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Article

Mobile Belonging in Digital Exile: Methodological Reflection on Doing Ethnography on (Social) Media Practices

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Abstract
Life in exile presents hardship and brings with it multiple personal and socio-political challenges and grievances. Being forced into separation from family and home society often stimulates the desire to maintain belonging and contact with families and communities. "Co-presence" and "being there" require a lot of personal effort and commitment. Communication and mediation strategies have a special significance as everyday practices in social and digital media technologies. "Mobile belonging" and staying connected across various online and offline spaces and in various social and political environments and communities can be a constant requirement in digital exile. After an introduction to relevant literature about the complexity of media communication, belonging, and migration, the article examines mobile media technologies and the central role they play in everyday exile. Following a discussion about the notion of "digital exile" and "mobile belonging," the second part of the article will focus on a specific case study of an Iranian artist and activist living in exile in Germany. It will show how (social) media promotes activism and performance in both online and offline public spaces as practices of "mobile belonging here and there" during the Covid-19 pandemic. Thirdly, the article will turn to a methodological reflection about doing ethnographic research on digital exile and practices of mobile belonging. With a systematic description of applied methods, early developments in multi-modal ethnography will be outlined that illustrate how collaboration and co-creation promise innovative directions for doing ethnography on digital exile in the different-yet-shared times of the pandemic crisis.

Keywords
activism; collaboration; communication; digital exile; ethnography; media; mobile belonging; multimodality

Issue
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1. Introduction

Exile poses an "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home," as Edward Said wrote in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Said, 2000, p. 310). Not losing contact with those left behind can make the traumata and grievance of exile somewhat more bearable. Communication is crucial to maintaining a sense of belonging among family, friends, and one's home country. Such efforts require certain strategies, or, more precisely, communication practices, whether in terms of representation and information politics, mobile messaging, community building, networking and placemaking strategies, or embodied and mediated activism or conflicts. In all these different cross-bordering spheres of mobilities and transnational communication activities, migrants make use of different media technologies (Smets et al., 2019). An accomplished range of scholars addresses the deep intertwining of forms of migration (including refugee, diaspora, and exile) and media. Much of this social qualitative research has, on one hand, a particular focus on new or polymedia and their role and functionality in transnational families, as well as the sense of connectedness and constraints they impart on intimate levels such as emotion, caring, or ageing (Baldassar, 2015, 2016; Baldassar & Wilding, 2020; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Palmberger, 2017; Pfeifer,

2019). Making distance bearable, de-demonising everyday separation, and being co-present and "emotionally 'there' for each other" (Baldassar, 2016, p. 145) illustrates how having access to information and communication technologies—and the technical skills necessary to handle them—are very important for the "ability to be co-present across distance" and to sustain "transnational family relations" (Baldassar, 2016, p. 145). On the other hand, there is a growing field of researchers who investigate global connectedness and transnationalism with a focus on dispersed and mobile diasporic communities. An expanding field of "digital diaspora" studies (e.g., Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Andersson, 2019; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Candidatu et al., 2019; Everett, 2009; Karim, 2006; Ponzanesi, 2020, 2021; Retis & Tsagarousianou, 2019) has critically engaged with diasporic media; "mediated interactions, on flows of ideas, information, resources"; and for getting beyond an "occasionally excessive emphasis on the notion of a homeland left behind, lost and/or lamented" (Retis & Tsagarousianou, 2019, p. 4). In this sense, studying the "connected migrant" (Diminescu, 2008) from a critical digital diaspora studies perspective hereby emphasises that contemporary human mobility is "shaped by and constitutive of an unevenly interconnected world" (Candidatu et al., 2019, p. 33). Digitality is furthermore "not disconnected from 'reality,' " rather an inherent "continuity between online and offline worlds" poses "different accents and problems to understanding their complementarity" (Candidatu et al., 2019, p. 40).

In this regard, it seems necessary to acknowledge certain interrelationships and power structures when studying media's role in migratory or diasporic contexts. As specific stakeholders living and working in the diaspora, media professionals deserve special attention here for their usage of different media in the diasporic situation. One can hereby ask for a relational approach to "both presenting and representing migration" in "migrant narratives" (Leurs et al., 2020, p. 4) because certain practices and forms of documentation and representation (including genres, styles, aesthetics) are deeply embedded within "larger frameworks of power and governmentality" (Leurs et al., 2020, p. 4). The politics and poetics of engaging with trauma, displacement, loss, or identity struggles in diasporic and migratory landscapes have found their entrance into different conceptual notions of "accented cinema" (Naficy, 2001, p. 4), migratory aesthetics (Bennett, 2005; Durrant & Lord, 2007; Moslund et al., 2015), performing exile (Meerzon, 2012), or documenting the migrant image (Demos, 2013). It is within this broader range of digital diaspora studies, in which I situate this article and my five years of related ethnographic research on the photographic practices in the art and activism of Iranian artists and photographers in German exile and migration contexts (see also Bublatzky, 2015, 2018, 2019a) arguing that such practices are "situated in the everyday" (Pink, 2012) of Iranian exile.

