

## SPECIAL SECTION

# Losing the notebook: An evolving study of the life of a Berlin Square

Julia Dzun 

University College London, London, UK

## Correspondence

Julia Dzun, University College London, UCL Department of Geography North West Wing, London WC1E 6BT, UK.  
 Email: [julia.dzun.19@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:julia.dzun.19@ucl.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

Drawing on PhD fieldwork on the practice and experience of ‘welcome’ in Berlin in the wake of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015–2016, this article engages with the ethics and practicalities of note-taking. It does so by focusing on the production of particular spaces of welcome and hostility in and around one neighbourhood in particular, Neukölln, an important place of arrival for newcomers both historically and in the present day. This article is about losing the notebook and finding new ways of approaching people and places in ways that centre reciprocity and an ethics of care.

## KEYWORDS

ethnography, methods, note-taking, public space

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2020–2021, over a one-and-a-half-year period of fieldwork, I set out to look at how ‘welcome’, and welcome politics more broadly, were experienced and lived in Berlin in the wake of the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ of 2015–2016. With Chancellor Angela Merkel famously proclaiming, *Wir schaffen das!* or ‘We can do this’, Germany at this time assumed centre stage with its opening of borders and a welcome policy towards Syrian refugees coming into Europe. My focus was on the production of particular spaces of welcome and hostility in and around one neighbourhood in particular, Neukölln, an important place of arrival for newcomers both historically and in the present day. Having conducted my field research in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with increasing restrictions on contact and places of gathering, I found myself gravitating towards one of the few places where public life was still taking place, an iconic public space in the neighbourhood, Hermannplatz. Over time I learned that this was not only a significant site of political struggle, with a long history of protest and a space of articulating demands including for and by migrants, but also an important meeting place, space of assembly, oral news and local knowledge sharing. My time spent in Hermannplatz is the focus of this article. More specifically, it is a reflection on the ways in which I learned to ‘lose’ the notebook and find more meaningful ways to engage with the space and its users. While note-taking is crucial for the early planning, organising and recording stages as well as for the later reflecting on and analysing of data, in the field losing the notebook allowed me to find more depth and nuance in my encounters and, ultimately, come away with more interesting and thought-provoking research questions, objectives and findings.

Figure 1 presents a perspectival sketch of the square and an example of my early-stage experimentations with different forms of note-taking. In the process of making my first sketch, I became aware that this was not an activity typically

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performed in the space and it immediately drew further attention to me – in addition to the other social markers of difference that made me stand out there – so I quickly abandoned it. During my regular visits to Hermannplatz, I devised and experimented with various note-taking strategies to capture the sights, smells and sounds in the space, while grappling with the ethical and practical challenges of choosing what and how to observe, record and render visible. As my notes evolved over time, so did my understanding of the public, private and personal vicissitudes of a complex field site.

Throughout the regular visits I made to the square, my note-taking style and form evolved. I began with a more formulaic and bird's-eye view of approaching and sketching the space in an attempt to *record* and *collect* what I initially perceived as data. I then moved to *situating myself* within such accounts through thick (detailed) descriptions, audio recordings and perspectival sketches of the space (Figure 1). Such sketches, in addition to being cumbersome to make while being present, proved inadequate in capturing the dynamics of the place. Finally, by *engaging with the people* and *activities* of the space, using a mixture of audio and hand-recorded formal and informal interviews, conversations and encounters, I landed on a more intimate and situated account of the socialities and materialities of Hermannplatz.

## 2 | RECORDING PHYSICAL SCENES AND SENSE-MAKING

Considered 'the gateway to Neukölln', Hermannplatz is situated at the north-western edge of Neukölln, where several main thoroughfares meet. I started going to Hermannplatz in the autumn of 2020 amid a second deep lockdown and continued going regularly through to the autumn of 2021. My early encounters there reflected some of the complexities and challenges of doing ethnographic research in a cross-language, -gender, -class and -cultural context. It is here where the politics of representation and the negotiated power relations between researchers and 'marginalised subjects' – refugees, racialised individuals, people living with precarity, amongst others – in everyday field encounters require particular attention and theorisation (Thieme et al., 2017). The notebook brought these divisions and considerations further into sight. Though the space was lively and social, heavily used by many, my presence there did not pass without question, nor should it have. Instead, being highly attuned to it, it raised important questions for me about my positionality and the positionality of my research. Through my experiences with my notebook, I began to reflect on how its contested presence becomes intertwined with the often-conflicting desires of the research(er).

