

“Better to be in quarantine on an island paradise than stay bored at home.”

Dominican Republic, 1 March – 20 March 2020

I'm an Austria-based cultural anthropologist with a research focus on forced migration, transnational memory cultures and Island Studies. For my postdoc project at the University of Art and Design Linz I travelled to the Dominican Republic to carry out ethnographic research on transgenerational family narratives and memory practices of Jewish exile in Sosúa.

When the first COVID cases were reported in China, it never occurred to me that I too would soon be worried about the Coronavirus. Even when the disease arrived in Europe and isolated cases were reported in Austria, I downplayed the severity to myself—it is like a flu, I had nothing to fear. Instead, my thoughts were focused on the upcoming three-weeks of field research in the Dominican Republic, which I started in March 2020. I was excited to begin a new research project in the Caribbean town of Sosúa.

Sunday, 1 March 2020

I'm preparing my suitcase for my departure to the Dominican Republic. I pack a broad-spectrum antibiotic for gastrointestinal problems. Should I pack some sanitizer as well? Currently there are 14 positive COVID-19 test results in Austria. In the Dominican Republic, the first case was reported today. A 62-year-old Italian entered the Dominican Republic at the end of February and is currently in quarantine at the military hospital in the capital of Santo Domingo. Could I be refused entry because I come from Europe where cases are gradually emerging? After all, the Dominican Republic is considered a Small Island Developing State

(SIDS) and may therefore be more vulnerable than other countries. In the last week of February, the Ministries of Health of the island states of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago, in order to protect their population, had already imposed entry restrictions and quarantine measures for those coming from outside the countries. Similarly, various island states in Oceania had already taken precautions after a measles epidemic struck the previous year. I decide to pack two face masks in my hand luggage. Maybe it will be required of European travelers upon entry into the Dominican Republic...

Monday, 2 March 2020

It is early in the morning and I am at Vienna International Airport. It is busy and there are already numerous people at the gate of my flight. I had thought about wearing my face mask at the airport when I left home. But here there are only a few people with face masks. Even the airline employees at the counter are not wearing any protective clothing such as masks or gloves. I don't want to look ridiculous if I'm the only one wearing a face mask here.

Arrived in Puerto Plata... I am at the immigration desk at the airport. After the immigration officer has scanned my fingerprints, he points to the sanitizer on the counter. I take some and rub it in my hands. I think it would have been better to do this before touching the scanner rather than after. After all, many people before me have touched this device with their possibly unsanitized fingers. Anyways, I say to myself, "just don't become paranoid."

Tuesday, 3 March 2020

I walk through the center of Sosúa, a small town in the province of Puerto Plata in

the north of the island. This will be my workplace for the next few weeks. The main street is busy, and many tourists sit in the bars and cafés. I start looking for the Jewish Museum of the city to make first contacts with possible interview partners. Unfortunately, the museum is closed. I stroll to a café at the seaside. When I look at my mobile phone, I see a pop-up message reporting on the increasing COVID-19 cases in Italy and the worried population. However, there is no sign of concern here in the Dominican Republic. The word ‘Corona’ is mentioned neither in the media nor in the conversations I can hear at the neighboring tables.

Thursday, 5 March 2020

During a conversation with an interviewee, we talk about the social situation in the country. The interviewee explains that outside the major cities, the quality of public health care declines considerably and emergency services are limited or even non-existent. For a moment, I wonder what the consequences would be for the local population here in Sosúa if the number of COVID-19 infections increased. Am I also a potential source of danger for the island population? Whom have I been in contact with in the last two weeks? Could I have been infected somewhere? I feel healthy, but that doesn’t mean anything. These thoughts leave me with a queasy feeling.