In this article, I foreground what I suggest calling a "digital exile" (instead of digital diaspora) and practices of "mobile belonging" in the face of mobile technologies and their use in on- and offline spaces. In doing so, I want to show in Section 2 that professionals like artists and activists (or activist-artists) living and working in a situation of forced displacement can be representative agents for digital citizenship and political and poetic migration narratives when doing ethnography on mobile media technologies and communication in the field of exilic cultures. Exile is an ongoing state of crisis, with "critical states as pervasive contexts" (Vigh, 2008, p. 8). This is particularly the case when governmental repression and political threats in one's home country restrict mobility and the possibility of return, in contrast to diasporic situations. In these situations, information and social media communication practices in online (digital) and offline (physical) spaces tend to take on a particularly strong socio-political dimension. When "caring for others" and "belonging to" not only include friendship and family members but also situate individuals or groups in exile amidst larger and multi-layered transnational power and governmental frameworks, studying activist–artists' on- and offline experiences with mobile media technologies allows for a "new conceptual and methodological understanding of the phenomenon in its online–offline intersectional co-constituency" (Candidatu et al., 2019, p. 40).

To illustrate its implication for those living in exile, I will provide some empirical insights into a case study and collaboration with the artist and activist Parastou Forouhar. Forouhar, who had been forced into German exile by the assassination of her parents in Iran, has organized an annual Memorial Day in her parents' house in Teheran ever since her involuntary departure. Due to the constraints and global travel restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, she had to interrupt her annual travels to Iran. Ultimately, with the help of others in and outside of Iran, she used a set of different multimedia strategies to cope with these unexpected restrictions and to maintain the Memorial Day in a kind of multimodal, on- and offline format without being physically present. With this particular example and with the discussion of a multimodality of mobile belonging, I wish to show that intersecting online and offline spaces are more than the sum of their separate parts and that "mobile belonging" and the possibilities of coexisting digital and embodied selves in on- and offline spaces in exile have far-reaching implications for those who live under such conditions.

The everyday of "mobile belonging" also has powerful implications for empirical researchers in such fields. Ethnographers, for example, have to carefully consider their methodologies and research designs and how they position themselves and behave as practitioners and researchers in a shared "hypermedia" world (Dicks et al., 2005; Goggin & Hjorth, 2014; Postill & Pink, 2012). In Section 3 of the article, I want to turn towards doing

research on the intersection of the on- and offline spaces and the significant methodological challenges inherent therein. With multimodality (Collins et al., 2017; Dicks et al., 2006, 2011; Hurdley & Dicks, 2011; Pink, 2011) in doing ethnography on mobile belonging and at the intersection of online and offline contexts, I will discuss an innovative approach, that, as I suggest, means researching different meaning-making modes as produced in the different (social and digital) media in people's everyday lives (Dicks et al., 2006, p. 82). Studying the impact of the different modes and the changes they exert on the social everyday implies researching the "use of personal wearable Internet technologies (e.g., smartphones, tablets, and smartwatches) and the increasing connectivity of more and more devices and objects" (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020, p. 230).

This multimodality and the affordances in communicating, producing, and circulating news and information and the social everyday of the "connected migrant" (Diminescu, 2008) or "connected exiled" has consequences for researchers and their methods and research design, triggering ethical concerns. When ethnographers are similarly connected and confronted with "intimate" on- and offline mobile media encounters in their research field, "mobiles increasingly become a pivotal and unavoidable reality in everyday social practices" (Goggin & Hjorth, 2014, p. 2) for the researcher and in the ability to build and maintain social relations with their interlocutors. In response, and in the light of a planned multimodal project that has been developed in partnership and collaboration (Kress, 2011) together with the artist, I will explain applied methods and the challenges and potentials of incorporating multimodality in digital ethnography (Flewitt, 2011).

