



Off-sited, on research and geopolitical uncertainty

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Abstract. Writing in June 2025, I reflect on Chowra Makaremi’s proposal of “off-site ethnography” amid global instability and shifting geopolitics. Through distance, Makaremi shows how research can capture what lies beyond direct observation, inspiring a reflection on presumed norms around fieldwork, mobility, and academic research. Her approach resonates with diasporic experiences, crises of access, and the urgency of safeguarding counter-memories in uncertain times.

As I write this in June 2025, the geopolitical context of Iran has reached a new height of instability. It remains uncertain what comes next for the country, region, or other involved actors and alliances, and I have no interest in speculating here. Not only is the scope of the problem beyond my expertise as an urban researcher, the situation seems volatile and subject to sudden changes, yet many of us working in higher education are affected by the changing geopolitics in our day-to-day work. This week, a colleague at a public university in a conservative US state expressed uncertainty about their name being associated with a publication by an author from Iran; they stressed how new policies restricted the admission of Iranian students, which they saw as a harbinger for future university policies decided at the state level. Days ago, an Iranian student submitted an apology along with their assignment, explaining their inability to concentrate with bombs falling in Iran while they were studying abroad. In Switzerland, where this journal is based, Iran is among the countries whose academics are faced with extra scrutiny out of fears about espionage (Allen, 2024), responsabilizing professors to participate in screening potential PhD candidates or collaborators (ETH Zurich Editorial Team, 2024).

This all inevitably shapes my reading of Chowra Makaremi’s “Insurrections in Iran: an off-site ethnography” (Makaremi, 2025), which I heard originally presented in 2023 at a conference in Frankfurt. I remembered most the discomfort of distance expressed in the lecture: as women took to the streets in Tehran, Makaremi was

captivated by the images disseminated online. She described staying up at night to scroll, and I could imagine her face in the darkness, lit by the light of her phone. The moment captures a simultaneous feeling of bodily safety, away from the source of the images, and a kind of anxiousness to be closer to the updates. I left her lecture feeling that this was a familiar melancholic experience for those of us leading diasporic lives: sheltered from turmoil but faced with a kind of loneliness.

Through distance, she is able to establish a new space of knowledge. This space of knowledge challenges some entrenched power dynamics on the issue of ontological locationality, how location shapes who is able to research and what is researched at all (Palat Narayanan, 2024). Indeed, she writes, “As long as access to the field is what legitimizes and delineates empirical knowledge, even the most impartial research remains dependent on power” (Makaremi, 2025:10). Off-site ethnography is therefore proposed as a means to challenge the way location, access, and knowledge are entwined deterministically. She shows how ethnography at a distance can help to capture “what remains off-field – out of range from concrete observation but also from our frameworks of interpretation and understanding” (Makaremi, 2025:11).

Makaremi’s reflections on this approach bears relevance for many researchers. Her empirical work connects her off-site ethnographic account of the 2022 Women Life Freedom uprisings with her long-term archival research about the Iranian Revolution, yet the approach goes beyond the specificity

of these events and informs research for times of uncertainty much more broadly. At its heart, the paper captures a juncture between the irreversible shifts that is represented in the insurrection in 2022 and the uncertainty of the future (Makaremi, 2025:12). Researching this kind of moment from a distance, while faced with its own limitations, may also be increasingly necessary across a diversity of topics and geographies.

1 Off-sited

New attention has been drawn to the changing nature of research practices in times of crisis and uncertainty (Hilbrandt and Ren, 2025). This is connected to the question of mobility that restricts the movement of certain researchers and the access to certain research sites at times disrupted by war but is also reflective of a perennially uneven terrain (Myat, 2024; Palat Narayanan, 2024). Research on academic migration underlines that not all researchers are equally mobile and that not all mobility is simply reflective of uneven terrains of power – that some mobility also manifests against the grain is a well-established phenomenon, framed by notions like brain drain or diaspora (Fahey and Kenway, 2010). Indeed, the potential gain of mobility for researchers is often framed discursively as reflective of excellence and beneficial for the researchers' own professional trajectories (Leung, 2013), though less is known about the consequences for those researchers who are not as mobile. That field sites are not equally accessible is likewise well established, resulting in a variety of strategies, including the relocation of research destinations (Mason, 2021). Research production is in this way often predicated on mobility and access, with inaccessibility implying the need to change topics or sites. Whether mobility is a problem, a possibility or opportunity is contingent on the positionality of the researcher.

Makaremi's own position is situated within a context of privilege and immobility, based at an institution in Paris, a city at the heart of the knowledge empire, but also unable to freely travel or access the site at the heart of her research. It is a position with resources and capacity, where she is able to do her research with relative security, but also a position with limits, fixed in a specific place that restricts her movement. This is a particular kind of condition for off-site research. It is arguably different to the temporary travel restrictions that some researchers experienced for the first time during COVID, where the expectation is that access will be restored. Research (im)mobility is a longer-lasting constraint that does not include the expectation of eventual access. It is also a condition laden with political risks.

