The Valorisation of Intimacy: How to Make Sense of Disdain, Distance and 'Data'

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Scene one: Fez. When I arrived in Fez, my Moroccan contact and so-called 'gatekeeper' granting me access to the migrant camp I was due to visit, told me that there had just been a public flogging there. Sarah explained, very matter-of-factly, that one of the migrants living in the camp, a Nigerian man, had been found guilty in a makeshift 'court' of stealing, and was thus sentenced to 30 lashes. 'Marginalised communities living outside the law tend to always have their own forms of justice', Sarah explained to me whilst driving me back to my guesthouse, and told me a story about a particular group of Berbers who punish stealing of water with a requirement that that person then cooks dinner for the whole community. It wasn't exactly the same thing. 'There are public floggings all the time in that camp'. As the director of a migrant NGO in Morocco for almost 20 years, she seemed to be hardened to all this. I however felt immediately sick; horrified and appalled. I hadn't yet been to the camp or met any of the people living there; all from sub-Saharan African countries, mostly male. But I wondered what kind of people could inflict this kind of pain on somebody else in such a barbaric and calculated way.

I was supposed to be broadly researching the effects of European bordering technologies on so-called third country nationals attempting to reach Europe. Like many others working within the field of security and migration, especially during the most recent refugee 'crisis', my main *problematique* was the complete de-humanisation of people on the move which has systematically taken place over the past 30 or so years; a misery which was very much a rule of the game rather than an exception in times of 'crisis' (Jeandesboz and Pallister-Wilkins 2016). Our project had investigated how various technologies had impacted the journeys of these 'TCNs' (Third Country Nationals), removing freedom of movement from the equation and reconceiving security as a 'balance' between coercion and surveillance. People crossing borders, with all their myriad of stories, families, careers and desires were homogenised and funnelled into flashing dots on a screen, FRONTEX statistics or a racialised horde blocked by police, barbed wire and dogs. An analysis informed by anthropology was seen as a way to re-humanise these travellers, disrupting statist or bureaucratic accounts of migration so prevalent in International Relations by privileging fragmentation and journeys, both temporal and spatial (see Basaran and Guild 2017; Bigo and Mc Cluskey 2017).

At first, it felt like a slightly futile endeavour, something we were forced to insert into a big European Commission-funded project to avoid a sterile or technocratic narrative of border technologies, nowadays often absurdly framed as 'humanitarian' (Gabrielsen Jumbert 2013; Pallister-Wilkins 2015). I was the ethnographer on the project, so it was me who could fly off and produce this research, with these refugees as my interlocutors (in reality, as with many of these type of projects, there was not really a great deal of time for in-depth participant observation or deep 'hanging out' [Madison 2005] so 'ethnography' became 'ethnographic interviews').

I knew it would be difficult; confusing emotions and feeling continuously destabilised are all part and parcel of fieldwork. It is always hard to speak about 'migrants' experiences' without replicating the usual discourses of vulnerability and suffering. This is especially the case when these individuals are forced to exist in an enclosed space, exposed to journalists and academics turning up to 'research' their daily lives (see Picozza 2018). But I had

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already formed a tentative opinion about the people in the camp and it left me conflicted: they were victims of these bordering regimes, certainly. But they also seemed frightening and violent. I'd never carried out fieldwork with people I had felt such antipathy towards before. Especially when my specific role was to 're-humanise' them in some way or another.

So the following day, I made my way to the informal camp to introduce myself. As I knew beforehand, the camp was divided according to nationality, with different roles allocated to different national groups. Nobody was particularly welcoming, but then again, I wasn't particularly friendly either. I wasn't expecting to be greeted warmly or offered a drink. But the wariness of my first interviewee was surprising nonetheless. His words, 'You are making a living from our suffering' haunted me for weeks. It was true. I was. Sub-Saharans in Morocco (for they were always presented as, and presented themselves as, a homogenous group) were over-researched already. It wasn't just 'an overcrowded field' (Andersson 2014), but profoundly sad and hopeless. I just didn't have it in me to try.

This was a failure from the outset. How could I even begin to attempt to do justice to the lived experiences of these people, trapped in Morocco, whose dreams and desires for Europe were funnelled and channelled into more militant claims for rights, counter-insurgency rhetoric and disdain towards me? Surely to talk about this, however sensitively, would feed into the securitarian and far-right narrative of civilisational clashes?