On the one hand, in the desire to capture and collect experiences and observations, the notebook can uneasily become a tool that produces a distanced researcher observing a space from afar; on the other hand, in the desire to do justice to a space, its materialities, affects and socialities, the notebook can be an aide or the ally of an engaged researcher. It can also be a tool for working out competing positionalities and desires to be at once an academic, an activist and a friend, as will be discussed in the following section. The desire to observe and record comes up against two sets of challenges, practical and ethical. Practical challenges involve the affordances of the space, temporalities of presence, occupancy and use, and its gendered, classed and racialised dynamics. This means being attuned and adaptable to its rhythms, the times of day, the appropriate length of presence and the activities and norms within those dynamics. Here I used voice memos



FIGURE 1 Perspectival sketch.

as note-taking as if conversing, standing in the transition spaces between consuming and commuting. Other times, I would take notes on my phone, as if texting, finding a small clearing appropriate to momentary dwelling. The ethical challenges are ones that involve the acknowledgement of existing surveillance and policing practices in a space. A space with a special designation, *Kriminalitätsbelastete Orte* or *kbOs* ('crime-prone places') for instance, involves heightened considerations around power dynamics, ensuring people's safety and security, building trust and spending time. I will speak to these challenges as I came up against them and had to continuously learn and unlearn, through my encounters in the field.

### 3 | STRUCTURED RECORDING

Observing, collecting and quantifying the activities and affordances of a space have regularly been understood as the means to understanding it. Nowhere is this better epitomised than in William Whyte's (1980) seminal film *The social life of small urban spaces* present on the syllabi of undergraduate and graduate geography and urban studies courses offered across North American universities. Informed by my years of schooling and professional experiences, including with the very influential people-centred urban design practice *Gehl*, my conception of how to study public space was, in short, surveying it. I would select particular times of day and a set amount of time, to map: *types of activities* – consuming, conversing, commuting, resting, soliciting, working, living (encamping, sanitising), etc.; *spatial properties* – enabling vs. hindering interaction and different uses, type of seating, multi-purpose use, entrances, fences, off-limit areas, costs; *interactions* – who (perceived age, race, gender, physical ability, income, etc.) and what (conversing, talking, shouting, kissing, hugging, fighting, people-watching, being social/being with friends/family); *types and condition of infrastructure and facilities* (restrooms, lighting, barriers); amongst other things. While useful for certain research questions and contexts, in a time and place of overlapping precarities such an approach quickly came up against my own understanding of responsible research.

During my regular visits to Hermannplatz, I continuously struggled with the distancing presence of the notebook as an object in this space. Following multiple attempts at simply 'hanging out' and participating in the activities and affordances of the space – shopping, eating, drinking, meeting and protesting – the lack of one affordance, seating, sorely stood out in a space heavily and regularly used for socialising. Standing around observing in a space where the majority of people spending more prolonged periods of time were men or people sleeping rough amplified the gendered dynamic of conducting the research and my conspicuous presence as a researcher. I devised and tested various note-taking strategies. I moved from physical notebooks to audio recordings to mobile applications such as Notes, Google Docs, Evernote, Miro and Adobe Suite. I experimented with free-form writing and formulaic recording, making ready-to-go templates (as outlined above) to use in the field. I adapted both styles to digital formats recorded on my phone for less conspicuous modes of collection. I would quickly and systematically jot down observations under headings such as sights, sounds, smells and snippets of conversations. Most of these were taken standing in one place, the space adjacent to the coffee stand. At home, I would revisit my notes, reflecting on and refining them. Note-taking is an individual and idiosyncratic process of trial and error, adapting, reflecting, refining and tweaking. Being in the field can be very overwhelming so, at first, certain types of structured and systematic recording, such as templates, can be a useful place to start. In my own time in the field, they afforded me a sense of comfort and confidence, aiding my understanding of what makes the space appealing to different users, how different individuals and groups use it, make sense of it and find meaning in it.

### 4 | NEW KINDS OF NOTES

Over time, I would come to reconsider the right time and place for the notebook, let go of the desire to capture everything in situ, and develop a new approach to note-taking and the field. Note-taking became more selective, sporadic and shorthand. With time, it also became less about the physical activities of the space and more about being attuned to its different affective and political registers. My notes included observations of the forms through which intersecting crises expressed themselves. How various individuals – regulars, passersby, vendors and security personnel – expressed and responded to the often subtle forms of insecurity and uncertainty that may be seen as 'abnormal' or 'antisocial' behaviour in a space. My notes reflected on how encounters between differentially mobile customers and vendors, around for instance alternative milk options, reflected the alienation of and resistance to changing demographics and gentrification politics in the neighbourhood. Here I would jot down brief descriptions of customers, their appearances, interactions