2. Mobile Belonging in Digital Exile

2.1. Mobile Belonging

Exile, as lived and experienced by Parastou Forouhar and many others, means living in an in-between state where one belongs neither here nor there (P. Forouhar, personal communication, May 24, 2017). Exile is intensively shaped by "a transit, a back and forth, be in and go out, go here and there—to be a nomad and yet be in exile everywhere" (Naficy, 1999, p. 4). Being in transit or "a figure of an in-between space" (Diminescu, 2008, p. 569) acknowledges migrants in particular under the "mobilities paradigm" including their social, geographical, and transnational movements and agencies (Adey et al., 2017; Barber & Lem, 2018; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007, 2010). When living in exile, however, this mobility also includes serious forms of immobility (Cresswell, 2010) because travelling back and forth can be very difficult, if not even dangerous. For example, even when living and working in Iran is unthinkable due to ongoing political persecution and repression, journeys between the host and the home country might still be possible. However, such journeys never happen in complete freedom and always with the uncertainty of experiencing political despotism upon entering or leaving Iran.

Identifying the "connected migrant" and "mobile networks of belonging" (Diminescu, 2008, p. 573) foregrounds mobile belonging in the social life of exiles as "deeply rooted in mobile technologies" and as "more liberated from geographical constraints" (Diminescu, 2008, p. 573). Here Witteborn's (2019, p. 180) approach to the "phenomenology of potentiality" turns out to be particularly useful when she argues that "digital technology is one of the drivers of this potentiality" in transforming "experiences of loss into experiences of participation, self-presentation, and social alliances."

This situation is very familiar to Parastou Forouhar. She is the daughter of Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar, opposition politicians and activists in Iran, who were victims of political assassinations in their Tehran home on 21 November 1998. Parastou Forouhar, who has lived in Germany since the early 1990s, belongs to the so-called *Burnt Generation*. This term refers especially to Iranians born between the early 1960s and the early 1980s who have spent most of their lives in an environment of war and religious dogmatism in Iran. Many of them fled the repressive regime as a result of the horrific events of the 1979 revolution, Iran's declaration as an Islamic theocracy, and its aftermaths. Settling all over the world, particularly in the US, France, Germany, and England, they form extremely diverse global Iranian diasporic and exile communities. In terms of national ethnicity and belonging, gender, generation, and different localities, one has to carefully consider when to talk about diasporic communities that "tend to be defined as national or ethnic" and when and how nationality and ethnicity interlink with gender, class, and digital grouping (Witteborn, 2019, p. 179). This also counts for exile groups, since exile also cannot be thought of as "a generalised condition of alienation and difference" but much more in the way that "all displaced people do not experience exile equally or uniformly" (Naficy, 1999, p. 4).

For Parastou Forouhar, exile means an in-between existence, being neither here nor there: "not here" (in Germany) where she experiences being perceived as the "other," the "foreigner," or the Iranian; and "not there" (in Iran) because she has been cast as a problematic and uncomfortable person for the Iranian government in the aftermath of her parents' murder and her subsequent struggle against injustice and human rights violations. When it is no longer possible to return to one's homeland, the "belonging neither here nor there" becomes a fundamental circumstance of everyday life in exile. Social and online media technologies thereby play an important role in encountering and even (partly at least) overcoming the grievance of forced displacement in one's private and professional everyday life.

With the approach of "mobile belonging," I do not merely focus on physical mobility. Instead, and in response to digital ethnography (Markham, 2020;

Underberg & Zorn, 2013), collaborative digital ethnography (Palmberger & Budka, 2020), and even hybrid ethnography (Przybylski, 2020), I consider the different uses of mobile media technologies for "mobile belonging" significant in those hybrid contexts where field sites "span digital, physical and digital-physical spaces" (Przybylski, 2020, p. 5). Moreover, because living in (digital) exile powerfully illustrates the ambiguity of "uneven connectedness" to one's home society in everyday life, it challenges in similar ways the social everyday that people experience along a relationality of the "co-presence'' of "being here and there" and across different on- and offline platforms and spaces (Candidatu et al., 2019, p. 40).

