



The Art of Conflict Chic (part 1)

Aman Mojadidi
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In this essay, Afghan American artist Aman Mojadid reflects on a series of installations entitled “Conflict Chic” he exhibited in a solo exhibition in Paris in 2011. He discusses the imagined geographies born out of the Afghan wars and the search for a post-Orientalist tradition in the post-9/11 era.

At a solo exhibition in Paris in 2011, I showed a work titled *Conflict Chic 1 & 2*. The piece was a critique of how the war in Afghanistan, and the expatriate life that accompanied it, had, over the years, become cool, artsy, and fashionable. In Hollywood, any number of movies could be found with some focus on Afghanistan



and its war, or at the very least a reference made to it such as 'like in Afghanistan', while in Kabul expatriates could wear the latest in chic, overpriced neo-traditional fashion to the various dinners, parties, or concerts they attended.





Suicide bomber (Installation by Aman Mojadidi)

The creation of Afghanistan as ‘conflict chic’ was also furthered as foreign governments began throwing money at a variety of art and culture-oriented projects through public diplomacy grants as part of their propaganda campaigns, trying to demonstrate how far Afghanistan had come since the invasion of the country in 2001. Although this included a range of nations such as France, Germany, and the United Kingdom, it was heavily led by the United States of America, whose public diplomacy budget totaled, according to the special inspector general on Afghan reconstruction, US\$111 million in 2010–11 alone; up from a total of US\$1.5 million between 2007 and 2009 (Sopko 2014). Although these budgets covered a wide range of activities, art and culture (under the umbrella of civil society) projects were given priority during this funding period.

These projects included a variety of mediums such as a fictional short film about young, impoverished boys with unrealized dreams of playing the national sport of buzkashi (which got a 2013 Oscar-nomination in the Best Live Action Short Film category, only reinforcing the point about Hollywood made above); a rock music festival (which actually began as a solid platform on which contemporary



musicians could express themselves but later became an all-encompassing 'performing arts' festival, corralling any and every art form under the sun – because why focus on one thing and do it well when you can co-opt, and possibly get funding for, more?); a documentary film that sought to place every Afghan artist into a life-or-death, good versus evil, battle against poverty, war, and Islamic extremism; and a multi-media project that simply showed the ordinary, though sufficiently exoticized, banality of everyday Afghan life just being lived.

And journalists, of course, could not get enough of stories about Kabul's 'first female rapper' or 'graffiti scene', as if there actually was a 'scene'. The reality, however, being that journalists often exaggerated graffiti's presence on the streets of Kabul, at times even dragging artists (all the better if it was a woman because that had so much more cachet for international audiences) to funky locations like the now demolished former Russian Cultural Center to spray something on the walls while the cameras went 'click click', serving as false witnesses to a growing 'movement'.

But this was one country, and Afghanistan was unique in many ways, due to the massive war economy that had flowed into it and shaped life and society there – for better and worse. I was curious to see what else was happening in the region, and so I attempted to look more closely at not only Afghanistan, which is where I had the most direct experience, but also at different Othered countries that are part of the broader region of Asia and the Middle East. I use this 'active' form of the term 'Other' as a tool in order to emphasize how the experience of being Other is an imposed system of differentiation rooted in Eurocentrism, rather than any place's or people's natural state. The approach is reminiscent of Arturo Escobar's use of the term 'underdeveloped' rather than 'undeveloped' in his arguments related to dependency theory and Latin America in a postcolonial era, whereby he asserted that the Third World was 'underdeveloped' as a direct result of Eurocentric policies imposed upon it after the Second World War (Escobar 1995).

Furthermore, and in particular, I wanted to look at countries that were either



experiencing conflict themselves, or were somehow part of larger geopolitical conflicts being waged across these regions. However, for the purposes of my argument, rather than only armed battle or a state of war, I define 'conflict' more broadly as the experience of various forms of political, social, economic, and personal instability by countries in the regions mentioned. However, I will use the expression 'conflicted countries' rather than 'conflict countries' partially for the same reason described above – so as to avoid the implication that conflict is in some way natural to any of these places.

