Laura Otto

“It feels as if you (can) leave a sinking ship in time, whilst others have to remain on it.”

Tulum, Mexico, 17 – 23 March 2020

I left Frankfurt, Germany, on February 27th for a field research trip on Sargasso algae along the Mexican Caribbean coast. I returned to Germany on March 25th, with one of the last flights that left Cancun airport. While the situation in Germany had already been very bad since the beginning of March or so, the news about the corona virus started to spread mid-March in Mexico and really affected me when I had to decide whether or not to leave the coast in order to travel inland for further interview appointments. My partner who holds US citizenship traveled with me while I hold German citizenship. This is something which, so far, had never impacted our relationship in any meaningful way, but when it came to making decisions on whether to stay in Mexico, return to Germany, and on how to leave Mexico, our respective citizenships suddenly became important.

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17.3.2020

It is Tuesday, 17.3.2020, and thus day 20 of my field research trip to Mexico. Actually, I want to leave the coastal region today and drive inland to Merida, because I have appointments at the university there. I read Mexican newspapers online and learned that there are already more restrictions in Yucatan than in Quintana Roo, the federal state where I am based right now. In addition, closing the borders between the states was floated as an idea in order to stop the spread of the virus among residents

of these respective areas. What to do? I contact my hotel in Merida. Its owner/manager advises against leaving Tulum, texting that it's better not come to Yucatan. He cancels my booking and tells me I will get the money back; money is not important at the moment anyway – one's health is more important. I should stay on the coast, he says. I cancel my appointments at the university and get an email back from my Merida colleague that there is panic at the university and I should better not come. We can skype instead. So, I start looking for a new accommodation in Tulum. After considering going to Cancun to be close to the airport, Tulum nevertheless seems to be the better choice. I find a small holiday home with its own kitchen. So, from now on I can cook for myself and isolate myself here. The case numbers are very low, 1 case in Cancun, 0 in Tulum. But while I notice how friends at home are isolating themselves more and more, it seems right to do the same here. Even though there are no governmental regulations yet. Before I can go to my holiday home, I have to eat something. For breakfast I go to a small *Taqueria* and sit in the garden. After some time two men arrive, I see that they are from the health department. They sit down with the owner; I hear how often the word "Corona" is mentioned. They seem to explain to her what this virus is and how its spread can be prevented. As I leave, I look at the poster they put up on the wall. With pictures and simple sentences, they explain how to wash one's hands correctly. A first step towards public health in times of Covid 19? As I walk through the streets, I see more and more people wearing facemasks and gloves, they keep their distance, it is emptier, many restaurants were equipped with these posters. I get updates from my landlady with the current case numbers on my mobile phone. In the evening I do more substantive shopping, as there are rumors that the restaurants will close tomorrow: pasta, beans, corn, rice. Fresh fruit and vegetables. In the supermarket, everything is still available in abundance; "panic-buying" is not something that seems to have entered people's minds. The atmosphere is relaxed. In the evening, I receive an e-mail that my flight home has been cancelled. The airline writes that they are not responsible for us, but rather that their CodeShare partner is, i.e. the airline on whose website we booked. I try calling them, but in spite of their 24-hour hotline, I

can't reach anyone. I'm on the phone for almost four hours – in vain. I go to sleep insecure.

18.3.2020

In the morning I finally manage to reach the airline. They say there is nothing they can do for us. All the planes are overbooked. They have one flight via the USA, but wait, as a German, you can't take it. He's sorry, the clerk says on the phone, there's really nothing he can do. I'm supposed to report to the German Foreign Office and the embassy in Mexico City. The whole thing leaves me insecure, but at the same time I have new tasks: call the embassy, register with the Foreign Office, keep looking for flights. One is well occupied with these tasks. But for the time being there are no results to show. I start to prepare the return journey in another way. In the pharmacy I want to buy facemasks for the return flight. They're sold-out all over Tulum. There's no telling when they'll be back. Acetaminophen is still available; I'll buy two packs. I heard somewhere – even if I'm not sure it's true – that ibuprofen is bad for treating Corona. So better safe than sorry. Acetaminophen is no longer available at home in Germany. Back again, I ask the beautician who has her practice downstairs from my home if I can buy a facemask for the flight from her? She doesn't want any money and gladly gives it to me. Meanwhile, an email from my landlady here in Mexico arrives on my mobile phone, "During these days, there are no borders. Feel at home. We are your family." It comforts me and provides courage to read something like this and I feel less alone.

19.3.2020

I do not want to give up and call the airline again, this time under their US American hotline. The clerk who answers my call sounds tired. But she'll find a flight! Direct

flight from Cancun to Frankfurt on March 24 at 10 pm. She rebooks me. Meanwhile I get a mail from the German embassy in Mexico City: As long as there are commercial flights, please leave the country on your own, the embassy is not responsible. The communication is brief and very matter of fact. It's odd because one sits here and sees German tourists from other regions of the world being flown home and you yourself are told "Take care of yourself"; it feels strange and like the German government is treating its citizens very differently. To some they are accommodating, to others not at all. My trust in German foreign policy is diminishing every day. I spend a lot of time on the phone with friends and family. Some say "Come right away", others say "Stay where you are, Mexico is nicer anyway." I rent a bicycle to be able to be a little bit mobile here and not to come into contact with other people in the taxi. The bike rental company, an Australian, tells me that he thinks that all this is not real anyway. An experiment. A third world war. One does not know. Supposedly, he tells me, supermarkets here in Mexico close on Sundays too. And while I am convinced that you can't protect a population from Corona by preventing it, it makes you feel insecure in a country where one does not speak the language well and the police and military are already cracking down on.