2.2. Mobile Technologies

With the rise of digital and social media in the 21st century, when "thanks to the globalization of travel, media, and capital, exile appears to have become a postmodern condition," sites of placement and displacement can be understood as increasingly mediated (Naficy, 1999, p. 4). These sites and their different temporal dimensions have "unique sociotechnical qualities" and "media ensembles" of different mobile devices (Postill, 2020, p. 321), which should always be considered in relation to the time and its technological possibilities. In recent times, they do include the smartphone with different messenger providers, computers and online communication, and chat formats (Postill, 2020, p. 321), whereas at the end of the 20th century, when the world wide web was not yet affordable for everyone, communication took place mainly by telephone or fax. In politics of representation, communication, and mediation, mobile belonging proves to be a central act in an exile-media paradigm that reflects an ambivalent condition of fragmentation in a situation of globally dispersed Iranian political exile and diasporic communities (Naficy, 1993, 1999). So, it is particularly relevant to understand the "technical affordances of today's networked devices" as they "enhance a sense of immediacy by making it possible for people almost everywhere to participate in conflicts [and civic action] remotely as they unfold" (Postill, 2020, pp. 320–321).

Here, overlapping and intersecting media ensembles become "a unique set of mobile (and other) technologies that are brought to bear on a specific collective action, for example, occupying a square, preventing an eviction, or holding a general assembly" (Monterde & Postill, 2014, pp. 429–430). Also, the distinctive mediations of conflict (Postill, 2020, p. 321) as well as the mediation of citizenship, solidarity, or resistance are particularly notable. Social (and other) media practices in online and offline spaces and other forms of media communication that cross transregional and transcultural borders provide the basis for mobile belonging in the everyday life and work of an artist and activist. In other words, mobile belonging is constituted through mobile media technologies on multiple platforms and with different devices and practices. Potential uses include posting photos, poems, or manifestos; sharing obituaries of political prisoners and updates on the lives of people in danger; and liking human rights initiatives or sharing artistic and activist works. Such activities function in conjunction and intersection with media communication work in different physical and digital-physical spaces. In its quantitative, qualitative, and multi-situational dimensions, mobile belonging in digital exile is thus of great social and political relevance for any kind of civic community work.

Parastou Forouhar is an extremely committed person. In addition to conventional media and her own artwork, Forouhar exercises a hyper-presence in social media that testifies to the intensity (e.g., in terms of time management) and intimacy (e.g., in terms of personal and emotional content, commitment, and empathy) of multi-situated mobile belonging as a (digital) citizen (Isin & Nielsen, 2008; Isin & Ruppert, 2020; Mossberger et al., 2007). This sense of "being-in-the-world" is neither merely a physical appearance and embodiment, "nor is the digital another realm outside material culture" (Kaur, 2019, p. 304). Forouhar, who is active in various activist networks, is often invited for interviews in the public media related to new human rights violations or protests in the Islamic Republic of Iran and is additionally an internationally recognized artist and art teacher at an art academy in Germany. She has never stopped fighting against the repressive regime of the Iranian state and is keeping alive the memory of the political assassination of her parents and others in the late 1990s (and afterwards).

2.3. Mobile Belonging in Online and Offline Spaces During the Covid19 Lockdown

Parastou Forouhar developed multimedia strategies to cope with the unexpected changes that accompanied the Covid-19 pandemic and the global travel restrictions in 2020. This included posting memorial letters on her website such as "The Political Murders of Autumn 98 In Iran Are Now 22 Years Old" (Forouhar, 2020) and (re-)posting video interviews or artistic works on her Facebook timeline. This allowed her to cope with the difficult situation of not being able to travel to Iran to organise an annual Memorial Day for her parents. Using alternative media strategies, she developed practices of "digital citizenship" (Isin & Ruppert, 2020).

Under normal circumstances, Parastou Forouhar would be busy planning her travel to Iran, as she has always done, to start the preparation for the Memorial Day. It takes place at her parents' home which is a significant site of remembrance, commemoration, and resistance for herself and for her parents' political supporters. The preparations and the ceremony usually include certain activities and rituals in the city of Tehran and in the house, as well as in the online and public media. She begins by announcing her trip with a public letter on

her website and in various online media and then gives speeches and interviews, e.g., for BBC Persia and various local and international newspapers. Forouhar publishes an obituary with a Memorial Day invitation in local newspapers. In Tehran, everything is prepared for the guests and the ceremony takes place in the courtyard and in the house itself and includes rituals with chants, flowers, and candles at the places in the house where her parents' bodies were found. These on-site and online activities are a strong gesture against forgetting and to maintain resistance. Parastou Forouhar does everything she can to maintain the event and has developed different publicity strategies over the years. But this year, she told me, she decided against travelling to Iran, because of the pandemic. It was a difficult decision and, as she explained to me, "I have to find an attitude to the whole situation" (P. Forouhar, personal communication, November 11, 2020), by which she meant the ambivalent situation of responsibility and solidarity, on the one hand, with regard to the pandemics and its risks, and on the other hand with regard to maintaining remembrance and resistance.