© Sarah Nimführ, Mamajuana – Dominican drink

Friday, 6 March 2020

While I drink my coffee in a small café in Puerto Plata, the owner addresses me. He tells me that he came to Puerto Plata from Austria 25 years ago. He left Europe for health reasons, as a tropical climate would have a positive impact on his skin disease. He then reports that today the second case of COVID-19 was confirmed here. A Canadian tourist had tested positive. The café owner says that he is not afraid of a large spread like in Europe. The tropical climate and the constant air temperature of 26-28 degrees would not allow the virus to survive for long, he says. Further, he would drink a daily shot of Mamajuana – a Dominican drink made from wine, rum, herbs and tree bark, which is considered *the cure*.

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Sunday, 8 March 2020

I start the day by checking the latest corona numbers. Three new cases in the Dominican Republic are confirmed. This leads to a current number of five confirmed COVID-19 cases. Today I will take a bus to the capital city Santo Domingo as I will have some interviews there. Although all detected COVID-cases are hospitalized in Santo Domingo so far, I am not worried. However, when I get on the bus for my five-hours-journey, I spontaneously decide on a seat with a little more distance to other passengers.

Monday, 9 March 2020

In the morning I visit the *Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo*. The campus of the public university is very busy. This is in contrast to the current situation in Austria. In the morning I had read that as of today the universities in the Austrian province of Tyrol would switch to distance learning due to frequent Coronavirus infections. The whole development seems surreal to me. Here in the Dominican Republic, nothing of this is tangible and perceptible yet. I feel safe here. In view of only a small number of cases for a total population of about 11 million people, I don't feel worried. My environment confirms this to me. Instead of Corona, the media are focusing on the upcoming municipal elections, which will take place on March 15, 2020.

“Here in the Dominican Republic, nothing of this is tangible and perceptible yet.”

Tuesday, 10 March 2020

I am meeting the former US-Ambassador to the Dominican Republic for an interview. After an interesting conversation, the former ambassador says goodbye to me. “Let’s say goodbye in an Austrian way”, he says, and goes for a kiss on the cheek. Laughing, he then pulls his face back again and says, “Oh, better not, in times of Corona we should perhaps keep our distance.”

Thursday, 12 March 2020

I drive through Sosúa together with an interviewee. I had learned from the Austrian media that numerous events had been cancelled there due to the prevention of the further spread of COVID-19, but here all everyday activities still take place. There are small rallies due to the upcoming elections on Sunday. We pass a small hospital. The interviewee explains to me that this is a private hospital, which would be mainly used by the “upper class” and tourists. The current mayor of Sosúa announced years ago that she wanted to build a public hospital in Sosúa, but so far this has not been implemented. For smaller treatments one could visit practicing doctors in Sosúa, but for more serious treatments one would have to go to Puerto Plata. This makes me think: If the number of COVID-19-cases should suddenly increase, would Puerto Plata even have the necessary capacity to care for people from Puerto Plata, and also from Sosúa and the surrounding towns?

Friday, 13 March 2020

At breakfast I read the news ticker. It is increasingly difficult for me not to read news

about Corona first. There are six new persons who have tested positive in the Dominican Republic, bringing the number of cases to a total of 11. Checking the numbers gives me a measure of certainty that the pandemic exists. Here in the Dominican Republic, it is absolutely intangible to me that this virus is currently circulating. The mood of the Dominican population is largely relaxed and calm. Rather, residents of Sosúa are worried about the outcome of the election. In the social media, the current mayor Ilana, who is running for reelection, is even being equated with the virus: „Se encontro la cura ‚Illnavirus‘: EL VOTO! (The cure for Ilana-virus has been found: THE VOTE!)”

“Checking the numbers gives me a measure of certainty that the pandemic exists.”

I begin worrying about my family back home. Yesterday, the first COVID-19 death occurred in Austria and the government is calling for all Austrians who are currently abroad to return to Austria as soon as possible. I contact the Austrian Embassy for information. Unfortunately, the Embassy cannot give me any assistance regarding an earlier return journey, but strongly recommends it, as Austria is planning numerous border closures in the coming days. On social media, there is a lot of discussion about the planned measures and everyone suddenly knows somebody in the health department who has heard about a potential Vienna lockdown. At the same time, photos of empty supermarket shelves and shopping carts filled with toilet paper and noodles are circulating social media with slogans like: “Austria is when even in a zombie apocalypse people leave whole-grain pasta on the shelf.” However, everything is as usual in the supermarkets in Sosúa—there is no excessive shopping and the shelves are also full.