and orders. On one occasion, when a middle-aged German couple came up to order coffee, the vendor, with a big smile giving away his excitement, said, ‘*Mit Hafermilch?*’ (‘with oat milk?’). There was a pause, confusion, then laughter. It was a joke. A jab at the sudden obsession. ‘*Nein*’, they said with certainty. My notes also engaged with how the election-time performance of a pirouetting camera, photo op and dance with the mayor of Neukölln, played out around one of the focal coffee stands, became a kind of perfunctory display of diversity politics in place of a real politics of representation and voice. I began to realise that I would need to be a more active and present participant in the space. Eventually, the practice of note-taking would take place primarily at different times to those when I was in the square, namely immediately upon returning from the field. This was a critical moment of learning that allowed me to be there and in turn to forge the crucial relationships that would come to animate and bring new meaning to my research.

## 5 | PUTTING THE NOTEBOOK AWAY – TOWARDS RECIPROCITY AND REFLECTION

With time, determination and the help of my Arabic-speaking friend and research assistant, I began to uncover a more intimately personal and political side of the square. This happened as I began to build a relationship with one of the small local coffee stand owners there, Ramzi. Over the course of my fieldwork, Ramzi, became a key interlocutor and a protagonist in my ethnographic writing, his stand serving as a node weaving through themes and spaces in my research. My conversations and time spent hanging out over coffees revealed the layered complexities of Hermannplatz not only as a commercial public space, but as an important meeting place, of day-to-day encounters, close ties and familial bonds.

My initial encounter with Ramzi began through music. He was playing Fayrouz, a Lebanese singer, whose albums, as Fadi explained, are the ‘morning music’ heard across the Middle East. Through our initial exchanges, I learned that Ramzi speaks Polish, which in our later conversations we would use interchangeably with English and German. He would regularly make the journey across the border when he lived further east, to dance. ‘Polish people have more fun,’ he told me. He had been living in Germany for over 30 years. In our later encounters, he would be increasingly insistent that I learn German. ‘It is easy,’ he said. ‘I learned German by myself. And Polish.’ He was a pharmacist back in Libya. I would spend a year of fieldwork chatting with Ramzi over coffee, often on very brisk cold mornings, with my phone out and notebook stowed away for later reflections. I learned to be present without drawing conclusions and to immerse myself without formally observing.

Even in the deep pandemic, Ramzi would remain open, his coffee stand serving as an important space for coming together. Some of Ramzi’s regulars traverse the city, commuting from far away districts for the familial found within Ramzi’s orbit. As Ramzi became a key interlocutor I came to see that he, for many, had long been the focal point of the square. Visibility is an important element of this. Ramzi made you feel seen, from yelling out ‘*Mustafa, Kaffee für dich!*’ noticing that it was that moment of the day that the 7 a.m. start of a two-hour assembly of the nearly 10-meter-long fruit and vegetable stand each morning started to weigh down his fellow compatriot, or playing Michael Jackson, waiting, knowing, everyone would dance, to leading Hussein, the key repair man, arm around shoulder to the ice cream vendor to treat him on a sweltering afternoon. While getting meanings right within ethnographic research often requires attention to the exact choice and order of words and sentences (Duneier, 2000), I made the decision not to record, or use a recording device, for every encounter. I would use my notebook, which at this point was my phone, to write down key phrases, but I would not rely on it to capture the entirety of each encounter. The notebook became an intrusive interloper, the phone a more discrete aide. While some exchanges are paraphrased, I did my best to ensure that they nonetheless reflected the words and meanings conveyed to me without claiming exactitude. This was important to me in light of the practical and ethical challenges I described above as well as the relational dynamics I describe below.

Our encounters complicated typical understandings of welcome and the nuances entailed in navigating, resisting and reconfiguring such relationships. Our evolving relationship would further concretise the complexities of welcome politics and the dynamics of studying it. It brought to the fore, the challenges of intersecting positionalities and my desire to be at once researcher, regular and friend. The notebook and note-taking became an important space, post-field visit, for working out and through these complex and shifting relationships in the field as I grappled with the work of ‘addressing ethics in situ’ (Huggins & Glebbeek, 2009, p. 2). The presence of consent forms, notebooks and note-taking only served to amplify the distance this created.