There was of course a certain tragic irony in this situation, as Parastou Forouhar has been organising this anniversary for 21 years. The day and the house are very important to remember the political victims of the Islamic regime, as a gesture of protest and resistance and to maintain them against state control and surveillance. This year it was not Iranian control forces, but the Covid-19 pandemic that prevented her physical presence. However, when we talked about this personal dilemma on how to deal with this "blank space" (P. Forouhar, personal communication, November 11, 2020, translation by the author), it was already clear to her that a digital event would not be an option, as she claimed it would undermine everything that has been done so far.

One of many interesting examples of how Parastou Forouhar has created new intersections between different online and offline memory spaces and between different places and actors in exile and elsewhere, and as I will discuss later as a multimodal form, is the publication of a YouTube link to the play *One Case, Two Murders*. This play was directed by the Iranian theatre director Niloofar Beyzaie and her exile theatre group *Daritsche* and premiered in Germany in 2009. It tells the story of the political murder of Parvaneh and Dariush Forouhar. The group's main goal is to raise awareness of the oppression and resistance, especially of women, in countries ruled by political Islam. The play, which also draws on other media such as photographs or documentaries, has been and will be performed on various occasions in Germany. In November 2020, Parastou Forouhar posted the link to its YouTube video (Beyzaie, 2020) twice on Facebook and once on Instagram and received a great deal of likes and comments both times (although there were significantly more reactions on Instagram).

This example demonstrates how Parastou Forouhar succeeded in creating a strong lasting public presence through various digital media and online and offline sites with this and other uploads that included public letters with political and solidarity statements alongside art. In other words, she managed to communicate her "rights of the political subject emerging across…borders and orders" (Isin & Ruppert, 2020, p. xiii). She enacted (with the support of others) a transversal and digital citizenship by "making rights claims [that] traverse multiple political borders and legal orders that involve 'universal' human rights law, international law, transnational arrangements, and multiple state and non-state actors" (Isin & Ruppert, 2020, p. xiii). With her digital activities (and the re-postings by others) of commemoration and remembrance that took place on social media channels and networks during the anniversary event, she certainly reached a wider and different audience, as the number of "like clicks" and the creation of online hashtags and peace signs slogans saying "hope to see you in that house" and "hope for #political_murders_ justice" showed. Together with the, albeit comparatively few, on-site actions at her parents' house in Tehran, mobile affordances and multiple media ecologies opened up new spaces of remembrance and solidarity, whereas the collective online and offline actions created a dynamic processuality (Monterde & Postill, 2014, p. 429) of "mobile belongings."

3. Doing Ethnography on Digital Exile: A Reflection on Multimodality

Doing ethnography on digital exile is situated at the intersection of mobile online and offline spaces and the studying of social and political positionalities in everyday life. The multiplicity of modes, on one hand, and, in distinction to media, on the other hand (Dicks et al., 2006, p. 82), indicate the multi-layeredness of the meaning-making environment in which belonging, connectedness, co-presence, and caring are created by the connected migrants. In this section, I turn to a reflection on methods, practices, and ethics as well as the challenges and potentials inherent in bringing multimodality to the ethnography, and more precisely, to my collaboration and partnership with Parastou Forouhar. My reflections join a multitude of studies on doing ethnography of the Internet and the everyday (Beneito-Montagut, 2011; Costa & Condie, 2019; Hine, 2015; Horst & Miller, 2012; Pink et al., 2016; Postill & Pink, 2012) when it considers multimodality as an approach in doing ethnography to face the intersection between on- and offline spaces in everyday life and when "there is no difference between online and offline interpersonal communication" (Beneito-Montagut, 2011, p. 717).

3.1. Multimodal Modes of Meaning Production in On- and Offline Media

Initially, the ethnographic research engaged Iranian photographers and artists living in the European diaspora

to study the production of knowledge, identities, and memory in photography. In this regard, I was interested in understanding how far and in which way photography represents and is shaped by diasporic aesthetics (Bublatzky, 2020). I accessed the project by studying photography (documentary and artistic) in its international production, dissemination, and reception. I explored photography's communicative and mediating value, and how it creates forms of global connectedness and transnationalism with a focus on dispersed and mobile diasporic communities. Moreover, I examined how professional photography mediates transnational migration experiences, as well as notions of mobility, interaction, identification, and belonging (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Andersson, 2019; Brinkerhoff, 2009; Candidatu et al., 2019; Everett, 2009; Karim, 2006; Ponzanesi, 2020, 2021; Retis & Tsagarousianou, 2019) within broader media ensembles. As part of my interest in critical representation politics and memory production, I came to know several photographers and artists, living in Germany, the UK, and France, including Parastou Forouhar. I was immediately compelled not only by her experience of migration and forced displacement but also by how these experiences converged with her artistic and activist practices, particularly her employment of a multitude of visual and digital media practices at the intersection of on- and offline spaces.