Once I started looking, I noticed that the last several years have seen a marked increase in the level of interest given by the Eurocentrics towards contemporary art from Afghanistan, as well as many different Othered countries in Asia and the Middle East, particularly conflicted countries.

This includes work created by artists living within the specific geographically defined border spaces, as well as the broader cultural spaces inhabited by artists of the diaspora. We can see the manifestation of this interest across a variety of initiatives such as the [Guggenheim's MAP programme](#) and planned Abu Dhabi museum, the recently established Iraq, India and Bangladesh Pavilions at the [Venice Biennale](#) and the inclusion of Afghanistan in [DOCUMENTA\(13\)](#), to name just a few of the more institutional movements. There has also been a parallel boom in interest by commercial galleries and auction houses for art from these regions, or the artists thought to represent them. All of this has provided a greatly extended platform through which the work of Othered artists from conflicted Asian and Middle Eastern countries could be shown in internationally renowned venues and exhibitions, exposing their work to entirely new audiences and markets.

I would therefore like to argue that the increased interest and the relationships created by it cannot be understood outside of Eurocentric models of power and hierarchy rooted in colonial structures, and that can still be seen in postcolonial (though not yet post-Oriental) relations between the Eurocentrics and the



Othered. That conflict has become a part of everyday life in many Othered countries that were once under some form of colonial control/influence, subsequently becoming a part of the Othered's contemporary 'exoticness', which can itself be understood as being rooted in these disproportionate historical structures that shaped so many unstable futures. Although it will be possible to also see market influences in this heightened interest by the Eurocentrics in art and artists of the Othered from conflicted countries, I argue that at its core one can still find the old attitudes of civilizational superiority and colonial discovery that led the Eurocentrics' historical conquest of places and peoples. However, I will go on to argue further that it is also possible that these new spaces within the art world where relationships are enacted between the Eurocentrics and the Othered could provide, though not without difficulty, the type of 'Third Space' necessary to begin dismantling old, colonial-era knowledge-paradigms and power structures.

As a start, we should examine these new spaces of interaction between the Eurocentrics and the Othered in light of how modern notions of aesthetic authority, and the subsequent power to represent in the field of contemporary art, are complicated by these deeper, geo-historical relationships. French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre has said, '(Social) space is a (social) product [. . .] the space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and of action [. . .] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power' (Lefebvre 1991 [1974]). I would argue then that this social space in the field of contemporary art as discussed above, due to its being intertwined with larger historical perspectives and political agendas (as well as to some extent economic initiatives), sees the same pattern whereby the productive space of Othered artists is also a space where Eurocentrics exercise their power to control and dominate aesthetic and artistic representation.

It is therefore necessary to look briefly at the person largely considered to be the founder of the Eurocentrics' understanding of aesthetics - German philosopher Immanuel Kant. In his theory, Kant argues that the judgement of taste, or what is



to be considered beautiful, might be dependent on a subjective principle but ultimately has universal validity (Kant 2000). This notion of 'subjective universality' in the determination of aesthetically beautiful 'things' has served as the building block for the Eurocentrics' approach to knowing and controlling the notion of modern aesthetics. Though on the surface this principle allows for individual or relativist agency in aesthetic judgement, it is in fact rooted in the Eurocentric mindset rampant across Europe during the Enlightenment period of which Kant was a part. By this I mean to say that, although it appears Kant is honouring individual taste, he is not however attributing equal value to those tastes. Instead, he deems that the individual, subjective tastes of the European are the specific tastes that have collective, universal validity.

In other words, a thing is beautiful if it is considered beautiful by a European.

Therefore, the 'subjective' viewpoint that Kant was so insistent upon in his philosophy was the Eurocentric subjective, while the universal it was applicable to belonged to everyone else. Beauty and aesthetic judgement therefore belonged to Europe, and from there it attained universal validity for the rest of the world.