Saturday, 14 March 2020

I follow the press conference from Austria and read “Down to minimum operation” and that parts of Tyrol are now under quarantine. Ok, it’s not Vienna that is being isolated as social media suspected. Fear and relief are spreading in me at the same time. So I will be able to travel home to Upper Austria after my arrival at Vienna International Airport – at least according to the current status. When I tell the host of my apartment about the plans of the Austrian government, she makes a statement of denial: “I have lived here for eight years now. There won’t be a lockdown here. That would damage the tourism sector so massively...that won’t happen...believe me.”



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© Sarah Nimführ, Cabarete in March 2020

In the afternoon I leave Sosúa for a short trip to Cabarete, since I had arranged interviews in this area. I sleep in a big hotel chain. At the beach I talk to a tourist, who arrived only yesterday from Frankfurt: “We were lucky getting the flight in time. Who knows when the flights will be cancelled? I would rather be here on holiday under palm trees enjoying the sun instead of being with people panicking back home,” says the lady and laughs. I’m not in the mood for laughing. While I’m thinking about how I could travel home earlier, this lady is enjoying her ‘just-in-time-arrival’ in the supposed holiday paradise. I’m wondering how she could come here despite worldwide travel warnings. What if the virus continues to spread here? The Dominican Republic’s health care system would probably be overtaxed even with relatively few cases. How can one take a relaxing holiday in such a situation?

Sunday, 15 March 2020

The hotel has taken some initial precautions and installed sanitizer dispensers at the entrances to the restaurants and in the reception area. Any guest wishing to enter the restaurant must first sanitize their hands. These are the first measures I encounter here on the island. I am relieved to see that preventive measures are finally being taken here, now that almost all stocks of disinfectants in Austria have already been sold out. At the same time, rumors are circulating that in Cabarete, one does not have to be afraid of the virus, since at this world-famous surf spot it is so windy that the virus would literally blow away.

I get a phone call from home. My children have a slight cough. But they are fine, my husband reassures me. I still worry. Is it just a stupid coincidence that my children have a cough or are they also affected by COVID-19? I’d like to get on a plane right now. My flight via Canada isn’t for three days. I try to find earlier flight options,

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preferably direct ones. However, the Dominican Republic announced today that due to the worldwide accelerating spread of COVID-19, direct flights to and from Europe will cease from March 16, 2020. At the same time, Austria also has imposed new entry regulations regarding air and rail traffic, which considerably restricts my search for an earlier return flight, as many flights to Vienna only have stopovers via Madrid, Paris, Zurich and the USA. The latter has also imposed entry and transit restrictions on Europeans. Until now there are no restrictions in Canada. I'm relieved. I am concerned about this relapse into nation-state structures, one country after another is closing its borders. Although I understand the reactions of the countries for the moment, it gives me a bad feeling. Will we regain our freedom of movement to the same extent as before, or will some borders remain closed?

Meanwhile, after the municipal elections in Sosúa, not only are the winners celebrating the election, but also excited and angry people whose party lost the election are marching through the streets. Although there is a steady increase in COVID-19 cases worldwide, warnings about large crowds and recommendations to wear face masks in public, not a single face mask is to be seen here, not one.

Monday, 16 March 2020

Today 10 new COVID-19 cases are reported in the Dominican Republic, bringing the total number to 21. Furthermore, the first death is announced—a 47-year-old man. Test results for 25 more people are pending. Corona is slowly becoming an everyday topic of conversation in the Dominican Republic as well. Rumors are circulating that the Dominican government may very well close down all air traffic in addition to the European flights, which have been already cut off.

