

**Shifting Intimate Encounters –
Rethinking Anthropological Practices During a Pandemic**

By Miriam Jaehn

Introduction

Anthropology and the practice of ethnography rely on intimate encounters with strangers by sharing the same sensuous environment. It is this sharing of a sensuous environment in space and time that enables researchers and participants to experience not only each other's but also one's own 'strangeness'. Face to face, they become aware of each other's strangeness with all their senses. Researching refugee-migrants in South and Southeast Asia, such ethnographic encounters are structured by the unequal im-/mobilities between researchers and refugee-migrants. While before the Covid-19 pandemic the researcher was highly mobile and could seek out encounters with refugee-migrants, they suddenly became incapacitated by regulations that enforced 'social distancing' as an obligation to protect each other from infection with the virus. Refugee-migrants were no less immobilized yet often desperately sought for mobility due to growing economic pressures. The Covid-19 pandemic, hence, deeply affected the encounters and relations possible between researchers and refugee-migrants. Amidst their shifting im-/mobilities, sharing of a common sensuous environment for ethnographic fieldwork was often hardly possible.

In this paper I therefore ask what happens to anthropological practices when intimate ethnographic encounters between strangers and with strangeness are hampered? How can anthropologists rethink and reconceptualize their techniques of knowledge to find connectedness in times of crises that shift their im-/mobilities? **I approach these questions by taking a self-reflexive turn. I focus on my experiences in transitioning from encounters with Rohingya refugees in the field to engaging with them online during the Covid-19 pandemic.** I argue that shifting from offline to online encounters involves strenuous acts of translation that inherently transform and reconfigure established intimate relations between researchers and refugee-migrants. Translating intimacies from one space to the other leads to new encounters with each other's strangeness and, as such, initiate novel intimate relations with and between the same

persons. I suggest that in the face of researchers' and refugee-migrants' shifting im-/mobilities and the breaking apart of their previous intimacies with each other, they need to draw on techniques of digital/online ethnography to recover the intimacy found through and beyond each other's strangeness. The challenges and frictions in doing so offer valuable insights to the different conditionalities of ethnographic encounters and intimate relations offline and online.

Offline Ethnography and Intimation Between Strangers

The discipline of anthropology has received a lot of critique for its involvement in colonialism and its often 'othering'/orientalising gaze (citations). This critique has led to a rethinking of its premisses and techniques of knowledge, mainly the practice of ethnography which is at the heart of anthropology. I understand ethnographic fieldwork as being emplaced in intimate encounters of strangers in a shared, sensuous environment. But what does this mean? What do I understand under intimate encounters? And who is a stranger, to whom? Berlant writes in "Intimacy: A Special Issue" (1998: 281) that "to intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, [...] But intimacy also involves an inspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others". As such, intimacy is to be found in an encounter between at least two people, but not any encounter but an encounter premised on the will to share. As such, "[I]ntimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces" (Berlant 1998: 282). It builds a world of you and me, of us.

In creating such encounters, ethnographic practices are not a solitary experience or the single work of the researcher, but they are the work of researcher and participant who have been 'strangers'. Yet, having been strangers does not mean that they have not had an idea of who 'the other' is. In contrast, entering the field, the anthropologist usually already has an idea of whom they will encounter – they have conceptualized 'the stranger', heard, read, and maybe even already written about them (Ahmed 2000). Yet, we researchers are strangers ourselves. We are conceptualized as someone before we arrive in 'our' field; research participants have a notion of who comes to the field. Anthropologists and research participants meet each other in the field as known and knowing strangers – entangled in discourses not only of 'strangeness', but often also 'otherness'. As such, it is the task of our encounter to unpack, and question

preconceived notions of ‘strangeness’. This is done through intimacy. Not an intimacy of instrumentalized friendship or sexual and romantic relationship, but an intimacy that represents an openness to share and create worlds and spaces together. To acknowledge and challenge each other’s ‘strangeness’ and to become attached – if only momentarily – to each other’s lives. Intimacy means meeting each other, becoming and being connected to each other, and creating an impact on each other (Berlant 1998). Intimate encounters are encounters that cannot easily be disavowed. Such encounters take place while being with each other. Anthropologists and refugee-migrants share a room, a meal, or a tea to face each other. A face-to-face, a being-in-it, that does not take notice of each other’s outward appearance, but that is “in a direct relation” to each other (Ahmed 2000: 145). It is this deep focus on who is presented to you that an encounter becomes intimate, it is the sharing of each other that creates intimacy and its sociality.

