



# On Not Being There

By Johanna Dahlin

This paper is an expression of the social anthropologist's frustration with not being there, and an attempt to deal with my own chronic disciplinary identity crisis and my "it's complicated" relationship with participant observation.<sup>1</sup>

I have worked for a long time now in an interdisciplinary setting, and although I sometimes characterize myself as an interdisciplinary bastard, I have retained a rather strong identification as an anthropologist. This identification is perhaps paradoxical as one of my main reasons for applying to an interdisciplinary PhD program was to get away from social anthropology. As a master's student, I became increasingly frustrated with anthropology and its insistence on ethnographic fieldwork as the one (and only) way to do research. I remember my annoyance with my supervisor's question, 'but how is this anthropology' as she was reading my proposals, until I finally included a passage on participant observation, which appealed her. I remember reading master's thesis upon master's thesis where it seemed to me that participant observation was actually quite ill-suited for investigating the issues at hand. And then, finally, I remember my relief when one of our professors tried to instil in us, that there are 'other ways of knowing about the world' than participant observation.

I came to my PhD studies with a thematic I wanted to study: the memory and commemoration of the Second World War in Russia. It was a topic I far from exhausted in my master's thesis, and a doctoral dissertation later I could easily devote a few more years to it. I also had a vague idea on how to go about studying it. Participant observation was to be a part of it, but I did not envisage it as the main part. Through serendipity, I happened upon the search for fallen soldiers, and ended up doing far more anthropological fieldwork than I would ever have imagined. It was quite literally field work, where I took part in work on the former battlefields to locate the remains of soldiers, fallen but often officially listed as missing in action. It was heavy, dirty, cold (or sometimes too hot) and very participatory, even hands-on. It was in many ways life-changing; allowing me close

**Keywords:** Fieldwork, interdisciplinarity, methodology, Russia, Social Anthropology.

Dahlin, Johanna: "On Not Being There", *Culture Unbound*, Volume 9, issue 3, 2017: 335–341. Published by Linköping University Electronic Press: <http://www.culture-unbound.ep.liu.se>

proximity to both the cruelty of war and the friendship of the volunteer search unit. And perhaps, it also made me end up as the sort of dogmatic anthropologist the master's student version of myself despised, because although I still agree that there are other ways of knowing the world, I have become one of those proponents of ethnographic fieldwork.

Being in the mud, in the field and getting your hands dirty became, for me, *the* image of the researcher. This was how research is done. Although I did work with other materials in my dissertation, they were always secondary. It was through fieldwork everything was somehow filtered.



The quintessential anthropologist: Malinowski in the Trobriand Islands 1918. Photo likely by Billy Hancock.

When I reluctantly had to leave the dirt and mud and move on to other projects, I continued to use fieldwork mixed with other methods. But the proportion is the opposite, and I am frustrated that I can't be 'there' enough. As things were getting really interesting, I had to go home. Instead, I have to try to access other sources. And I, quite frankly, don't know how to deal with it. Most of all, I'm frustrated with trying to research social media. So frustrated, in fact, that I have adopted the 'ostrich approach': I stick my head in the sand, hoping it will just go away, which is hardly a long term solution to my problem or a methodological approach that funding bodies generally approve of.

But let us return to Russia. I recently stumbled across a conference paper that I wrote early on as a PhD student. I wrote it as I was approaching the end of my first period of fieldwork, relieved that no one asked me, 'but how is this anthropology?'. Instead I asked this question to myself, anxious for disciplinary belonging or merely to be employable after attaining that PhD. There aren't too many places for interdisciplinary bastards, after all. (And here I am, almost 10 years on, still no proper employment, still the same disciplinary identity crisis.)

My doctoral research was actually not my first attempt at fieldwork, but it was part of an initial attempt to make sense of the whole endeavour. And in that attempt, an oft-quoted poem by Fyodor Tyutchev from 1866 came to my mind. It begins ‘Umon Rossiyu ne ponyat’, and in John Dewey’s English translation it reads like this:

*Who would grasp Russia with the mind?  
For her no yardstick was created:  
Her soul is of a special kind,  
By faith alone appreciated.*

The Russian ‘um’ is perhaps better translated as ‘reason’, and the message is that you cannot understand Russia, you have to believe in her. It has become something of a popular maxim in Russia, but for someone embarking on a career where understanding Russia was her very *raison d’être* it was of course provocative. But as I was trying to come to terms with fieldwork in St Petersburg, I was also gaining a new sympathy for Tyutchev, or at least for ‘mind’ or ‘reason’ not being enough to understand Russia. Because what I was doing, as I tried to gather material for my dissertation, was feeling. Experiencing things down to my skin. And as I later developed my relationship with the search unit that I had met for the first time just days before I wrote that paper, this emotional aspect grew even stronger.

I’ve tried to come to terms with this in a book chapter, that I’ve called ‘A labour of love’ as this is what the search work is for many of the participants. But perhaps it is also a description of what I am doing. Is ‘labour of love’ an apt term for research? The chapter deals with the emotional aspects of heritage, but can I engage with ‘affective meaning making’ in what I study, without engaging with my own ‘affective meaning making’?