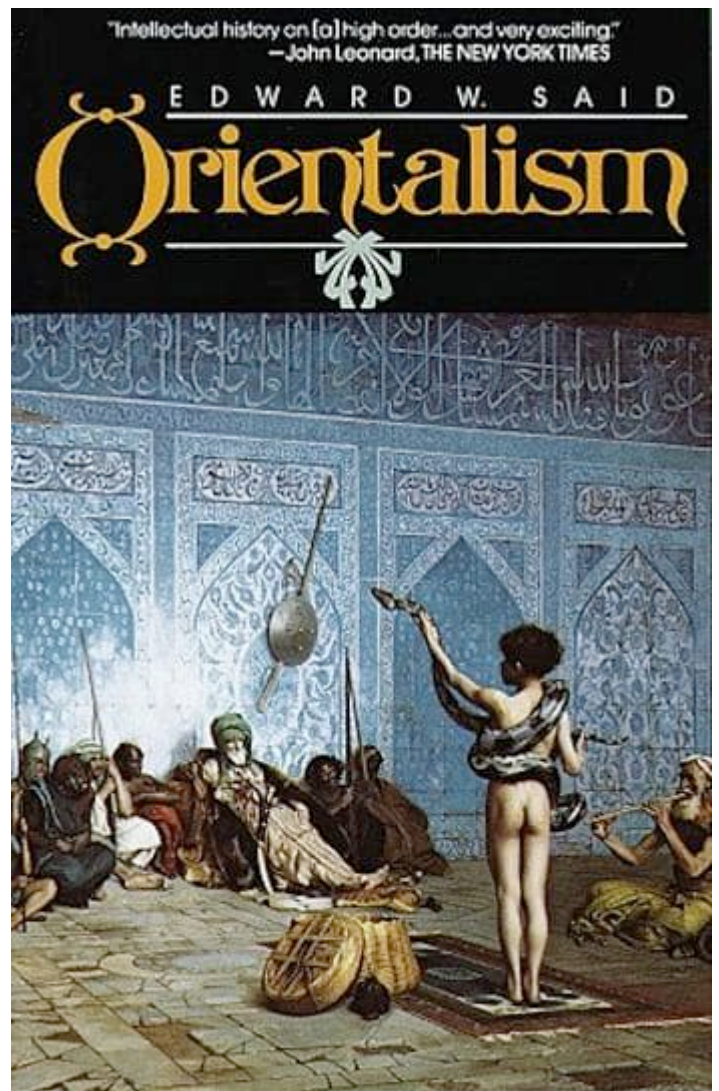
This Eurocentric model of aesthetic authority can still be found today in the contemporary art world, largely dominated by American and European curators, museums, dealers, galleries, and institutions. It is their authority to judge not only where the focus of the curatorial eye should fall, but what and whose work within those areas qualifies (i.e. achieves the expected level of aesthetics) to be exhibited and brought into the global art world. We can see further foundations of this attitude in Jean-François Lyotard's theories on the imperialistic nature of western science. He would look at the arrogance of the West in its belief that their science, such as in the field of medicine, was without a doubt superior to that of other cultures. In that sense, western scientists, doctors, etc. felt they had the monopoly on knowledge in their fields (Lyotard 1984 [1979]).

Again we are confronted with the Eurocentrics' belief in their own superiority and, in the context I am discussing here, we can see the Eurocentric curators,



gallerists, museum directors, institutions and so on with their monopolies in the field of contemporary art knowledge, and how they seek to impose that knowledge on others; it is this imposition of monopolized knowledge that Lyotard equates with imperialist motives and approaches. This sense of authority over judgement contributed to justifying European colonial incursions around the world as missions to enlighten and civilize other cultures, while today the Eurocentrics in the art world are justifying incursions into the lands of the Othered where they impose their aesthetic value systems on works and artists that may operate on an entirely different aesthetic scale.

Moving from models of Eurocentric authority over aesthetics and the imperialist nature of knowledge to Eurocentric attitudes towards the Othered that were shaped and solidified during colonialism, we cannot ignore the writings of Edward Said in his classic work *Orientalism*. In this seminal work, Said argues how an entire region was 'almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experience' (Said 1978). These 'imagined geographies' were envisioned as exotic locales that served only to bolster the Eurocentric perspective in respect to hierarchical levels of 'civilization', whereby the Eurocentrics represented the highest echelons of cultural and intellectual development in





comparison to the lesser-developed inhabitants of the 'Orient'. In his work, he made dichotomous distinctions between 'the West' and 'the Other' to highlight the schism that Eurocentrics had created between the two 'worlds'.