With the art installation *Documentation* (1999–present; Bublatzky, 2019b, 2021), for example, the artist performs a fractured narrative about the memory of her parents, murdered in Iran, and her own resistance to political injustice. Within this installation, she arranges numerous documents including protest letters, correspondence, reports, and newspaper articles around a xerox machine at its centre. These documents, drawn from her protest and activism and from a variety of media from different situations and places, represent a strong testimony to the brutal and politically motivated murder. Considering that "the recreation of personal records, family histories and communal identities ultimately becomes an attempt to reclaim and reconstruct their shattered lives and to honour the memory of those who perished" (Halilovich, 2016, p. 83), this work represents an important insight to the multiple politics and poetics of migrant narratives (Leurs et al., 2020).

Forouhar's efforts and commitment to maintaining political and activist engagement in post-revolutionary Iran—which is evident in her artwork, physical mobility, and activities across an array of social and digital media—illustrate a central dimension of mobile belonging in exile. In fact, and as over 10,000 people followers on social media demonstrate, she plays an integral role in exile communities and political networks both within and outside Iran. She is hyper-present on social media in all of these activities, whether on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram. Forouhar communicates via different messenger services, depending on her networks and the availability of the messenger services in different local contexts and countries, and must also contend with regular internet censorship of social media and different communication platforms by the Iranian government. She runs several websites, one for her own art, exhibition, and writing activities and one where she publishes letters and documents from the period of her parents' political work that she found in her parents' house, as well as a podcast site (Forouhar, 2021–present) where she reads from her book *Bekhan be nam e Iran, Dariush va Parvane Foroohar* (*Read in the Name of Iran, Dariush and Parvaneh Forouhar*; Forouhar, 2012) in Persian.

Parastou Forouhar's mode of "mobile belonging" has significantly helped to shape my research and research design according to multimodal research "across multiple platforms and collaborative sites, including film, photography, dialogue, social media, kinesis, and practice" (Collins et al., 2017, p. 142). Researching her work led me to acknowledge "the centrality of media production to the everyday life" of both myself as an anthropologist and my interlocutors (Collins et al., 2017, p. 142). This requires recognising the important role of collaboration with interlocutors who are key experts (see e.g., paraethnography) and the fact that research will lead to different outcomes and in different media formats, which, taken together, is highly beneficial.

3.2. On Methods

From the beginning of my project in 2017, I had to build my research around fragmented field sites. One reason for the multi-sitedness (Marcus, 1995) was that "the field" consisted of multiple locations (instead of one or two clearly defined places), individuals (instead of a community or neighbourhood), and various digital (on- and offline) networks and activities spread all over the world. A field site, then, that is best defined, if at all, by its dynamics, mobilities and instabilities, and collaborations "in time." And while my ethnographic project was originally characterised by being "not on location," "not present in time," or sometimes "not present at the same time," research on photographic or artistic practices in situ has yet not taken place. Instead, and this is also related to how I was able to access the field at all, my research focus was first on sites of professional and social interaction and visibilities (e. g. museums and galleries, symposia, or printed media). This also included the main body of qualitative interview methods with migrant photographers and other experts, from places such as galleries, museums, or other institutional settings like photo festivals (e.g., Photo London). My primary interest was to gain insights into the cultural politics of representation: How, when, why, and by whom were specific photographic works produced, displayed, circulated, and perceived? How much of the migrant experiences (during migration, displacement, and back in their home country) was a topic in photography? How does photography in the arts or documentary provide alternative narratives in contrast to mass media and the political

presentation of Iranian society? I began this project at a moment when photography by Iranian migrants was receiving significant international attention, due in part to the tense situation of political and international relations with Iran, as well as the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the US and the war against Islamic terrorism. Consequently, much research also went into (digital) archival work to obtain an overview of the international visibility of Iranian photographers and existing networks (who knows whom). This was accompanied by collecting data through participant observation during exhibition openings, guided tours, or public talks by respective photographers. The research took place in the UK (London), France (Paris), and Germany (e.g., in Berlin), and also included a first short-term research trip to Iran (Tehran). The Covid-19 pandemic began thereafter and communication and travel became increasingly difficult and insecure.