I’m beginning that text in the woods and bogs of the Sinyavino heights east of St Petersburg. From 1941 to 1944 fierce battles raged here and helmets, splinters and barbed wire are still visible. What is not as visible is that the ground is also filled with the remains of the soldiers that fought here. I wanted to begin the text there, in the mud, and I seized upon a day in September a few years ago. It was during one of the unit’s larger expeditions, but it was not enough people present and we were often working alone. During my third day in the same spot, in the same pit, I was getting bored. Digging was slow. The remains were in a very poor condition and I had to be careful. Patience with this type of work was one quality I could bring into the search unit, but the conditions were also frustrating as it was hard to do much social research, when isolated in a muddy pit where the only human presence was in the form of decomposed bones. On the third day I finally had some company. One of the search unit’s members had just returned



Dragon's teeth near the Sinyavino heights. Photo by the author.

from working in the city and decided to help me. As one of the most experienced members in the unit, he was also a “key informant” who, over the years of my involvement in the unit, has been teaching me the intricacies of search work, and how to understand the terrain and infer the course of war. He started digging where I had not yet been digging, and almost immediately he encountered a pair of glasses. I inspected them, both fascinated and slightly annoyed that he had showed up to find the most interesting things. “It must be a *politruk* [political commissar]” my companion decided, explaining that glasses are a rare find.

We also found a decomposed pencil and an eraser, and the remains of what appeared to have been a purse containing 25 kopecks. Compared to the two soldiers I previously dug up out of the pit, a crumpled mug seems to have been their sole collective property, this was quite a find in all its modesty. The lenses in the glasses were intact, but the frames loose and broken.

This muddy pit was not too far from where I, two years previously, had my first encounter with this search for fallen soldiers. I was deeply affected when I found my first soldier. I had never handled human remains before, and the emotional impact it had on me was in many ways crucial in shaping my doctoral research. After two years, I was already a bit blasé.

Getting to know Russia and the Search Movement was both an intellectual and emotional process. Being there creates attachment and just being in this landscape is cherished by *poiskoviki*, as the search unit's members are called. However, place is also central to learning and teaching about the war, and about the search. The



The politruk's glasses. Photo by the author.

world of my doctoral fieldwork, St Petersburg, the woods and bogs, and not least the people, has come to mean much to me, but I cannot spend a lot of time there anymore. I work on other things, have other commitments. And not being there, not seeing my friend's children grow up, is painful.

This brings me back to Tyutchev. Perhaps you cannot grasp Russia with the mind? Is understanding a question of reason, or is it also about feeling? Emotions and attachment are important for making sense of things. Is separation of sense and sensibility possible? The dedicated fieldworker in me says no.

But there is more to my uneasiness with having other sources of knowing the world than being there as a basis of my research. Another part of the problem, I think, is noise. When you're not here, there is not enough noise—and too much noise at the same time.

I guess there is much in most research projects that will not make it into the final publications. But I imagine there is more discarded bits and pieces in a project based on ethnographic fieldwork. When the research instrument is your own body, which is on 24-7, where there are constantly sounds and smells and sights to make sense of. Noise in this sense, is about overcrowded trolley buses, money sent from hand to hand in a marshrutka, the crowds outside inexplicably closed metro doors. It is the unknown man who explains that you cannot stand and dither so long at the crossing because then you will never get across the street, or the old woman at the cemetery who is praising the bird song and peace, or, for that matter, the clatter of high heels against the paving stones. Things that seem



Fieldwork noise in the form of dust. Photo David Torell.

irrelevant, but that I think are important. This is noise in the sense of the roar of a river. Even if you're interested in the wetter properties of water; take away the roar, and you take away a good deal of what that river is.

There is not much of this on social media. There might be a good deal of posting going on, and of course this is indicative of something, and can be an excellent source to find out about that something, but I miss the noise. The media is such a severe filter in itself, content curated with varying degrees of care. Where are all the things going on around the thing I'm supposed to study? The things that give it context and meaning. Even for the most frequent posters, there is but a tiny fraction of their life that goes online. There might well be good answers to this in any of the many handbooks on studying social media that I keep checking out from the library and return unread, but my hunch is that the problem probably has to do with me not viewing the internet as a site, in keeping with anthropological terminology. And perhaps it needs to be a site to do it justice. Instead, I have seen it as a way of getting a glimpse of the real site. A way to reach what's behind the screen. It might not be surprising that it fails to live up to this promise.

There is too little, and at the same time too much. The internet is its own ever-expanding universe. Social media has its fair share of noise, more like a disturbing static than a romantic roar. Irrelevant posts, trolls, hopeless comment threads. The online selves of some of my interlocutors in the field are a conspiracy-filled nuisance. If they were complex and interesting people when I met them, I don't want to understand their actions or motives anymore, just tell

them to get a grip. While there was a good deal of annoying things about them on the ground as well, the whole thing was exciting and intriguing. Their online presentations, however, made me lose interest. Analyzing social media posts might be a way to get some data, get that article written, but it does not spark my curiosity. I'm not particularly interested in what I might find.

The beauty of being able to access things from your office is also a curse. To get material into your own every-day life, instead of you getting immersed in that context, is very convenient—but for a terrible multitasker like myself, far from ideal. Research drowns in the mighty roar of the flood of everyday life. It is too easy to log off: for lunch, for tea, for colleagues knocking on your door, for pre-school pickups... In the field, on expeditions, there were no breaks. The frequent *perekur* (the smoking-break enjoyed by smokers and non-smokers alike) was prime research time. Even in the city, when the water, so to speak, was out of sight, the roar was still heard. The countless hours I spent alone in my room, curled up on the wide window sill watching Prospekt stachek below; the noise of the six lane road was part of this whole understanding Russia thing.

It is the noise, the kind that I miss, that helps me make sense of my data. It gives me leads and frames of interpretation. It may give a feeling that there is something in this, and noise then turns to music. And if there is no noise, I'm at a loss. Perhaps I'm a hopeless romantic, but give me back my mud, dirt and dust.

**Johanna Dahlin** is Executive Editor for Culture Unbound. She is post-doctoral fellow at Linköping University and Södertörn University. She is currently working in a research project concerned with how common resources are enclosed and privatised, focusing on the processes and relations involved in mineral extraction. E-mail: [johanna.dahlin@liu.se](mailto:johanna.dahlin@liu.se)

## Notes

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