In a traditional sense, this “facing (up to) an other” (Ahmed 2000: 146) has and still is being done by many anthropologists in moving towards those conceptualized as strangers. Of becoming and seeing oneself as a professional stranger (Ahmed 2000). The anthropologist is an uninvited guest who asks for a welcoming by their research participants. Anthropologists have asked for an unconditional hospitality, of being received and leaving after having learnt and gained knowledge from a so-called stranger. As such, anthropologists may not necessarily act reciprocal nor leave timely as expected from stranger guests to whom one is hospitable. In such hierarchised encounters, the anthropologist as guest questions the research participants’ role as patrons and of those defining the threshold – setting the conditions of hospitality (Derrida 2000). Yet, it is in the intimate encounter that the anthropologist becomes conscious and faces up to the research participants’ needs and wants as a willing or reluctant host. They share and present themselves vis-à-vis while respecting their boundaries. They face up to the fact that hospitality of refugee-migrants cannot be unconditional, that they have to give as they receive. In the end, ethnographic encounters are “very ‘painstaking labour’ of getting closer, of speaking *to* each other, and of working *for* each other” (Ahmed 2000: 180) involving translation between each other.

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Ethnographic Disruption

But what are the conditions for intimate and consensual encounters if facing each other in a literal sense is no longer possible? How is sharing in each other's presence still possible and how are boundaries drawn? What role does hospitality still play in forming reciprocal relationships? These questions are central to the practice of digital (or virtual, online, cyber-). ethnography (Jones 1998; Hine 2000; Sade-Beck 2004; Underberg and Zorn 2013) and its ethics (Murthy 2008). Despite the importance of digital and online spaces in our daily life, more 'traditional' ethnographers have still not engaged with online ethnography in their projects. They continue to solely rely on intimate encounters offline rather than to acknowledge the significance of online spaces in shaping peoples' daily lives. However, with the onsetting of the Covid-19 pandemic, they were suddenly faced with the harsh realities of not being able to encounter each other in a fixed place offline anymore. Regimes of im/mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) shifted in a way that complicated 'traditional' ethnographic encounters. While before the pandemic, anthropologists of forced migration tended to seek out the routes and places of refugee-migrants, which they were now hindered to do. One, because their privileged hypermobility as a tool to 'access' refugee-migrants was questioned – Either they fled containment in precarious places (as I did) or they were unable to move out of their sanctuaries – and second, public health measures emphasized 'social distancing' to protect each other from infection with the Covid-19 virus. To still physically encounter refugee-migrants who suffer from a lack of access to healthcare, and often also hygiene products and sanitation facilities, would have been irresponsible.

Further, refugee-migrants' mobilities shifted into different directions. While the regimes of im/mobility have already targeted refugee-migrants before the pandemic, forcing them into clandestine journeys (Mainwaring and Brigden 2016), the brunt of measures and restrictions to life hit them more than us, anthropologists. Engaging in precarious and informal labour, they no longer had an income to gain, were squeezed and contained in overcrowded housings, camps, and IDCs, or had to walk and travel hundreds of kilometres to find a safer place for their health and livelihood (citations). Refugee-migrants' im/mobilities only became ever more exacerbated in their precarity as they became hyper-criminalized not only as a political and economic threat but also as a threat to public health, potentially carrying and spreading the virus

with them (Khanna 2020). As a result of these shifting im/mobilities, anthropologists were forced to interrupt or reinvent their research from an offline field to other modes of engagement with refugee-migrants, disrupting previous processes of intimation. This disruption, an excruciating moment of disconnect, created a rift in routinized and familiar expressions of intimacy. Intimate ties of the field threatened to crumble and break apart as fieldwork became disrupted and needed to build intimate relations anew in another space-time continuum –such as in online spaces.

Reinventing Research, Translating Intimacies

However, as working with refugee-migrants in the field already involves layers of translation to intimate with each other, shifting the field to new spaces requires another moment of translation. When the field moves ever more from offline towards online interactions and communication, shifts in intimacy even occur if online interactions have been part of each other’s offline intimation. The moment that physical distance grows and becomes permanent, online communication becomes the main vehicle to experience and express intimacy. It is no longer a complementary form of facing up to each other, but it becomes its defining moment. It attains a level of relevance it previously did not encompass.

As spaces of encounter change so does communication and language. Although the language of communication may remain the same between anthropologist and refugee-migrant (as for example English), shifting the field from online to offline interaction requires at least some level of “intersemiotic translation” (Jakobson 1992) – “an interpretation of verbal signs by other nonverbal sign systems” (Bassnett 2014: 7). What was previously expressed through the spoken word in facing each other in its literal sense – a face-to-face in each other’s physical proximity and presence – has now to be translated across distance in space and time, and across semiotic systems. Feelings are no longer necessarily traceable on a person’s face but need, despite the occasional use of voice messages and video calls, to be read through written words, unspoken messages (as silences), and the use of emojis to imitate facial expressions.