At this time, I was already in regular contact with Parastou Forouhar. We had met for several interviews (online via Skype), and I attended her exhibitions and public talks. In the early summer of 2017, for example, she sent me a large number of photographs of an unfinished art project she was working on during an artist residency in Switzerland and that I was able to see at a later date. These kinds of encounters allowed me to gain deeper access to her practice and motivations. Artists and photographers are by nature highly mobile, they are obviously always very much immersed in their different projects, residencies, contracts, etc. One could say that professionals in this field "never stand still."

Conducting ethnographic research required acknowledging, among other things, that digital and mobile media technologies gained a fundamental role in the everyday life of such people (e.g., in the era of digital photography, for work meetings, or social networking activities). Accordingly, I began to not only include other forms of media practice, while remaining inclusive of visual anthropology but to also engage "in public anthropology and collaborative anthropology through a field of differentially linked media platforms" (Collins et al., 2017, p. 142).

The circumstances surrounding organising the Memorial Day for Parastou Forouhar's parents in various on- and offline spaces were exemplarily and significant for my research. The ethnographic research turned more and more towards the multi-situational and multimedia intersections where the artist (and her networks) became active. With the help of my research assistant, we had begun to trace specific postings on various media platforms that the artist made at the same time or to investigate public human rights discussions with, for example, the federal president of the Federal Republic of Germany and other Iranian activists in Berlin. These methods of "tracing" included a fundamental shift in the research and included "going beyond interviewing activists about what they do" and "bringing together relevant online materials and either following or actively participating in blogs, social media platforms, online news sites (both professional and amateur), and face-to-face events" (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 126). In my eyes, "the research on the 'intensities' of social media activity and sociality that span online and offline and [that] also have repercussions in other web and face-to-face contexts" (Postill & Pink, 2012, p. 126) illustrate the first steps towards a multimodal research design.

3.3. Multimodal Research Design

With the Covid-19 pandemic playing *yoyo* with the world, "social distancing" affected professional and personal lives at challenging and powerful intersections of different online and offline spaces in the online digital world. Conversations and meetings had intensified since the lockdown in Germany in 2020. They often revolved around similar experiences and obstacles during the pandemic, as well as short exchanges about work and personal life. In the summer of 2020, and during the lockdown, for example, Parastou Forouhar spent some time in Switzerland to create a version of her *Written Room* in a public space in Chur. I knew about this project in January 2020 from a conversation and after the artist and I had been invited to give a lecture together at the Technical University of Darmstadt. In our conversation about the upcoming project, we talked about the very special situation of doing *Written Room* in a public space on the ground and with very different materials and colours, new conditions for this project, which the artist was very much looking forward to.

The frequency of brief phone conversations or voice messages intensified around this time, which strengthened our relationship and created the basis for a creative and collaborative exchange that lasted beyond the lockdown and continues today. This shift in media ecologies, as well as multiple modes of encountering and exchange, allowed me to raise questions about the role of partnership and multimodality in the research. Referring to the work of Kress (2011) and his engagement with "multimodality and social semiotics" (Kress, 2011, p. 242), I began to reflect more intensively on ethics and constraints, meaning-making, and collaborative knowledge production in my project.

Forouhar and I began to work more intensively together and to think about future co-operations like lectures and publications, networking, and artist-ethnographic research projects. We used different modes of mobile communication platforms and devices to work together. As our collaboration deepened, the nature and intersection of online and offline spaces where the artist and I met, exchanged, and collaborated became more complex. The "affordances of different modes offer particular constraints and possibilities for meaning making, and therefore offer different potentials for learning" (Flewitt, 2011, p. 295), data, and knowledge production.

The intensifying processuality of the collaboration, which continues to this day, entered a new phase in

spring of 2021 when Parastou Forouhar proposed to write an article together on feminist art in the diaspora and in relation to her work. Feminism and art are a new topic in my research, and writing this article together with Forouhar, including different working phases and organisational steps, guided me to a new theoretical terrain and new processes of knowledge production that will likely lead to further outcomes (Collins et al., 2017, p. 142).