Since the fall of 'colonialism proper' (meaning direct political and military control), many countries of the Othered have themselves fallen into states of near perpetual conflict, driven by a variety of factors such as internal political agendas, poverty, ethnic intolerance, foreign invasion, religious extremism and dictatorial leaders. This adds another layer of complexity to the new Eurocentric interest in Othered art in the sense that widespread conflict in many parts of Asia and the Middle East can serve as ignition points of entry for Eurocentric curators, collectors, gallerists, etc. On the surface, it appears that the impulse comes from a desire to understand the complexities of the region 'from the inside', from the creative voices of artists living in (or at least with roots in) these Othered countries where conflict in some form has become a part of their everyday reality. However, it is difficult to dismantle the old colonialist models beneath the surface that are shaped by historical paradigms and continued disproportionality of power/control hierarchies.

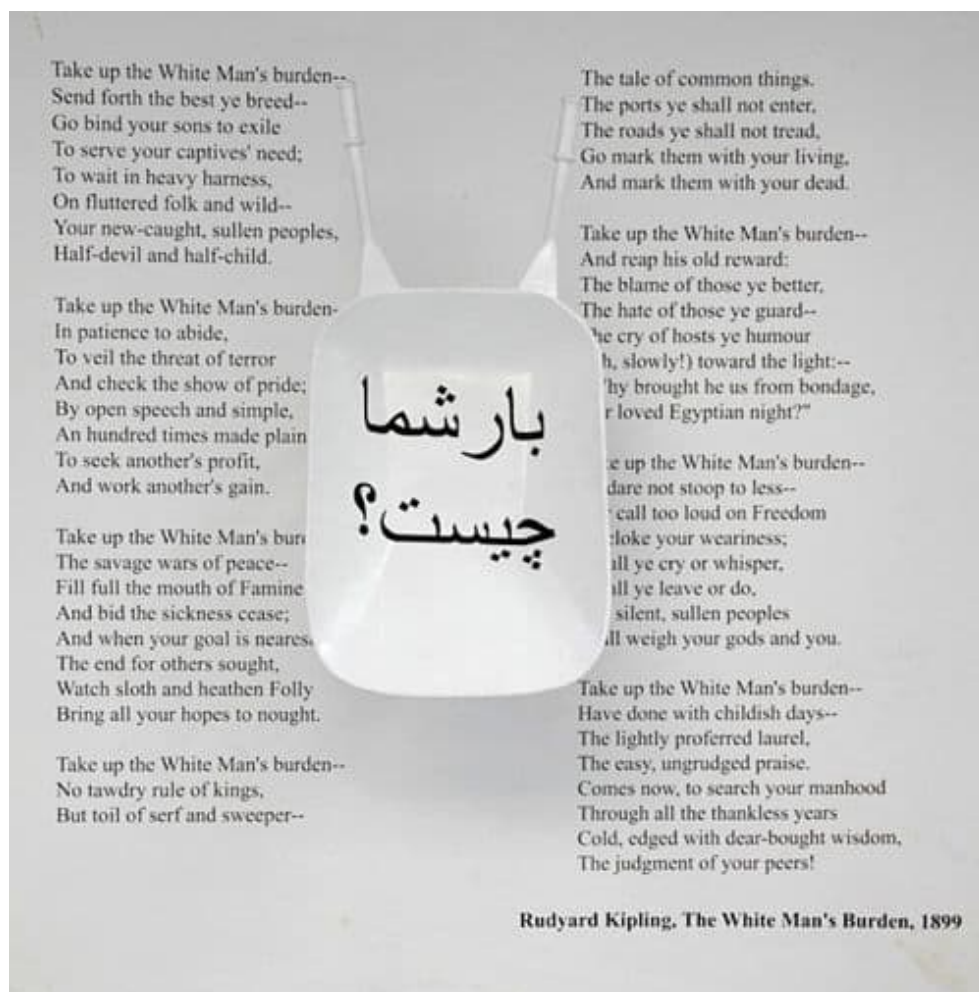
When we see the dOCUMENTA(13) with satellite activities in Afghanistan, the relatively recent pavilions of Iraq and Bangladesh at the Venice Biennale and the Guggenheim's MAP programme, we should feel compelled to ask ourselves what drives all of these institutions to go so far away, to the lands of the Othered, in order to 'discover' or 'present' the contemporary artistic practice of these places. If it were just wanting to go where contemporary art is still under-represented, under-appreciated and/or in a nascent state of being, many rural areas in the United States and Europe could offer the same challenge. But that is not where they are going. Rather, they are going to places where they can give a voice to the voiceless, an attitude often seen in Eurocentric approaches to Othered nations, particularly conflicted countries which cannot escape the yoke of the 'white man's burden'.