Moreover, offline intimacy is not only built through the words we use to communicate but also through the intonation of our words and our body language (Sade-Beck 2004) – how we move in the physical space-time we share. All these shared sensual

expressions of us that create intimacy change with a shift of the field from offline to online spaces. This requires not only strenuous acts of translation but also, inadvertently, causes to change how we intimate. If we want or not, it changes the way we can build, share, and express intimacy, how we encounter each other. As such, the intimate relations we have created in the offline field will not remain the same online. As I wrote elsewhere, intersemiotic translations from offline to online communication require “constant, strenuous acts of collaborative interpretation, resulting in approximations and mistranslations” (Jaehn 2021). They do not replicate but produce new forms of intimation and intimacy. In effect, our self-translations into online spaces may have been undertaken with an intended search for equivalence, of reproducing offline intimacies, but they become “an unending process that endows a text [and its resulting intimacy] with new life and new meanings” (Bassnett 2014: 64).

Yet is not only the textuality of online communication which constitutes a new semiotics and requires translation, but it also its location in a different time-space continuum that shifts expressions of intimacy online. Messages are not necessarily received and replied to immediately. Messages received and sent may lag as internet usage is bound to divergent access and usage of online spaces and its availability to a person – discussions of digital divide must come to mind (citations). As such, online spaces give us time to react and to contemplate longer how to respond to intimation. Instantaneous reactions and facial slips may largely fall away whereas more thoughtful and stylised responses and messages come back to us. As such, intimate encounters online appear to be less spontaneous. They are more intentional, thought-through. While offline intimation often arises in moments of rest, silence, and contemplation in each other’s physical presence, online spaces are created across divergent temporalities, intimate encounters stretched across time-spaces. Offline time and space are shared even if one is not talking in each other’s presence whereas online time and space are only actively shared in the moments of approaching and replying to each other’s fragmented calls for intimation.

Online Ethnography and Intimating Encounters

This does not mean that one cannot intimate online. But one does differently so. Yet, in this shift from intimate offline to online encounters, the development of online

intimacy tends to be expected to build upon previous intimate relations offline. When in the field offline, lasting attachment not to be disavowed is expressed by an exchange and sharing of social media handles. By exchanging our online identities, we intend to stay connected, imagining a return to meet and encounter offline again. But if this is not possible, social media channels function as a tool to stay connected. Yet, in the moment of offline interactions we may not always remember to include all our world, our online presence, into our sharing. So, some connections only fostered in the offline have been lost in the moment of shifting im/mobilities – at least for the time being. But with others, it is these channels we suddenly can and have to rely on to remain attached to each other. Yet, we have to re-encounter each other as we build other lives and profiles online. In these re-encounters with people, we have previously become familiar and intimate with offline, we try to reconnect by emphasizing and referring to our previous intimacy (Jaehn 2021). We refer to the food, thoughts, and emotions we have shared and the knowledge we have gained about each other. We reiterate that we cannot wait to share them again – in future offline encounters. In essence, our online encounters are made possible and are hence bracketed in these previous experiences and acts of intimation, of becoming familiar in each other's presence, of taking shape together.

But, to creating lasting attachment, we must move beyond the reiteration of previous intimacies as these crumble in the face of prolonged physical distances to escape the danger of only 'lurking' (Murthy 2008) on each other's profiles – indulging in a voyeuristic gaze without participating and facing up to each other when presenting ourselves online. Such a 'lurking' on each other's profiles without engagement, without saying "I am here, I see you and here I am, I want to be with you", is problematic as it empties out the idea of an encounter. Indulging in 'lurking', we no longer encounter each other but consume stylised online identities. We consume passively and turn ourselves into objects of passive consumption. We are no longer present in intimation. While we have shared our social media identities and thus consented to our insight into each other's life online, over time we risk forgetting to seek out a personal attachment that goes beyond passive consumption. By lurking on social media without creating a dialogue, we are no longer hospitable to each other. We do not present ourselves as guests and we no longer act as patrons. We only steal each other's information as we do not announce our presence but remain invisible to

each other. Although we do not leave or hide, we also no longer meet and connect. We only know that we occasionally, or constantly, observe and consume each other.

