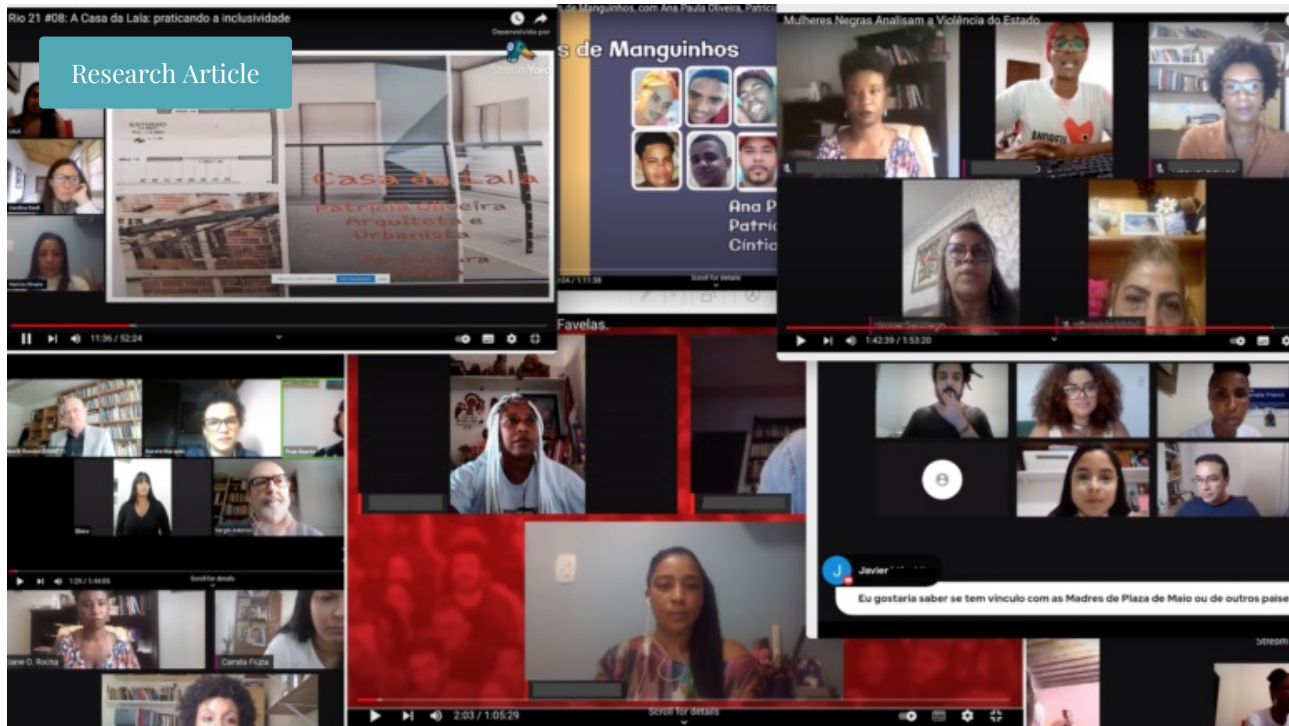




Accessing local knowledge from afar. A hybrid research project

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Issue: Dislocating Urban Studies

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Introduction

How does a feminist conduct urban research during a global pandemic? How can we get close to the lived realities of communities we seek to study despite physical distance? How can I still conduct research in a country that has become the epicenter of the Coronavirus outbreak? These are questions I have thought about extensively over the last two years. The emergence of COVID-19 and the related restrictions brought about some challenges for my PhD research, on which I reflect in this article. In my research, I bring (feminist) security studies and urban studies into dialogue. I investigate how race, gender and class are constitutive of how favela residents in Rio de Janeiro experience everyday security and insecurity. Feminist security researchers express the complexity and ambiguity of security in the notion of *(in)security* in order to demonstrate how security and insecurity are mutually constitutive.

Urban (in)securities in favelas are not merely a geographical phenomenon that can be measured in crime statistics. Rather, everyday encounters with violence include physical forms, but also psychological, political and economic repression. Urban violence—and the threat thereof—frequently interrupts the everyday due to partial or complete closure of schools, health units and people arriving late for work when shootings or police operations occur (Rocha 2012; Vargas, 2005). This continuum of violence has been reinforced since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the beginning, residents, activists and community organizers have chosen online spaces to connect and talk about urgent issues, such as healthcare, violence and other pandemic-related impacts on favelas. In my research project, I utilize these exchange formats to analyze how the affected actors make their multiple (in)securities a subject of discussion and create a common space to share experiences.