I feel uncomfortable in the hotel among so many people and decide to return to the apartment village in Sosúa. My planned interview does not take place anymore. I just

can't manage to get a clear thought. It leaves me without peace to not know whether the airport of Puerto Plata will still be in operation on Wednesday, the day of my scheduled flight back home.

When I go to the supermarket in Sosúa in the afternoon, I get a completely different picture than in the previous days. Before, I only knew panic buying from the pictures on social media from Europe. Now people here also have started to fill their shopping carts with unbelievable amounts of food and household utensils. The queues at the cash desks of the ordinarily uncrowded supermarket extend far into the interior of the supermarket. There are hygiene notices hanging at the checkout and the cashier wears gloves and a face mask. From one day to the next, the way the virus was handled suddenly changed.

“From one day to the next, the way the virus was handled suddenly changed.”

Tuesday, 17 March 2020

Today, Dominican President Danilo Medina announced a state of emergency and a series of measures to stop the spread of COVID-19. He ordered that all borders be closed for 25 days beginning March 19, 2020. Further, all commercial business activities with the exception of supermarkets, petrol stations and pharmacies are to be suspended and a curfew is imposed. This is the first curfew in the Dominican Republic since the 1965 revolution. The host of my apartment was mistaken. Although immense losses are expected in the tourism sector, the Dominican government has decided to take this drastic step. People from the local population I talk to tell me that they are afraid of the coming future. This comes after a

comparatively weak Christmas season. The state of emergency would mean economic bankruptcy for many small businesses and self-employed people. Would there be state aid? If so, when would it come into effect? And would it even be accessible to everyone? Further, the population of a small island state may be more severely affected by the multiple impacts of COVID-19. Difficulties may arise in providing enough hospital beds or offering sufficient food supplies and maintaining transportation links. The previously relaxed and carefree mood is turning into an eerie and frightening atmosphere.

“The previously relaxed and carefree mood is turning into an eerie and frightening atmosphere.”

My own worries seem almost insignificant. I'm worried about my return flight. I could not get any earlier flight, but so far, my actual return flight is confirmed. However, I discover that my onward flight from Frankfurt to Vienna has been cancelled. I am afraid that my flight to Europe via Canada might be cancelled as well due to plans for entry and transit regulations there. But somehow I'll make it home.

Wednesday, 18 March 2020

My night was very restless. I just could not get to sleep. The events of the last few days and the sudden change in behavior of my surrounding unsettled me. I check my flight connection: still confirmed. As today is the last day with regular flights in the Dominican Republic, I decide to go to the airport on time. At the breakfast table I talk

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to the remaining guests. A German couple jokes that they wouldn't mind spending another 30 days here. "Better to be in quarantine on an island paradise than stay bored at home" one of them says and wishes me a good return journey. I am dismayed by this relaxed and ignorant attitude to current events.



© Sarah Nimführ, Airport Puerto Plata in March 2020

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When I arrive at the airport of Puerto Plata, I receive a text message from the airline stating that my flight has been cancelled due to aircraft technical issues. I cannot believe it. This is the last day to regularly leave the island. After that, only return flights of the embassy are possible, but they prefer to bring tourists who are on package tours home first. At the airport it gets restless. Many see themselves spending more days on the island with curfew. While some were still optimistic at the beginning of the day, fear was now written all over their faces. In the event of an involuntary extended stay, curfew and quarantine in the island paradise would not just be a mere extension of a vacation, but would be exactly that: curfew and quarantine. Fortunately, the airline was able to send a replacement plane and we could take off in the late evening.