One feels that the Eurocentrics see it as almost a necessity, a humanitarian



burden they must bear to show the rest of the world what amazing work Othered artists in conflicted countries can create.

One can almost hear the echoes of early anthropologists, and the Kipling-era colonialists they often accompanied, who set off on adventures to Othered lands where they could explore and discover local cultures. It is as if what was once the white, European anthropologist, locked in global colonial structures and defining for us the noble savage, has now become the still largely white Eurocentric curator/dealer/gallerist/institution defining for us the noble artist – the artist who can rise above the savagery of war and oppression of conflict that surrounds them.



Burden 2011 (Installation by Aman Mojadidi)



A disturbing effect of this renewed interest in conflicted countries and their Othered artists has been that of the Othered beginning to self-promote and highlight their own Otherness for the benefit of the explorer curator – self-orientalizing themselves to create work that fits the model of what is expected by Eurocentric interests. Artists from conflicted countries of Asia and the Middle East have therefore become the spokespeople for a place and a people that the Eurocentrics need and want them to be. Questions are asked of them such as ‘What is Afghan about your work?’ or ‘What is Pakistani about your art?’, questions that are never asked of western artists. ‘What is American (or French, or British, etc.) about your art?’ is not a question ever heard. This is because the Othered are still believed (even when they convey individual, conceptual ideas through contemporary artworks) to be of one mind, one thought, one homogenous ‘local’ entity that lacks the individual diversity thought to be inherent in the developmentally advanced Eurocentrics. The fact that this has become a part of these new relationships only reinforces the stereotypes that have dominated Eurocentric attitudes towards Othered nations and their people for decades.

This blanket perspective on entire regions and peoples was a hallmark of colonial endeavours and Orientalism as a whole. The attitude has not disappeared. And unfortunately it is becoming adopted by many artists in these regions, believing that by creating what is expected of them they will eventually reap the rewards of their loyalty through participation in the Eurocentric-dominated exhibitions and markets. But is it truly necessary that the Othered artists create work that directly reflects the exoticized conflict they are somehow deemed to be an inseparable part of? Must they be a ‘voice’ of their people in troubled times, just waiting to be heard? What happens if an Iraqi artist for example wants to paint something else, something ‘un-Iraqi’ (as defined by the Eurocentrics), something abstract and without a sociopolitical message? Would it be judged on the quality of the work or only on whether it says enough about the artist’s troubled identity and environment?

With so many factors playing a role in shaping these new relational spaces between the Eurocentric art world and the Othered artists, it becomes necessary



to also look briefly at how perhaps the Eurocentric-dominated art world has simply become bored and saturated with what is being produced in Europe and the United States and is therefore looking for different perspectives in art from conflicted countries in Asia and the Middle East, and subsequently for new products for their markets. It is a fact that some 'emerging markets' seem to coincide with these conflicted Othered countries and have become a very hot topic in the business world. Why wouldn't we see similar inroads into these new, potentially economically fruitful, zones by the commercial art market? From galleries to collectors to auction houses, conflicted countries of the Othered have become all the rage. Looking at Christie's auctions of modern and contemporary Middle Eastern art that take place in Dubai as an example, the confluence of cash and conflict is striking. One has the impression, while sipping on champagne, that the deeper the crisis, the heavier the conflict behind the work, the more the work of art will sell. Working in emerging markets already has its complications, whereby largely Eurocentric investors often take a certain paternalistic approach to investment in new markets. When coupled with the problematic surge of interest by the contemporary art world in work from conflicted countries which also double as emerging markets, we can try and separate the purely economic interests from the Orientalist-based interests of the Eurocentric.