Into the unknown: urban research during a global pandemic

Initially, my research design entailed an ethnography with two short-term research stays for conducting fieldwork in Rio de Janeiro. My original plan entailed a three-month ethnographic fieldwork on-site in spring 2020 after a preliminary visit to make new contacts in summer 2019. For the time of my fieldwork, I established a formalized research collaboration with a local NGO that would provide access to community organizations and activists. In my case studies in two favelas, I would conduct qualitative in-depth interviews with residents and focus on how they make sense of their everyday experiences of security and insecurity. Research participants' experiences not only give insights about how they are affected by urban violence but also generate a deeper understanding of how security "works" in an urban setting. A bottom-up approach was crucial for me to engage with everyday actors and draw a picture from the standpoints of those marginalized in security narratives. Of course, adapting to a changing research environment, making methodological adjustments and finding new ways of data collection are always part of an empirical research process, even under pre-pandemic circumstances. Fieldwork requires a lot of planning, from bureaucratic requirements

from both the host institution and your department at home, to applying for funding, to finding accommodation. During a pandemic, changes are more about giving up being in control, “waiting and learning patience rather than concrete adjustments” (Nikolić, 2021, n.p.). Especially for early-career researchers, this can be difficult due to short-term funding and economic uncertainty, but also the lack of an established network within the research field. About two months into the pandemic, I realized that fieldwork on-site would not be feasible within the scope of my PhD project. After seriously doubting the purpose of even pursuing a PhD at all, I found new possibilities to approach my “field” by talking to a colleague who had substantial experience in online research and by collective reflection with peers.

Departing from the field on-site

A shorter visit to Rio de Janeiro in August 2019 was crucial to being able to follow through with the intended geographical focus. Although I did not establish as many contacts as I’d hoped, the experiences shaped my understanding of my online field in the sense that I had an idea of how the physical space looked like when I later dislocated my research to the online sphere. Field notes from that time helped me to revisit the geographical field, at least in my mind. I tried to use Google Maps and Street View to go back to the places I visited and relive my experiences. However, favelas are barely accessible through Google Street View as only roads surrounding and some main roads that go through them are accessible. Many favelas, especially those built on steep hills (*morros*) are characterized by narrow, winding roads that are too small for the Google Street View car. As favelas are partly off the online map, the information value for me was thus fairly limited. I could reconnect with the field from afar with the help from Patrícia, an architect who lives in the favela of Manguinhos in Rio de Janeiro’s North Zone. Patrícia and I met in 2019 during a field trip to Manguinhos with a group of architecture students from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), which I was able to join. Patrícia was our guide for the excursion. She likes to call herself the *favelada arquiteta*, the architect favelada (female favela resident) because she regards her background and positionality, being a *favelada*, as decisive for how she practices architecture. Building according to favela residents’ needs is thus the most important objective of her profession. That is, building houses for people who, in general, do not have a lot of money in an area where there is a strong tradition of self-building. At the end of the two-hour tour, I asked Patrícia for her contact details. I explained that I planned to come to Rio a second time in fall 2020 (or European spring 2020, respectively) to conduct my research, and that I would love to meet again.

Disembarking on my online field

After several attempts to reach potential research participants with whom I could conduct online interviews during late summer 2020, I realized that the people I tried to get in touch with needed to take care of themselves and their loved ones since the COVID-19-situation was still precarious and unpredictable in Brazil. What’s more, I did not feel comfortable contacting people repeatedly because of said situation. I feared to put pressure on favela residents who were already struggling, and I felt my research project

was irrelevant compared to their daily challenges. Therefore, I turned to collecting data that was already available online.

The Internet is omnipresent in most of our lives. It is therefore a logical consequence that academics from different disciplines use the Internet both as a tool and a field of research itself (Gray, 2016; Hine, 2000; Pink, 2013; Pink et al., 2016; Postill, 2017). Researchers conducted research remotely long before the pandemic and even before the invention of the Internet. For example, anthropologists studied countries like Germany or Japan from afar during World War II. A difference is that, nowadays we can access a plethora of media in real-time (Postill, 2017). In the 21st century, it is no longer only researchers who record events and share information about it. On the contrary, oftentimes research participants are just as connected as the researchers, despite unequal access to technology (Bliesemann de Guevara and Bøås, 2020, p. 4; Przybylski, 2021, p. 2; Sommer, 2018; p. 108).