How could I talk about my own positioning, the discord I felt, the fear? Should I 'write this in?' How would this at all help in re-humanising these people who were already de-humanised in so many ways? The cognitive dissonance left me feeling rather depressed and I'm quite ashamed to say that I cut my losses and left after only a week.

Because of these conflicting feelings, I re-located my fieldwork from Fez to Rabat, where I also had an NGO contact. The capital city was also home to around 2000 Levantine Arabs on their way to Spain and further onwards into Europe. It would be much easier for me to build some kind of relations with people in Rabat as the situation for these Arab migrants, I had been told, was not so desperate or harrowing. Their suffering was less visceral. Stan Cohen (2001) has written in *States of Denial: Knowing About Atrocity and Suffering* about the under-theorised notion of compassion fatigue which can contribute to a denialist mindset. A psychological term which alludes to the sheer quantity and intensity of suffering leading to a type of numbing and de-sensitivity towards people enduring this suffering, 'compassion fatigue' is perhaps one explanation for my disengagement with the migrants in Fez. The strategies of avoidance Cohen speaks of are certainly recognisable in my own practices. However, this explanation lends a veneer of righteousness to what was a rather selfish action (indeed, the term is often deployed in relation to humanitarians who have spent too much time in 'the field'). I was no humanitarian, just someone on a 'jet-set' ethnography (Olwig 2007, 22) who would simply have rather hung out with people who made me feel less guilty and less uncomfortable from the outset.

A more academically acceptable reason for me shifting sites also presented itself, allowing me to leave aside these feelings of shame and disdain. There had not really been that much written about Arab refugees in Morocco as the phenomenon was rather new; a consequence of the 'way' to Europe being made much longer and pushed much further west as the result of various EU-Turkey, EU-Libya deals and increasing surveillance of the Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes (Frontex 2018; Heck and Hess 2017). I'd spent a bit of time in Syria before the war, worked with Syrian refugees during my Ph.D. and didn't even speak French, the language of many of the sub-Saharan people living in Fez.

I became rather sheepish when I was chastised for my decision to move to Rabat and interview Arabs by the chair of the NGO: 'For God's sake, Emma. Why are you interested in Syrians? They don't have a difficult time here at all compared to the Africans. They're the brother Arabs; they get given everything on a plate'. The deserving/non-deserving migrant dichotomy invoked by Sarah was a little surprising, but in some ways, she was right of course. But by that point I'd already made up my mind.

Professional Ethics of Empathy: Problems and Pitfalls

Placing ontological primacy on lived experiences and all their complexities is central to any mode of anthropological

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inquiry. Our professional ethic demands us to be open and sympathetic to all our research subjects and the sets of the relations within which they are embedded. This is so well known that it's almost a doxa of the field. Ethnographers are supposed to be moral relativists. Not only does this prevent against 'conceptual enclosure' (Montesinos Coleman 2015), it can also shed light on the conditions of possibility for all the political 'bads' that have happened lately: Brexit, Trump and the like; in short, what Geertz (1984, 275) describes as 'looking into dragons, not domesticating or abominating them'. An openness and understanding of the experiences of everyone in the field, no matter how morally ambiguous this turns out to be – is supposed to be essential. But of course, this commitment to professional empathy is much easier to grasp in the abstract. When one is immersed in distressing or destabilising situations, you can never predict exactly with whom bonds will be formed. Professional ethics can only take you so far.

Relatively little has been written about the problems encountered in the field thanks to this professional commitment to empathy. In the field of IR, Julian Eckl (2008) was one of the first to question what 'responsible scholarship' looks like when researchers finds themselves in ethically ambiguous situations – concerns which also relate to what and how researchers should convey their findings. From a gender perspective, 'awkward surplus' is the phrase used to talk about the stuff that gets written out of the final book or paper – the fear of what informants come to expect in return within the very mercenary relationship of the researcher and the researched, for example (Hanson and Richards 2017). As women in the field, what amount of sexual harassment will we put up with to form a relationship with those we are researching (see also Desirée Poets's chapter in this volume)? Though I experienced no harassment at the hands of my interlocutors in Morocco, the 'awkward surplus' that manifested itself in my fieldwork also seems to be taboo. They disliked me; I kept them at arm's length. For my interlocutors to view me in any way other than as an annoyance would have seemed like a perverse improvement of sorts at the time.