However, online ethnographies must not shift into ‘lurking’ and passive consumption of each other’s presented, fragmented lives. Intimate encounters are possible online in participating in dialogues, in encountering each other again. Social media spaces do present and offer tools to us to show our presence and face each other. Hence, we must make use of the full register of online communication. While ‘liking’ a status is the most ‘basic’ form of interaction, of facing up to someone, we can also share or comment on a status, send private (voice) messages, and ask for and respond to video calls. Using these features increases our connection to each other and create an intimation by making ourselves readable, visible, and audible – we become recognizable. Yet, remaining mostly present through our words to represent our thoughts and feelings might also make us more approachable beyond our physical appearance. The focus of our encounter can shift from our physical presence to our inner world. Rather than expressing ourselves through our gendered, classed, and racialised bodies, we can express ourselves through our minds. However, the internet remains a stratified place and our offline identities are not anonymous and free of classifications. Online we still remain acutely aware of our offline social identities. As such, our ability to express ourselves online remains shaped and limited by our offline identities. We perform online as we have learnt offline, and we react differently to people depending on their assumed classed, racialized, religious, and gendered identity (citation).

Frictions Of and Beyond the Digital Divide

As I stated earlier, intimate encounters online are translations of previous intimacies offline that include approximations and mistranslations. As such, frictions and rifts may emerge, especially as online ethnographies face a multitude of spaces with different access and privacy settings (Hine 2000). Interacting with somebody on a Facebook group or on their profile is a rather ‘public’ interaction. It is visible to third persons, and they may choose to follow and even participate in the initial interaction. A conversation and encounter on such sites can generate a discussion across and between a multitude of people, generating new possible encounters – of connecting to

people we previously would not have faced up to. Friend requests may suddenly pop up and open the door to encountering new people, of creating dialogues previously impossible as one would have never met in the offline field due to gatekeepers who want to **monopolize** representation of the community.

But it might also limit the information shared, the more sensitive and private, the information and emotions that are shared in meeting each other by shutting out everyone else and focusing on each other. Rohingya women for example tend to be less present and visible on social media. They may be completely absent; their presence may be more coveted as they do not share pictures of themselves and reach out less to persons on social media they have not met in person or share phones with male family members who have access to their profiles (Jaehn 2021). As such, even when connecting with some persons through “pm” (private message), privacy – as communicating one on one – is not guaranteed. Private messages might be read or listened to by a person who has the access settings to the phone and social media profiles of whom tends to intimate with. Certain topics that could be previously addressed have suddenly become more sensitive as it is not clear if somebody else is ‘lurking’ around, controlling each message and interaction.

Depending on each other’s positionality, connecting, and intimating on social media through activity on each other’s profiles, sending pms, voice messages, and making video calls can create wide divisions in possibilities of connection and frictions in each other’s intimate encounters. While privacy may be limited in some contexts, in others, online spaces can create a level of privacy previously absent. While in the offline field, specific spaces may not be shared and hinder specific forms of intimation through reservation, observation, or interruption by a third party, these factors may fall away if access to the phone is limited to one person only. If privacy is given, this might encourage a person to attempt a redefinition of intimacy towards romantic or sexual relations. While this might create discomfort and frictions in previous intimate encounters offline, it also must lead to the acknowledgement of refugee-migrants beyond their construction as just that. The attempt to redefine intimate encounters away from their identity as refugee-migrants is a demand to pay attention to their desire to become perceptible as other than refugees and migrants (Witteborn 2015). In online spaces, refugee-migrants (and we as well) express an agency to portray and stylise lives that may not be possible offline, but which are

nevertheless desirable, influencing our identity formation – offline and online. As such, by sharing each other's lives as desired and not only as lived offline, we can encounter each other from a new perspective not constrained by the harsh grounds of our offline lives but on the imaginary possibilities of fashioning more glamorous online identities. We face up to our deepest and most private needs and desires that may remain unmet offline. We become more multi-faceted as we reinvent ourselves and escape the social constraints of our offline lives. Only few lives remain completely untouched by social media today.

A Return to the Status Quo? Lessons from Ethnographic Disruptions

So, how has the pandemic influenced practices of anthropology? How will ethnographic research look in an 'after' the pandemic?

Returning to the status quo seems impossible when facing up to the pandemic and what it has taught us about anthropology as a discipline and ethnography as its main methodology and practice. The last two to three years cannot be ignored when re-connecting with refugee-migrants offline again. They have been too transformational not only to our lives but also to our intimate encounters with each other. Covid-19 and its effects on anthropology's techniques of knowledge need to be addressed to account for our dis-connection throughout these years. When re-turning to offline intimate encounters, we must acknowledge and draw on previous offline intimacies but also on those intimacies that were (not) fostered online. Returning to an offline field must face up to our failures and successes in sustaining and creating intimation and intimacy online. We must face up to our lurking, consumption, and redefinitions of intimacy online. Our experiences of (failed) intimate encounters of the last two to three years of the Covid-19 pandemic must be used to create deeper, long-lasting attachments and to take up responsibility for a greater hospitality towards each other. We need to remind ourselves of facing up to each other in the multitude of space-time continuums available to us.

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