20.3.2020

Although I think the statement of the bicycle rental company is nonsense, I go to the supermarket again. Everything is still normal here, people are buying things in normal quantities. Nobody seems to have lost their mind. Everything is there! I start to ask the people here more specifically what they think about Covid-19 and how they are doing. While it's mostly the people from Western countries who confront me with conspiracy theories, "China did this to have more power", or "This is all fake news anyway", or "Donald Trump is to blame for everything", it's the Mexicans who communicate fear and concern. Where does that come from? What will it do to us in the future? Are we all gonna get sick? What will happen to our financial situation?

Meanwhile I read more Mexican newspapers. The cases are still small, the country is in phase 2, most of the people have been infected abroad, no reason to panic. In other media the president of the country is sharply criticized because he allegedly trivializes the virus. Just a short time ago a festival was held in Mexico City with 70,000 visitors. At the same time, I receive memes from WhatsApp suggesting that Mexico should build the wall to protect itself from the infected Americans. In Tulum, where I am staying, there are still 0 registered cases. Although I had actually ordered home quarantine, I go out for a burrito on the street in the evening. What about tomorrow, I wonder? You don't know what about tomorrow, says the street food seller. They said it's such an uncertain time, we must see day by day.

21.3.2020

My landlady tells me that some bars are open on the beach, others are closed. I want to know if it's legal to go out for fun. Yeah, no problem. Meanwhile I get other news from Germany and I still don't want to make a mistake here. So, I take the bike to the beach. Hardly anything happening. I decide to go to a café, which I also know from the city, as they have two outlets in Tulum. My partner comes along. We put the bikes down and are greeted by two employees. One gives us anti-bacterial hand sanitizer; the other measures our temperature with a kind of thermometer gun. My temperature is 35 degrees Celsius, and I get a thumbs-up. My partner has 33.2 degrees Celsius, so he is practically hypothermic, but thumbs up for him, too! "Very accurate", I think to myself, but this episode also offers some levity in what appears to be a really serious situation. We have the feeling it's getting more and more absurd. We sit down. There are hardly any other guests. I lie down in the sun, two beach vendors speak to me. They want to know where I come from. From Germany. When does my flight leave? On Tuesday, I say. They think it's a pity. There wouldn't be any new guests after all, they figured. Couldn't I at least stay? Only white people would get Covid anyway and I have a well-developed sun-tan, so I wouldn't have to

worry, I could stay and be safe here. I think to myself, “Wow, if they really believe that, that’s a problem! But maybe it was just a way to keep talking to me. Beach flirting in Corona times?

22.3.2020

I decide to go back to the beach by bike. En route to the beach there is very little going on, I don’t know Tulum this empty. I think it makes sense to shop for a few more things I can give away for birthdays in the coming months; especially hand-woven small cosmetic bags seem to be practical. I find a nice little shop and buy a few things. I get into conversation with the owners, a married couple in their mid-40’s. They live, despite having their own shop, from hand to mouth, “De día a día.” They don’t know yet what they’ll have to eat tomorrow. I don’t know what to say and it makes me sad. I assure them, in the belief of saying nice things, that I will surely return next year. Yes, but one wouldn’t know if they will still be here then, they say. We wish each other good health and lots of strength in these times and it is not the first time that I feel unwell when I think about what Covid says about global social problems and inequalities. On the beach my temperature is measured again, today it is 35 degrees Celsius, so I can pass without problems. The menu in the café has been cut down to a minimum; it is also laminated and is permanently wiped off. Chairs are also sprayed with liquid disinfectant, as well as the tables which are constantly wiped.

23.3.2020

It’s my last planned day in Tulum. I still read in the paper about zero cases here. On the one hand, it’s reassuring, but on the other, it makes me suspicious. Can that really be true with the international audience here? Before becoming claustrophobic

in the holiday home, I take my bike to the beach one last time. Hardly anyone is really on the road anymore. Many small cafés are closed on the way to the beach; some shops have emptied their goods. It's only a matter of days until the violence returns, some people are convinced. Whatever the outcome, Tulum has become a ghost town. My feeling is also that the police presence has increased. The otherwise vibrant life has stopped, coupled with panicked tourists who want to go home and a local population full of concern. In principle they cannot afford a shutdown like in Europe and elsewhere. While I cycle, I pass more and more closed shops. The café that I like to visit on the beach is still open. But even here, the hut directly at the sea is locked with slats; they carry off their valuable espresso machine with a wheelbarrow. It is sad to see how everything is locked and barricaded. I'm going to get something to eat. I notice that there are Covid warning posters everywhere. The waiter tells me it's supposed to be 40 days, that everything in the hotel zone is locked. The remaining tourists were put in a few hotels, and the other hotels have closed. His new outfit – a facemask – is described by him as "Corona style". Then, after 40 days, hopefully people will come here again. On the way home I stop briefly at the supermarket. A German tourist calls her parents crying, she doesn't know what to do. In the store people keep their distance to each other. On the shelves there are now signs saying that you should disinfect your hands regularly and please only buy as much as you need. At the cash register it says that you should keep a meter distance to other customers. The opening hours have been shortened; alcohol is only available until 5 pm. When I returned my bike to the hostel from which I rented it, I was informed that the hostel is closed, too. No guests are arriving anymore, and the last ones have gone home. Everything is different. I can check in for my flight in the evening and it looks like I will be able to return to Germany as planned. It feels as if you (can) leave a sinking ship in time, whilst others have to remain on it.