



On Being Here

by Mattis Karlsson

Dear Johanna,

This paper is a response to the social anthropologist's frustration of not being there. It is, to make further use of your own words, an attempt to deal with my own chronic disciplinary identity crisis. It is a response written in recognition of your situation and in recognition of the symptoms that you so eloquently describe.¹

I love your expression “interdisciplinary bastard”, partly because I can relate, and partly because of what happens when the metaphor of disciplines and parenthood is extended. I was once also in search of parents. As a fresh undergraduate student my first contact with academia was at the program for Social and Cultural Analysis at Linköping University. This is a program managed by scholars who in many cases had left their respective disciplines to answer calls for interdisciplinary science. The program was also a response to a similar call: approach the world with an open but critical mind without the guiding hand of a specific discipline. In a sense we were all orphans. We grasped for clearer contexts, conformity in method and a canon to rally around. I found all of this in the disciplinary arms of sociology. However, I rebelled on my newfound family at every given opportunity. To me, sociology is merely a point of departure. I keep coming back, but only because I imagine it as a necessity in order to leave. I think this is an imagination based on a false distinction. The insides and outsides of disciplines are arbitrary divides. There are no perfect lines drawn on maps to indicate where sociology ends, and anthropology begins. The “field” is little different from the disciplines of science in that regard. I do not practice fieldwork in any traditional sense. Regardless of whether I am in search of material, or if I am analysing or writing, you are most likely to find me by my computer. In spite of this, I would argue that I am there. It is not from laziness or reluctance to travel that I have decided to conduct my research in this manner. It is from interest and a want for effectiveness.

In my coming doctoral dissertation I study the recently discovered prehistoric human species, the Denisova hominin, or simply, the Denisovan. I am interested in the fascinating process of how this species' making via scientific practice and the mediation of science—a process that involves places like the damp caves of the Altai Mountains in Russian Siberia, high technology laboratories at the Max Planck Institute for evolutionarily anthropology, editorial rooms of newspapers and tabloids and many other places where I have yet to set my foot. I have spent countless hours observing the muddy caves of the Altai Mountains although I access this field from my cosy office. While you are “out there” in the mud I am exploring the deep Siberian caves from my perfectly ergonomic fold back chair. I am sipping coffee while accessing the world via my screen.

The difference is extreme, but only because we let the extremes make the difference. It is not authenticity that separates my “there” from yours. A virtual reality is reality first, virtual second. Sometimes it is mediated, sometimes it needs translation, but it is never less than. Nor is it noise that makes the difference, my field offers plenty of that, although it does not always make sounds. I spent days exploring the comments on a Russian YouTube-channel recently and I could speak at great length about the amazing insights I had there. And a few days ago I realized (with a mixture of horror and fasciation) that the advertisement in my browser was based on my regular visits to a neo-Nazi website that I was gathering information from. I realize that the Altai cave that I am so interested in has qualities that I may need to see with my own eyes in order to comprehend them, but I would argue that it has qualities that I am seeing with my own eyes because I am where I am. The online/offline divide is too often a compulsive divide. It too is an arbitrary distinction, and the best research is probably made without it, or we will forever study half of what we are interested in.

This is when you say: “The beauty of being able to access things from your office is also a curse.” Sure, there is a beauty in accessing things from the office, but it is no more every-day life than your mud “out there”, and it makes me no less immersed in context. I do not find my material conveniently situated at the top of my Facebook-feed. It takes time, searches, discussions with colleagues, translation, and navigation to find my material. I imagine it is the same for you, you will not simply walk out your door Monday morning and start your observations. You will not draw conclusions about Russian soldiers based on observations from your local city square. There are crucial differences in our methods, absolutely. However, the contrast between every-day life and getting immersed in context is not one of those differences. On the contrary, it is one of the things we share. We share the travel from our every-day life to the field. The means of travel are radically different, but the point of departure and the point of arrival could be the

same. We simply have different routes to Russia.

At the end of the day I think your best arguments for being there has very little to do with method and more to do with romance. But that is also why I am sometimes jealous of your relationship with participatory observation; you have clearly been through a lot together and you seem to look at your field in a way that wholly differs from the way I look at mine. It is a sort of romance indeed, and maybe that is why it has so much to do with method after all? What we love, we do well.

What about me? Maybe I'll do things your way next time. I might try out mud, dirt and dust AFK. The beauty of being in a poly-disciplinary relationship is that you get to pick and choose. There is no such thing as an uncomplicated relationship anyway.

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Notes

¹ This conversation originates from the workshop Changing Methods: Conducting research in the age of mediatization held at University of Amsterdam in November 2016.