

**Intimate Encounters and Shifting Im-/Mobilities –  
Rethinking Anthropological Practices During a Pandemic**

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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

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.