Inescapably, these multiple and complex interpersonal engagements, which involved inserting myself to varying degrees into the lifeworlds of my interlocutors and opening space into my own, were laden with power relations linked to the choices I made as an ethnographer. For as Thieme (2017) argues, often the key moments of data collection are

ones where conceptions of the ‘field’ – as a relational space of reciprocity and ethical responsibility – test the norms of conventional ethnographic research. Prioritising presence, listening, speaking, hearing, over observing, recording and note-taking, building a relationship (with a person) over building rapport (with a research interlocutor) meant different kinds of note-taking. Building rapport meant being accepted as a researcher and gaining trust to be able to carry out interviews. This on its own felt self-serving, as during our interactions Ramzi was generous enough to share more personal accounts of his everyday life, relationships and trajectories. Building a relationship meant opening up my lifeworld, periodically coming with my partner and introducing my mother when she came to visit Berlin, as well as disclosing my own thoughts, wants and apprehensions about notions of family, place and home. This further required putting the notebook away while in the field.

It also eventually led to ‘gaining access’, which meant carefully and ethically navigating more formal interview encounters in which I was challenged. ‘Why him and not me?’ asked one of Ramzi’s regulars, or ‘I will only do the interview if we do it in German’, Ramzi responded to my interview request, and would later state ‘I am not an *Ausländer* (“foreigner”); as I fumbled with my phrasing and vocabulary in German. With the help of my notebook, more post-field visit than in situ, I made the decision to at times ‘write myself in’ as an ethnographer, as a means of making more explicit the complex nuances of continuous negotiation of self, in relation to the field, to interlocutors and to the written accounts that emerge from fieldwork. ‘Writing myself in’ meant reflecting on how my presence affected the space and people around me, how power relations between interlocutors, ‘marginalised’ to varying degrees, and myself as a researcher were negotiated in our interactions. It also meant acknowledging that my written accounts would inevitably (re)produce and/or challenge existing conceptions of people and place as I expand on below.

## 6 | ‘WELCOME’ AND EVOLVING ETHNOGRAPHIC ACCOUNTS

Coming to understand Hermannplatz as an important space of welcome – one of contingent mobilities and everyday variegated experiences of the continuously shifting asylum policies and humanitarian border regimes – has meant reflecting on and evolving my note-taking style. Particularly in research contexts of varying forms of marginality and precarity, the forms of representation used to describe people and places require ongoing care and critical reflection. Doing so is necessary for seeing, encountering and writing the field ethically (Alexander, 2006).

In certain spaces such as Hermannplatz, putting the notebook away can be the right decision. The kind of situated and engaged form of note-taking and representation described here is particularly important, because these are spaces that are already hyper scrutinised. Here, the criminalisation and stigmatisation of people and places are further entangled in the surveillance technologies and policing strategies of the state present in such spaces. At the same time, they are important spaces where the currencies of everyday knowledge and shared know-how, of first contacts and key connections, of past and present ties, work to counteract the deliberate opacity and obstinacy of state policies aimed at the intractability of being and existing (on the ‘margins’) in everyday life. Particular forms of looking, observing and participating are necessary for conducting ethnographic research in such spaces – ones built on relationships based on mutual respect and recognition of autonomy. The accounts of my encounters in this article reveal the ways in which a key interlocutor exerted his agency in outlining the terms for our developing relationship. These terms included reciprocity and presence. The notebook was critical for making sense of the nuanced and complex ways in which interlocutor–researcher relationships reveal deeper meanings, at times foundational to the research questions one sets out to study, such as the politics of welcome. First, losing the notebook, and then re-engaging with it, was key to recognising, reflecting and doing justice to the complexities of a space and the people who make it.

The elusiveness of the ethnographic experience and the not always clear terms in which ethnographers write about their time in the field (Hitchings & Latham, 2020), are the product of the messy nature of working out such practical and ethical engagements on the ground. This piece, in conversation with the other papers in this issue, voices some of the vulnerabilities related to the unpredictability and intractability of the field and centres them as a critical part of conducting and writing ethnography. The questions I sought to answer required engagements beyond observable data. They necessitated interpersonal encounters in which the notebook no longer took centre stage. The evolution of my learning, of being distant and being proximate, is reflected in my note-taking style. I eventually moved away from a more formulaic and top-down view of the space to a more intimate, situated and personal account of the socialities and materialities of Hermannplatz. Attunement to street-level agencies, being present to the subjective ways in which individuals navigate, narrate and choose to accept, extend or challenge notions of welcome, is crucial to responsible forms of representation born out of critical and reflexive methodologies outlined here. The notebook becomes a kind of stand-in for broader

questions of research approaches and agendas. What one sees, observes and collects, what one listens to, hears and records are all part of a choice. Those choices inform note-taking practices and emerge out of them.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Due to the nature of this research, participants of this study did not agree for their data to be shared publicly, so supporting data are not available.

## ORCID

Julia Dzun  <https://orcid.org/0009-0006-4682-7611>

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