In my own research, as I am constantly trying to calculate the risks – for my team, for our interlocutors, for myself – I look to Makaremi's proposal of the off-site as a hopeful space. She is proposing distance, which could also be framed as exclusion, as a differently productive knowledge space. She frames the question as an issue of method, "*how can*

we lead an empirical investigation without being present in the field?" (Makaremi, 2025:10). Focusing on three themes from anonymously sourced images, she delves into reflections on memory, identity, and subjectivation. This raises the question of how the analysis of these images from a distance is substantively different to an analysis of the events in the images as witnessed and studied first-hand. For researchers grappling with risk, the potentially productive nature of this distance is hopeful – not promised or expected, but possibly substantial.

Distance as a productive space recalls the foundational work of Clifford Geertz, offering up interpretation as a key site of meaning-making (Geertz, 1973). Perhaps the off-site facilitates a means of interpretation that is aided by mediating factors. For instance, the proliferation of certain images implies a dominant discourse in the media around women "waking up", which Makaremi is able to dismiss as obviously flawed (Makaremi, 2025:12). The media discourse frames the images in a way that Makaremi is able to critically engage with, offering the possibility for her to reframe the images and offer alternative interpretations.

I also find myself relating to Makaremi's recounting of scrolling, between sleep and wakefulness. There is an intimacy to the mediated image, experienced in the night time, on a phone, held close. Scrolling at night is a private experience, addictive, mesmerizing, endless, and, as she writes, emotional.

Years ago, during a postdoctoral fellowship, I was away during the holidays from my Hong Kong apartment, which was embroiled in a violent street protest. Later described as the "Fishball Revolution", people were demonstrating in my neighborhood in Mong Kok. During the Lunar New Year holiday, it is common for people to go out and buy street food, like the popular fishball, to snack on. That year, tensions escalated when authorities began shutting down food stalls over permit issues. This was perceived by many as an unwelcome example of mainland state encroachment, another sign of the unraveling of the "one country, two systems" agreement. Bricks were thrown, fires were set, riot police were deployed, and I was glued to my screen. I was rivetted by the physical and material violence and the transformation of a neighborhood that I strained to recognize.

This was in 2016, pocketed between the Umbrella Movement of 2014 and the anti-extradition law protests of 2019–2020 that would reshape Hong Kong (Ng, 2020). It was a transition moment from peaceful occupation to something else at that time still unknown. And perhaps it was precisely because of this – what Makaremi describes as an irreversible shift, yet unknown future – that I could not look away from my phone when I was home in Berlin.

About 10 years later, I am preparing for a visit to a very different Hong Kong. And the growing list of uncertainties, especially those voiced by researchers familiar with the city, reminds me that access is not certain. In Makaremi's words, "we cannot challenge the political order; we can-

not escape surveillance,” but we can make methodological choices (Makaremi, 2025:10). And I wonder how to apply off-site ethnography in my own project, not just as an alternative or plan B, but as a generative site of knowledge production. When I consider the mediating factors relevant for my own research, I think of the platforms, the publishers, the authors, and the photographers whose situatedness already frames the scope of what I see. Beyond this, the data servers, software applications, and hardware that I use to receive information lend all these sources a sense of added risk. In addition to ethnographic traditions of anonymization, our team is working on issues around metadata, server security, and encryption. For the grant funder, we have to balance data publication and accessibility with protecting sources. There is an urgency to safeguard as we witness how easy and fast it is possible to censor and erase (Barankiuk, 2025) and to remove users from digital places (Morris, 2022). Our collection of screenshots grows, as websites and posts disappear.

In this way, my concerns about safeguarding also touch on Makaremi's questions around the work of counter-memories. Recording memories for some places is now becoming a counter-memory as official accounts of the past ossify. In the growing body of resources and archives about Hong Kong outside of Hong Kong, what can I learn about the city, about everyday urban life and the urban futures that once animated it? The futures imagined and fought for in the city's recent past, perhaps these are less present in Hong Kong today than they are in the growing archives abroad – underlining the potential relevance of off-site research. If certain discourses and memories “encircle our political imagination” (Makaremi, 2025:16), perhaps alternative interpretations and counter-memories offer a means to possibly expand it instead. Documenting and safeguarding accounts of a place under threat of erasure can serve as a form of counter-memory, which, especially from a distance, might imply a greater capacity for imagination. In these uncertain times, we would likely benefit from more experiences with off-site methodology and more appreciation for the unique kind of geographical knowledge possible from a distance.

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