Inga Janina Sievert
Coral O'Brian

Research from afar or carrying out research 'un-ethnologically' close?



Weighing our options. Photo by Matthew Henry, altered and published in compliance with Burst image license.

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The plan was solidified. Coral had received her visa and the final logistics were set to travel to the Cederberg Mountain region in South Africa for a 12-month fieldwork stay beginning in April 2020 – and likewise, Inga to Darjeeling, India for the same period of research.

We both work in a large, interdisciplinary research project called 'Climate, Climatic Change, and Society' (CLICCS) at the University of Hamburg, and our task as

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anthropologists is to investigate future expectations and impacts of climate change through ethnographic approaches. However, our research plans were interrupted due to the breakout of the global SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, then paused, and are now altered, as we employ flexibility in order to continue our research in the present circumstances.

In the spring and early summer we were still optimistic that our fieldwork might only be slightly delayed and that – hopefully – we would eventually be able to enter our respective field sites towards fall or winter. The idea then was to begin researching digitally, starting with an online media discourse analysis with locally relevant environmental NGOs and social movements within our regions. "As the Internet is strongly embedded in our (and activists') everyday lives (Wellman 2011) and not radically divorced from social movements' offline activities, it can be approached through a wide range of familiar and established methodologies" (Mosca 2014, 405). In social online networks such as Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram we could carry out participant observation as we were trained to do, albeit in this case, through an online format. We also planned to start interviewing actors that were easily accessible online with the aid of Skype, Zoom, or even WhatsApp call functions.

As time continued to pass, and after identifying relevant actors and organizations (and further disruptions with research project related tasks), it became increasingly apparent that it would simply not be possible to conduct our ethnographic fieldwork as planned in South Africa or India. This became a further concern given the time limitation of our contracts. Additionally, the actors and voices we are most interested in uplifting might not be possible to engage with solely through an online setting. Therefore, the question arose whether it even made sense to start researching from afar, when the chances of later connecting this with an in-person fieldwork were increasingly declining. These circumstances led us to view our ethnographic work through a closer lens.

Our main topic revolves around examining social constructions of climate futures,

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and while we were prepared to conduct this research in South Africa and India, it is of equal relevance in our own backyard: Germany. Within our sub-project of CLICCS, Germany is an additional regional focus – and so far not covered by ethnographic research. So, why not conduct fieldwork in Germany? Clearly, this research would not occur in the same settings we had planned – tea plantation workers in Darjeeling and rooibos farmers in the Cederberg mountains – yet it could similarly be a medium for the same overarching question: which climate futures are possible and which are plausible?

Within standard academic expectations (namely Social and Cultural Anthropology), not being in a field site physically, or to conduct research 'at home' would likely not be encouraged under 'normal' circumstance. However, currently there are simply no 'normal' circumstances, which opens space for new frames of thinking. Dozens, if not hundreds, of early stage researchers worldwide are currently balancing similar questions. Our discipline is required to undergo further flexibility for a generation of young scholars who simply have not had the opportunity to conduct long fieldwork stays abroad. Why not research relevant topics, particularly one such as climate change, which is unequivocally a global issue, from afar or 'un-ethnologically' close to one's 'home'?

Our current plan is to begin with a shorter 'co-fieldwork' around the topic of forest decline in Germany. We are in the process of identifying a suitable location to investigate the role and communication of climate change and future imaginations of different actors within this topic. We plan to engage with foresters, hunters, private forest owners, conservationists, timber producers, political actors within the region as well as their networks, and additional residents who are directly or indirectly connected by the forest. We are in contact with a number of foresters and rangers who offered their assistance in our search for a fitting location.

Despite the fact that both of us cannot write two dissertations on this topic, we, as anthropologists, are freshly motivated to finally work personally with a diverse set of

stakeholders for this project. It gives us the opportunity to devote ourselves to something meaningful and still leaves room to perhaps travel to Darjeeling and the Cederberg Mountains at a later date for a shorter fieldstay. Or, if this is completely unrealistic, then our work in Germany can potentially be broadened to incorporate both of our dissertations. Certainly, one can say we have chosen a pragmatic solution, however, the prospect of working with people face-to-face unequivocally held the highest appeal in our minds. Moreover, this decision provided an opportunity to clarify a primary motivation for us to become anthropologists – an exchange of in-person connection – paired with reforming our notion of fieldwork for this project to an intimate and familiar setting.

We believe it is a useful strategy for researchers to investigate topics in an area they can safely gain access to, which in many cases would be their country of residence, and apply their planned methodologies and theoretical knowledge to their own backyard.

Inga Janina Sievert and **Coral O'Brian**, PhD candidates in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Cluster of Excellence 'Climate, Climatic Change, and Society' (CLICCS) at the University of Hamburg, researching future expectations and social constructions of climate change in India, South Africa, and Germany. Contact: inga.janina.sievert[at]uni-hamburg.de and coral.obrian[at]uni-hamburg.de

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