Ethical challenges

Conducting research online is not an easy fix for pandemic-imposed challenges. There are also downsides to using digital methods. Depending on where your research is based, access to the Internet might be unequally distributed, research participants might lack the necessary knowledge and experience with technological devices (Zheng and Walsham, 2021). On one hand, the availability of large amounts of public data (e.g., on YouTube or other social media platforms) does not mean you can use it for research without obtaining consent. On the other hand, informed consent is a controversial issue, since research ethics are not a checklist that guarantees for your research to be ethical when followed thoroughly. In some contexts, mostly public and semi-public, it is not possible to obtain consent from everybody. This applies to both offline and online spaces (Legewie and Nassauer, 2018; Linabary and Corple, 2019). For example, Legewie and Nassauer (2018, n.p.) argue that “on platforms such as YouTube maximum visibility can be expected to be either the user’s explicit goal or an accepted fact.” But this does not necessarily mean that they would agree to be a part of scientific research. Furthermore, research ethics as approached by (university) ethics boards are based on the Eurocentric idea that ethical guidelines can be applied universally (Madge, 2007). There are also political and ethical challenges that emerge from online research specifically. For example, using video conferencing tools and other virtual platforms creates the risk of digital surveillance. Private data is valuable for many actors, from authoritarian states to private companies. Furthermore, conducting research from afar means that the researcher is indeed distanced from the field. The (Western) researcher’s status of a mere disembodied outside observer runs the risk of producing top-down knowledge when studying ‘the other’. Academic knowledge production at the expense of marginalized populations has fatal consequences for them (Linabary and Corple, 2019; Mwambari et al. 2021).

In my opinion, it’s critical to acknowledge that it is not easy to merely transfer an offline research design to the online sphere, nor is it desirable. Online research does not produce lower or higher quality research per se, but different research. The research output depends on how researchers go about the process. An important principle of feminist

research practice is that of doing no harm, which means to be attentive to not add to the trauma of research participants who have experienced violence in war and conflict. The highest priority is to not exceed personal boundaries for the sake of data collection. Continuous reflection throughout the research process about one's own assumptions and decisions is key to feminist research, also in online research (Basini, 2016; Linabary and Corple, 2019).

Making sense of the hybrid field

The considerations outlined above were crucial to my research. I was torn between wanting to be a “good” feminist researcher, trying to live up to the ideal of an ethnographer on the one hand and having to deal with research conditions strongly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, not being able to revisit the offline field. “Being there” has long been an unconditional requirement for ethnography, which privileges data gathered in face-to-face settings as inherently more authentic or valid (Morrow et al., 2015; Postill, 2017). Ethnographic research means to build relationships with research participants and participating in cultural practices on the fieldwork site – be it online or offline (Przybylski, 2021, pp. 3–4). The decision to use online material was not easy as I had recurring doubts whether the data would be suitable for the in-depth analysis I had hoped for my PhD thesis.

Is it even possible to dislocate research on an urban matter to the online sphere? At first, I broadened my scope again since I was not sure where the data would take me. At the beginning of my digital encounters, I did not know what focus would provide enough data and was worthwhile to pursue. I started following local initiatives and NGOs on social media and watched YouTube videos, in which activists, community organizers, residents and researchers discussed topics like police violence, mental health, urban development in favelas, etc. Most of the discussions were streamed in the evening, Brazil time. Many of them were posted on YouTube or Facebook thereafter. Due to the time difference, it was convenient for me to watch the recordings at a later time. This allowed me to go through and sort the material and avoid being overwhelmed by the sheer mass of videos. In a second step, I decided to focus on videos in which urban violence (and not, for example, access to health) was discussed in order to narrow down the data. My knowledge about local organizations and actors from my visit to Rio, and Manguinhos in particular, in 2019 was an important entry point to deal with the quantity of material available online.

One of the themes were the narratives of Black mothers from favelas whose sons were violently killed by the police and their subsequent fight for justice, memory and political change. They create a political identity and unity through their experiences of insecurity and the sudden death of their children. Families of victims of police violence regularly participated in online exchange formats. Many of the speakers were known for their activism. For example, *favelada arquiteta* Patrícia and her sister are active in a group called *Mães de Manguinhos* (mothers of Manguinhos) who translate their mourning over the loss of a family member into a public fight for justice, anti-racism and the end of lethal security politics directed at favelas. This focus allows for combining my initial

research interests: the interplay of urban space and security politics, the production of gender, race and class and a bottom-up approach to knowledge production. Since I was physically disconnected from the field, I saw it as an advantage that I had at least been to Manguinhos once and I could complement the analysis of digital material with my own field notes from 2019. After a preliminary selection of videos, I tried to get in contact with individuals that could help me get in touch with the speakers. Patrícia was an important gatekeeper for me and even helped me with obtaining consent from the Manguinhos mothers.

In my research, I could thankfully utilize that the speakers in the videos were connected online and used online spaces to make their voices heard. I benefitted greatly from favela activists and residents sharing their everyday life with others online. I want to emphasize that I did not practice “lurking”, a controversial research practice, where the researcher is present in an online environment with the intention to study the environment without disclosing their identity (Morrow et al., 2015, p. 536; Tzanetakis, 2021, p. 138). I watched a lot of YouTube videos to get an idea about this online field without disclosing my identity. I did not feel that it was necessary to make myself known every time since I did not know if I would want to use the video or not. After I made a list of videos I wanted to analyze, I started the process of getting consent.