These types of dilemmas and contradictions arise because of the value the discipline places on forming *intimacies* and intimate relations with research subjects (Appadurai 1997). As Hanson and Richards (2017, 596) have remarked 'No one gets excited about an ethnographer that has awkward or strange relationships with the communities they are trying to work in'. Certainly, the 'best' ethnographies, the ones which are most celebrated, cited and win all sorts of awards – are the ones in which close bonds have been formed.

There is no doubt that the level of discomfort I felt shaped my research in Morocco. But to dwell too much in this discomfort would have felt self-indulgent, possibly somewhat racist, and perhaps insignificant in the eyes of other, more experienced scholars who might be more hardened to this kind of violence and suffering. I didn't want to be seen as too soft to do this type of research; naïve and immature, clueless as to the horror of the suffering of refugees at Europe's borders, even though that was all probably true. This discomfort also didn't fit the line of the big research project. Instead of acknowledging this therefore, I just pretended it didn't happen. It was relegated to the stuff of half-drunken conversations with close colleagues at conferences.

Scene Two: Rabat. The *Rue al-Arab al-Maghriby* was temporary home to many of the Syrians and Yemenis passing through Morocco on their way to Europe. I was introduced to Samar in a Syrian restaurant over a *narghile* and orange juice. A young, articulate and enthusiastic woman who was very easy to chat with, I had met her much more serious husband a few days earlier and was heartened by the high esteem in which he had obviously held his wife. Both of them were extremely positive about my research: 'It's great that you will write about us and bring attention to our stories. Syrian people here have had to travel through six, seven countries and families are having to storm the wall (in Ceuta), with their children, everything! We are a civilised people.'

Rabat was a much more pleasant fieldwork experience altogether. There were no 'camps' here. The travellers who were here were a bit more settled, living in cheap hotel rooms or cramped apartments. There were NGOs dealing with the large number of migrants who found themselves in the city, as well as a UNHCR presence. For many of the Levantine Arabs however, 'official' NGOs were avoided in favour of more informal Syrian diaspora organisations which had a long history in the city. Keeping under the radar was often a way of life for many of the Syrians and suspicion of charitable organisations, even those that could have offered them some accommodation or small payments, meant that they were much more difficult to locate. I was quite pleased with myself for being able to gain the trust of many of the Arab travellers.

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Samar's story was very relatable – she was a Ph.D. student of Arabic literature in Aleppo, but was forced to abandon her studies back in 2015. Her family had paid for her and her husband to travel first to Lebanon, then to Egypt. Egypt became a difficult place for Syrians to live after el-Sisi rose to power, so they flew to Algeria, then crossed illegally into Morocco; a process which caused the couple great suffering ('You have to understand Emma, we've never broken the law before'). Samar took out two books from her bag, which she then handed to me with great pride: collections of modern Arabic poetry which she had edited whilst still in Aleppo. She must have carried several copies of these books all the way from home. On the inside cover, she wrote a message: 'Dearest Emma, beautiful mother and scholar. With love from Samar'. I beamed at receiving the gift, and the compliment.

Sociologising These Encounters: How to Avoid Reproducing the 'Good' Refugee Discourse?

How could I sociologise and objectivise these situations in which I found myself? Of course there were many ways for the story of 'third country nationals' stranded in Morocco to be told. The incident of the public flogging didn't get written into the final 'deliverable' or journal article. However much I tried to reflect upon this and theorise it, the encounter never managed to fit congruously with the project's aim of re-humanising people who had been de-humanised. There was no space for complexity, uncertainty and even contradiction in my analysis; this dissonance could only ever be a residue which needed to be wiped away (cf. Morin 1992). I was also explicitly warned by colleagues not to go near the topic; 'You don't have a permanent job yet, think how this would come across on social media if someone misinterpreted you in a conference…'. No amount of reflection on power relations and ethnocentric assumptions could mitigate against the good vs. bad migrant narrative which could emerge from juxtaposing encounters in Fez and Rabat.

