialectic. Inasmuch as the current accuracy of most GPS devices is often limited to a 3–5 m radius, it is suggested to abandon them at the final stage of the search to focus entirely on the surroundings.[28] Once in the vicinity of a geocache, it provides indeed little support to find the hidden container. For example, a variety of hiding strategies and locations were used by the geocache owners of the 18 physical containers found during my fieldwork. Some were found in the cracks of a wall; in the metallic structures of a bridge or a banister; or under a rock, a radio antenna, streetlamps, park benches, or a large piece of art. Some containers were nano (less than 10ml, e.g.: a lip balm stick), while others were micro (less than 100 mL, e.g.: a 35 mm film canister) or small (between 100 mL and 1 L, e.g.: a sandwich-sized container). Some were magnetically-attached, while others were wisely camouflaged. Since geographical coordinates refer to the location (as a point in two-dimensional space) of geocaches, rather than their three-dimensional emplacement, the GPS compass did not account for the altitude of the containers, regardless of whether it was at one, three, or twenty meters above ground level.[29] In fact, none of the above

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[27] Additional hints, to avoid undesired spoilers, needed to be decrypted to be read, by following a simple key or clicking on a button.

[28] In my experience, the precision of my GPS was regularly better. It did happen a few times, however, that the signal was either completely off-track or bouncing around irregularly. It must be noted here that the precision of the GPS information in relation to the position of a particular geocache also relies on the precision of the initial coordinates, collected by the device of the user that hid the cache in the first place.
[29] While most GPS can account for altitude, the information provided by the geocache owners (including the coordinates) rarely include it. In a

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characteristics cited as examples could be uncovered by my device. For example, in search for the geocache Katechaki Bridge, I was exploring the structure at street-level. Although my GPS compass was indicating that I found myself at "ground zero," I could not find any container.[30] Knowing that it was a magnetic cache from the information provided on the website, I was carefully examining all metallic structure, but my attempts were in vain. Slightly uncomfortable with the idea of inadvertently waking up the naked homeless man sleeping under the bridge, I decided to abandon. Just as I was about to leave, however, I raised my head and the realization that the geocache could actually be hidden on the pedestrian bridge dawned on me. The geographical coordinates used for geocaching are two dimensional. In this regard, a cache could be hidden anywhere on a hypothetical vertical line of possibilities stemming from the ground and share the same reference points. In other words, while I found myself at ground zero, it would also be the case on the bridge at the same point-location. Accordingly, I immediately caught sight of the magnetic micro0cache as I walked up the stairs. The film container, tapped in white for camouflage matching the color of the structure, was magnetically attached under a handrail, located exactly at ground zero. As represented in this example, one must rely on an interplay of sensory attunement and cognitive skills upon arrival on site, an embodied "sense of geocaching," as I would call it. Places also have the potential to become meaningful for geocachers through this practice of sensing the environment to

detect potential hiding locations and/or decipher additional hints.

On Emotional Geographies

"The view, along the way, especially of the Acropolis and our neighbourhood, fed a sense of accomplishment, adventure, and pride, particularly for it felt like most of the hike was now behind us." (fieldnotes about my journey to Lycabetus Hill and my search of the geocache Lycabetus Top, June 17, 2013)

"Felt like childhood again by jumping from rock to rock and navigating challenging terrains." (own log entry on finding DIN V 4131, June 17, 2013)

I took the direction of the neighbourhoods of Plaka and Anafiotika with a vague notion of the location of the cache. Walking around for a while, I was alternating between busy streets full of tourists, restaurants, and street vendors, and desert streets up a few set of stairs: two neighbouring, but totally different worlds. The streets were so quiet that I was wondering about the legitimacy of my presence, as if I was walking in someone's backyard. The tranquility of the place (no car or motorcycle traffic, almost no pedestrian), especially in relation to the bustling streets below (arguably the busiest tourist hubs of Athens) was astonishing. I really had the feeling that solely a tiny number of travellers actually trickle to those streets. Since I could not find anything similar to the pictures posted on the geocache webpage, I took my GPS out of my bag and followed the direction. Stopping on my way to observe things that caught my attention and take a few pictures, I finally

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sense, this may well be part of the pleasure many find in searching geocaches or hiding them wittily.

[30] The term "ground zero" corresponds to the perimeter within which the GPS device is not helpful anymore, typically when it indicates a distance to destination of 0 or 5 meter.

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reached a set of stairs hidden behind trees and overgrown bushes, and covered in crushed blackberries-like fruits eaten by flies. After hesitating for a moment, I engaged on the path, being very careful not to step in the insects' feast. The stairs were connecting with a tiny narrow street, in appearance the lower entrance to the remains of Anafiotika. As promised in the geocache description, a (stereo)typical image of Greek islands unfolded before my eyes: white houses and perfumed lilacs, narrow passages and staircases, and blue shutters. The place, with its streets virtually empty of people (I only encountered a family of three during the 10 minutes spent on that street), was idyllic. I was surprised, yet blissful, of the inexistent tourist traffic, as it rendered the place even more special to me. Near the cache I found under a rock sitting in a flowerbed, I could hear clinging cutlery and people chattering in a backyard hidden by tall walls. I signed the log book, took a few pictures, and then continued to explore the area.