Challenging methodologies and methods

For me, opening up to online data had several positive implications. Let me highlight three of them. First, on a personal level, I was able continue with my research even during times of a raging pandemic and a continuing strained situation in Brazil that left communities in favelas most vulnerable. I had concerns about “wasting” the participants’ scarce time resources when trying to get interview partners. At the same time, I feared that more than two years of research and preparations for fieldwork would go to waste if I let go of my research topic. This entails to find other ways to make urban phenomena tangible even though I did not know the place (very well). A more participatory approach could include photo or video diaries. Ultimately, I was not able to do an ethnography but there are many elements of ethnography – offline, online or hybrid – that are worthwhile of incorporating into your research design.

Second, challenging the private/public dualism still popular (not only) in urban studies (Linabary and Corple, 2019; Morrow et al., 2007). Residents and activists utilized online formats to share their personal lives and bring their own concerns to the fore. They exchanged views on urgent topics that mattered to themselves at those particular moments in time in a structured way. Often, participants were not strictly one or the other but were both researchers and activists. Using digital tools and online arenas to talk about matters they deem important, to connect with other actors and to make them accessible to a wider, potentially worldwide audience blurs the (artificial) boundaries between private and public (Howlett, 2021). Using a title for the event, opening with an official greeting, having a Q&A session at the end makes these allegedly private issues public.

And third, in my bottom-up research design, I had to let go of any power over the course of the conversations. There are similarities with narrative interviewing, where the researcher adopts the position of the listener (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). With all the possibilities at hand, I would not have chosen to do so. But as I did not succeed in recruiting interview partners for my study, online discussions thus provided a very valuable opportunity for being able to access local knowledge. Before starting fieldwork, I read up on tons of literature and already had a certain pre-shaped idea of my research topic, whether intentionally or not. Without the possibility of steering a conversation, there might be surprises with regards to what counts as urban violence from the perspective of the speakers. Of course, in such settings asking questions is not possible, which might limit the kind of knowledge you are able to obtain. However, most of the live events streamed online have the opportunity to ask questions in the chat when watching live, regardless of the tool used.

To conclude, even two years through the pandemic, we should not try to go back to business as usual, thinking the scientific world has not fundamentally changed. Many researchers had to respond directly to the COVID-19 outbreak, reevaluate both ongoing and future research, reconsider the ways fieldwork is conducted and rethink relations between researcher and researched (Howlett, 2021). We are still amidst the pandemic and the scientific community still feels the impact, whether in the form of online and hybrid conference formats or the exploration of new methods. I think that many of especially long-term research projects such as PhD theses will show traces of COVID-related challenges. Many (early-career) researchers wrote about the difficulties they faced, for example for conducting urban research. Their accounts offer unique ways of approaching the challenge of conducting research in times of a global pandemic (see e.g., Ashoub, 2021; Banerjee 2021; Boczy, 2021). I am convinced that many scholars who had to adapt their research design due to the pandemic will not change back again to their original plan, for example after the lifting of travel restrictions. The exploration of new methods might have implication for their future research. Personally, I will consider online research in the future as well, even though it was not on my radar before the pandemic.

Urban research during a global pandemic: Final thoughts

Infectious diseases, epidemics and, most recently, COVID-19 all have obvious and manifold implications for urban planning and everyday life in cities (Baeten, 2021; Kleilein and Meyer, 2021). There are impacts on housing, urban infrastructure and mobility, the distribution of public and privatized space as well as reinforced inequalities that manifest in urban spaces. Simply put, the COVID pandemic made many (already well known) shortcomings and failures of contemporary city planning visible. Consequently, the pandemic-imposed 'new normal' effects research on urban matters. On the one hand, there were immediate consequences for ongoing research in the form of global travel restrictions, local lockdowns, etc. While some needed to shorten their research stays and return home, others were not able to conduct fieldwork on-site at all. Some were able to postpone research stays or adapt their research designs to digital framework, others needed to fundamentally change their topics. On the other hand, a pandemic lasting more

than two years and all the uncertainties that come with it require more or less constant adjustment, which implies long-term changes for research projects.

I regard both the messiness of data collection and the setbacks, disappointments and doubts crucial to how my research project transformed and I want to make them visible in my writing since they have the tendency to disappear in the polished narratives we often seek to publish. While there already is a body of research of online research in urban studies (Graham, 2005; Madge, 2007; Morrow et al., 2015; Parr, 2002) the pandemic offers an exciting momentum to challenge methodologies and methods and to develop creative research designs beyond traditional approaches – presuming there is a common understanding in academia that the pandemic's implications are still in effect, for some more than others.

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