Friday, 20 March 2020

It's my birthday today. After a 50-hour journey, I reached Austria in the afternoon. I could only travel from Frankfurt to Austria by train, as Vienna International Airport was kept on emergency service. Still I manage to travel easily from Germany to Austria due to their common land borders. A possibility that does not exist for islands without connecting bridges, tunnels and closed air- and seaports, thus considerably restricting the freedom of movement of people on islands in times like these. This was very clearly driven home to me during my uncertain return journey from the Dominican Republic. Having arrived at home, I check the Dominican news immediately. The worsening situation on the ground keeps me busy even from a distance. Today, the Dominican Minister of Health confirmed 38 new cases, bringing the total number of cases in the country to 72. Beginning today, the announced curfew came into effect in the island state. This means that not only cafés and restaurants will remain empty, but also the dream beaches. There will be no relaxing quarantine in the island paradise.

“There will be no relaxing quarantine in the island paradise.”

Four months have now passed since my research stay in the Dominican Republic. The island state has to deal not only with challenges regarding public health issues of the pandemic[1], but also with a sudden change in tourism-dependent economies.[2] The state of emergency declared on March 19, 2020 ended on July 1, 2020 and was accompanied by a partial opening of the borders. The opening of the border was mainly geopolitically driven in order to reactivate the profoundly affected tourism industry on which the Dominican Republic is very dependent.[3] On July 21, 2020, however, the Dominican government once more declared a state of emergency due to once again rapidly increasing number of infections. The future will show what consequences this will have on the ‘mobility regime’ – including my mobility as a researcher to have further visits to the Dominican Republic– and how the island community will respond and adapt to this issue, as it did previously after being hit by hurricane Irma in 2017.[4]

A review of my research diary shows that from the beginning of my research stay until the day I revised this article in the end of July, I observed different levels of threat awareness regarding COVID-19 and also found myself going through them. The risk of infection is perceived differently depending on one’s own situatedness and ranges from a relaxed humorous attitude, naïve denial, worried discomfort to panicky hamster

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purchases. As a shared social experience, the pandemic brings with it extremely diverse and quickly changing perspectives towards it, which confuses and rearranges what each of us considers as reasonable. Gradually, my assessment towards the pandemic's risk changed and I became increasingly alarmed by statements from people who tried to trivialize the threat or made jokes. I was outraged about this, although a few weeks earlier I had feared I would make a fool of myself by wearing a face mask at the airport. My own underestimation of the situation feels embarrassing. At the same time, it worries me how quickly I got used to all this. And today, after weeks of staying at home and participating in numerous webinars and virtual meetings, my own feeling of fear from back then seems almost unfamiliar to me – despite still existing or increasing infection rates in many places. What can we learn from this observation? Maybe that in uncertain times we should remain vigilant about our rapidly changing perceptions and how they affect our view of the environment. The pandemic might be with us for some time. If we stay aware of our own constant change of perspectives, we may be able to better understand and to deal with the effects of the pandemic's multisituatedness.

Footnotes

[1] On July 24, 2020, 93% of all hospital beds in the country were occupied by COVID-patients, with the occupancy rate of available COVID beds in the capital Santo Domingo reaching 97%. See Dominican Today (2020). Pandemic: zero availability of hospital beds imminent. Retrieved from: <https://dominantoday.com/dr/covid-19/2020/07/24/pandemic-zero-availability-of-hospital-beds-imminent/>

[2] Sheller, M. (2020). Restructuring tourism in the Caribbean: connecting pandemic recovery, climate resilience and sustainable tourism through mobility justice. *Journal*

of *Sustainable Tourism*; here: p. 3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1791141>.

For pandemic and disaster effects on islands in general see also Grydehøj, A.; Kelman, I. & Ping, S. (2020). Island geographies of separation and cohesion: The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the geopolitics of Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland). *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie*, 111(3), 288–301; here: p. 297, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12423>

[3] See also Jessop, D. (2020). The way ahead for Caribbean tourism. *Dominican Today*, 1 May 2020. Retrieved from <https://dominantoday.com/dr/opinion/2020/05/01/the-way-ahead-for-caribbean-tourism/>

[4] Sheller, M. (2020). Restructuring tourism in the Caribbean, here: p. 3; 9.