With Kress (2011, p. 242) I dealt with questions "around *meaning*; meaning-*making*; about the *agency* of *meaning-makers* and the constant (re-)constitution of *identity* in sign- and meaning-making" (italics in the original). This new situation of partnership not only led to an intensification of the relationship with the artist but to even more new collaborative projects, for example, on historical photography and the artist's private archive of press and political photographs of her father, Dariush Forouhar. This marked a significant turning point in my research, which transformed my understanding of knowledge production, making meaning, and the different agencies of the artist and myself. The project is just starting; there are several meetings planned, and there will even be a prestigious fellowship at a German research centre available for me to work more intensively on the data and project. All this bears ethical and "(social) constraints" that I find myself facing "in making meaning; around social semiosis and knowledge; how 'knowledge' is produced and shaped and constituted distinctly in different modes; and by whom" (Kress, 2011, p. 242), but where I also see the affordances of multimodality at the intersection between different practices, experiences, meanings, and expectations that are negotiated across these different modes and spaces, and which turn out to be a reciprocal, yet unfinished process.

As "multimodality as such…names a field of work, a domain for enquiry, a description of the space, and the resources which enter into meaning, in some way or another" (Kress, 2011, p. 242), "multimodal anthropology asks that we take these outcomes and processes seriously as meaningful interventions that nudge anthropology into more collaborative, innovative, and reflexive directions" (Collins et al., 2017, p. 142). To further explore these developments in their relevance to the ethnographic process and multimodal ethnography (Collins et al., 2017; Pink, 2011), I began to approach the multiplicity of practices and sites in different terms—for example, the importance of different sites where a person takes social action that are closely related to each other, such as sites of exile and activism, sites of (artistic, teaching, or administrative) work, or sites of research. All these sites are constituted by different sensorial and social experiences of place and belonging as well as by different possibilities in using, dwelling in, and moving through them as online and offline mobile spaces. In its methodological dimension, this recognises at its core the central importance and diversity that media use and production acquire in each of our everyday lives. As it reflects on such changes in the media ecologies (Collins et al., 2017, p. 142), I recognise three key developments among the approaches in multimodal anthropology: "(1) the (relative) democratization and integration of media production; (2) the shift toward engagement and collaboration in anthropological research; and (3) the dynamic roles of anthropologists vis-à-vis both the profession and the communities in which they work" (Collins et al., 2017, p. 142). "The new experience of a hyperconnected reality within which it is no longer sensible to ask whether one may be online or offline" (Floridi, 2014, p. 1) and the "onlife" entanglements (Kaur, 2019) with both the multiple modalities of "exile" and "mobile belonging" emphasising the role of mediation and media in contemporary social and everyday practices of Parastou Forouhar. And through our agencies as collaboration partners (Nolas & Varvantakis, 2018), I recognize a certain momentum in the overall research with Parastou Forouhar, as well as in its goals and their development.

4. Conclusions

Exile is a constant context of crisis and action, it often means a daily life marked by efforts to belong politically and culturally, to remember and resist. By considering co-presence and connectedness as a fundamental challenge, particularly during the global Covid-19 pandemic and social distancing, I concentrated in this article on "mobile belonging" in the digital exile. Considering digital exile as a sum of different on- and offline spaces, where mobile practices including cross-bordering daily media communication, activism, and the use of mobile media technologies such as the smartphone, social media platforms, or computer work span and trigger social and geographical distances, I identified multimodality in artist-activist work as exemplarily for conducting and developing a multimodal ethnography.

With the case study of the Iranian artist and activist Parastou Forouhar and the annual day of remembrance for her murdered parents in Iran, this article has illustrated that living in exile bears a complex (media) lifeworld including belonging to different groups and communities: as an internationally renowned and interconnected artist, as a political activist, and as a daughter of politicians murdered in Iran. The affordances of multiple communication and information technologies have been discussed as being central to the emergence of "mobile belonging" and the agency of digital citizenship in exile and, as has been shown, may even be reinforced by global crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Drawing from the research on and the collaboration with Parastou Forouhar and her different media and communication practices of memory and activism, the article elaborated on the necessity of developing a multimodal research design (Collins et al., 2017) to meet complex and powerful intersections of different online and offline spaces in the exile and everyday research. In response

to this complexity and the artist–ethnographer collaboration that formed during this period, this article has argued for the necessity of a multimodal ethnographic design, outlining several of its possibilities. Such an approach to ethnography would enable and acknowledge encounters and practices in multi-situated onlife entanglements in exile and its studies while remaining flexible, processual, and collaborative as envisaged by multimodal anthropology.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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