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It was only more than halfway through my fieldwork that I realized how affect, in my exploration of territories through geocaching, had been closely tied to my perception of places. Some excursions had left a stronger trace in my memory than others, often, but not always, as a figure of my success of failure at finding my way and the geocache. There is more to be said, however, but my fieldnotes rarely dwelled and elaborated on the subject. There were excerpts, nevertheless, that hinted in that direction. For example, on June 8, I wrote that "undoubtedly, the journey to a geocache has the potential to be memorable. Days after my discovery of Anafiotika, I am still talking about the neighbourhood [to friends, family members, etc]. The geocache and/or its exact location were not as important in

my narrative as was my journey to get there, and what I discovered along the way." To be sure, all excursions were remembered, but some more than others, and it is this discrepancy that can be enlightening and deserves further attention.

My fieldnotes, however, were no more explicit (if they were at all) about affective states during my excursion. In retrospective, nonetheless, it was undeniably remembered as exhilarating and fulfilling. It appealed to a sense of accomplishment, adventure, pride, and vibrancy. The drastic change in architectural aesthetics was unsettling, and the place felt truly special, so much that it marked me and entertained conversations for a few days.

In some other cases, nostalgia has also been a factor, developing connections with past memorable experiences. For example, the excursion that brought me to the top of Lycabettus Hill reminded me of the joy and freedom I felt when hiking in the United States. Similarly, as mentioned above in the epigraph of this section, the path that led me to the neighbouring hill to find DIN V 4131 evoked childhood memories. In both cases, I felt transcended by those affective states, and it positively affected my perception of those places. However, my excursions were not all memorable. Despite the lack of elaboration in my fieldnotes, it is clear that, in some cases, I felt frustrated, disappointed, and/or unmotivated. In turn, those affective states, often resulting from my inability to find a geocache, also influenced (negatively) my perception of places.

If my perspective on the topic is limited, partially due to the late realization of its possibilities, it seems clear to me that place-making has the potential to be about more than just materiality. Intermingled with sensations in the perception of places,

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affects –which I understand here as individual or collective feelings, emotions, and dispositions, named or unnamed intensities felt in relation to the experience of a worldly environment (including all sorts of interactions with its occupants)– form "emotional geograph[ies]" (Alexandrakis 2013:85). Such geographies are fluid, as Alexandrakis (2013) argues, for they can see "new experiences... and interpretations... superimpose a new understanding of the city on the old, revealing in the process new trajectories of various kinds" (86). In other words, the practice of geocaching also has the potential to change participants' understandings of places they already knew. This would explain why the journeys and locations of particularly difficult geocaches became much more pleasant and memorable upon finding the hidden containers.

Concluding Remarks

"Such a beautiful place. Thanks for the cache, and especially for bringing me there." (own log entry on finding Anafiotika, June 7, 2013)

On that mid-afternoon of late June 2013, nearly an hour after the departure of my friend Alexis, I was walking on a trail at the top of a hill overlooking Athens. Most of the Attica plain was unfolding before my eyes, and I could discern Lycabettus Hill and the port of Piraeus on the horizon. The dirt trail, running along dry scrubs and pine trees on one side, and a cliff on the other, was virtually empty from people. A loud symphony of crickets filled the air. Sitting on a tree stump, I was enjoying the view, a pleasurable reward after the physical challenge of the excursion that had resulted in the finding of two geocaches outside the touristic areas. It had proven to last much longer than expected, so much so that my water bottle was dangerously empty in the afternoon heat.

Thriving in that level of unpredictability and nonlinearity, my experience of geocaching has fostered my discovery of the city of Athens. Prior to my fieldwork, I had visited the area only once, with a group of students, on two days of April 2006. Our experience had been limited, however, to the traditional touristic circuit encompassing Syntagma Square, the Acropolis, the National Archaeological Museum, the neighbourhood of Plaka, and other archaeological sites around the city. This time, my experience has been very different.

In this essay, I explored the intricacies of the game of geocaching, and more particularly the part of the game that involves attempting to find hidden containers. Adopting an uncommon, autobiographical approach, which I carefully unpacked, that was simultaneously multi-sited and ethnographically-informed by participant experience, I gained an embodied understanding of the possibilities afforded by this cultural practice. I highlighted how places acquired meanings through my sensory and affective engagement with specific environments. More than being just about the embodiment of a destination, I showed how journeys to the geocaches also have the potential to become meaningful, resulting in the development of a matrix of interconnected paths that are marked by movement, rather than destinations. I also argued that emplacement, that is a situated body-mind-environment relationship, can result from the negotiation of a device-environment dialectic. To this end, I sketched a critique of geotechnologies, informed by the ironic double-bind geocachers must navigate: while they require GPS devices to situate the approximate location of a geocache, they

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also risk being deceived by incongruence between reductive and anesthetizing "map spatialities" and "the realities on the ground" (in all their sensuous and affective possibilities). This critique allowed me to demonstrate that geographic apparatuses may be thought of as cultural technologies, as are the processes and practices by which people use, evaluate, and ultimately translate them. Finally, I explored the particular forms of sensory attunement emerging from the practice of geocaching, a perceptual shift from a Western ocularcentric sensory model.

If my data undoubtedly stands on its own, I have also considered my fieldwork as preliminary. While I think that participant experience and autoethnography are essential methods for research dwelling on the body and the senses, a methodological diversification involving, at the very least, interviews, would be beneficial. As geotechnologies grow in prominence and geocaching becomes increasingly popular, our engagement with space/place is redefined in new ways. The game presents an example of a rich ethnographic context that anthropologists should attend to. I have begun to explore some of those possibilities in this article, but others, like the touristic practices in relation to the game, would deserve some attention. After all, behind each smiley earned from a successful log entry online lies much more than the mere finding of a hidden container.

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