Later, and after a good few of the late night drunken chats I alluded to earlier, I came to reflect upon the way the violent practices of the Schengen border were mimicked and reproduced through the violence of the camp; from the categorising and separating of people based on their nationalities, to the beatings and humiliation of those deemed to have transgressed the rules. In a way, the category of the 'black migrant' became a lived-in category and went some way in 'making up' these people on the move (Hacking 2006; Andersson 2016; Tazzioli 2019). The levels of violence that they had faced (one man from Ghana had lost his legs from an attempt to scale the wall at Ceuta) did nothing to reduce the desire to come to Europe. So perhaps in many ways, Sarah was right to chastise me for deciding to focus my research on the Levantine Arabs. An analysis based solely on mimesis however removed something from the story of these men living in the camp. I didn't want to write a romanticised, homogenised story of migrant autonomy or reproduce this valorisation of suffering.

Writing about Syrians who were 'like us', was comparatively far easier (see also Žižek 2016 on this subject). Samar had the symbolic capital to be able to manipulate our encounter somewhat, to ethnographically 'seduce' me (cf. Tubaro and Casilli 2010), writing a personal note to me in her book though she'd only known me for three or four hours. Her education, gender, and confidence meant that she was able to temper and soften the power relations between us. In this encounter, I wasn't the European cosmopolitan from the research business, making a living out of her suffering. At least I wasn't *only* that. I was also a fellow scholar, young woman, and mother. Plus, she was nice to me and complimented my appearance. This was altogether a much less uncomfortable set of relations.

What also didn't get written into the final write-up however was the disdain felt by many of the Syrians towards the black Africans in Morocco. It wasn't only Sarah, but several other NGO workers and volunteers that complained about the rude behaviour of the Arabs towards the other migrants, the complete normality of overt racism and hostility towards Africans, which sometimes escalated to minor scuffles. This prejudice wasn't exactly far hidden in Samar's story, but who was I to judge? She was glamorous and educated. The Syrians were also suffering.

Reflexivity is supposed to be the answer to all of this. And in many ways, a careful, empirically situated analysis of relations is supposed be so much more than self-flagellation or a descent into narcissism (see Hamarti-Ataya 2013 for this discussion). Shedding light on the assumptions, biases and baggage that one brings to the field is an indispensable first step. But with a strong ethnographic analysis, perhaps it's possible to trace the ways in which the research encounter is itself shaped by the researcher's positionality, beyond the seemingly sterile and bureaucratic way of 'objectifying the object' (Bourdieu 1988). I carried with me a multiplicity of subjectivities into the field; a

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foreign mercenary, an expert, a mother, or a fellow scholar. With an attentive ethnographic ear, one can follow the shifts between these possibilities, as well as the activation of positional relations that hadn't been anticipated. Opening myself and my fieldnotes in this way to others; to productive misunderstandings and alternative interpretations – is as much a part of the anthropological venture as is conducting fieldwork (Fassin 2017). Sometimes I forgot that reflexivity is a collective enterprise and that nobody can do it on their own. The late-night drunken chats are part and parcel of the endeavour.

Conclusion: Rethinking Reflexivity in Times of Precariousness

By way of conclusion, I'd just like to dwell a bit more on what reflexive scholarship could mean in light of how we conceive 'failure'. A practical and collective reflexivity, with the help of friends and colleagues, is indispensable to the type of embedded, ethnographic fieldwork so many of us are now undertaking in the field of IR.

What I'm still unsure about however, is whether this commitment to reflexivity can mitigate against the necessities of the early career scholar in precarious employment to refrain from saying the wrong thing; being too risk averse to take a chance. Admitting when something hasn't gone to plan; that fieldwork can be confusing, frightening, destabilising; that your interlocutors find you repulsive; – these issues shouldn't be the big taboos that they are. In this sense, we are all a little bit complicit in maintaining a certain 'public transcript'; a carefully choreographed performance of what acceptable research should look like, which serves to uphold certain types of domination and exclusion.

I can't imagine soliciting contributions for this volume was especially easy for the editors, but provoking and reinvigorating conversations about failure, however we think about it, far away from the 'think-about-how-this-will-affect-your-career' contingent is a necessary and welcome undertaking. Perhaps acknowledging these taboos, these anxieties and these pressures as precarious scholars could allow us to revisit what we mean by the very idea of reflexive scholarly practice.

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