But perhaps things have become so intertwined that it is not about separating them, but rather about trying to understand what this intertwined approach and perspective means for the future of contemporary art from conflicted countries of Asia and the Middle East. Therefore, although the inspiration for these new relational spaces comes from a place of disproportionate power structures and colonialist-rooted attitudes towards the Othered, perhaps they can also become spaces where a radical shift can take place - a shift towards a new era of post-Orientalism, and a new social space of alternative identities and relationships that through contemporary art can move us beyond the cultural legacy of colonial-era mindsets. What might be the possibilities if there developed a true 'Third Space' which, as a discourse of dissent, has been presented as taking two forms, 'one is that space where the oppressed plot their liberation: the whispering corners of



the tavern or the bazaar. The other is that space where oppressed and oppressor are both able to come together, free (maybe only momentarily) of oppression itself, embodied in their particularity' (Bhabha 1994).

The notion of 'Third Space' as a postcolonial theory on identity and community, largely accredited to Homi K. Bhabha as part of his arguments on 'hybridity' and discussions on where culture might actually be 'located', attempts to explain the uniqueness of each person beyond the colonial-era, Orientalist 'lumpings' of entire peoples and places into a form of exotic homogeneity. It can also be seen as rooted in the early works of Henri Lefebvre seen earlier in this chapter in his discussions on the production of space, particularly his ideas that influenced contemporary discussions on the notion of spatial justice and equality of representation within spatial realms. It is therefore the second form within the Bhabha quote above that contributes to the potential these new relational structures might provide for the various individuals and institutions involved. In his seminal work *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha further defines the modality of a Third Space as part of a postcolonial condition where there exists 'unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation' (Bhabha 1994).

It is this inequality of representation that concerns us here. For just as the notion of a Third Space could contribute to a certain form of liberation by Othered artists of conflicted countries in Asia and the Middle East from the disproportionate power structures at play, it may even further provide a platform through which a sort of post-Orientalism can be attained. But what would post-Orientalism look like? How could these relationships become more egalitarian? A major obstacle is the idea itself of a 'post' anything. When we talk about postcolonial, we imply that the legacies and attitudes of the colonial era are now behind us. But unfortunately this is not the case, and it is much like calling Afghanistan 'post-conflict' (which it is more often than not in reference to 'post-conflict development') when a conflict both domestic and international is still going strong throughout the country.

(continue reading [here](#))



The Art of conflict chic (part 2)

Aman Mojadidi
October, 2017



In this essay, Afghan American artist Aman Mojadid reflects on a series of installations entitled “Conflict Chic” he exhibited in a solo exhibition in Paris in 2011. He discusses the imagined geographies born out of the Afghan wars and the search for a post-Orientalist tradition in the post-9/11 era. Read part 1 of his essay [here](#).

Since the end of the Second World War and the appearance of a so-called Third



World, academics and geopoliticians began speaking of 'postcolonialism', as if by becoming self-governing nations that were no longer politically ruled by western powers these places were now somehow independent (or indeed free from) their unequal relationships with their now former colonizers. The reality is very different. After years of exploitation, including that of human and natural resources, the newly 'independent' countries went from being politically oppressed to being economically dependent, and the relationships simply shifted from the governmental realm to the financial one where loans were dispersed by former colonizer (Eurocentric) countries to formerly colonized (Othered) nations that ensured their ongoing dependence and guaranteed that their politicians would make policy decisions favourable to their former colonizers. As a result, these restructured relationships did not facilitate the kind of transformation necessary in order to move beyond the colonial mindsets that perpetuate unequal political and economic dynamics between nations of the colonizer and colonized. Instead, the struggle for liberation from control by Eurocentric nations has continued over recent decades, and therefore the attitudes that shaped pre-Second World War relations can still be found not only in political and economic circles, but in artistic and cultural ones as well.

This then brings us back to the discussion of how we can truly create a Third Space, as opposed to a Third World, in order to achieve the liberating state of a post-Orientalist condition. What would it look like if or when we did create it? Of course, we are not talking about a space in the traditional sense, with walls, limits and boundaries. Quite the opposite in fact - we are talking about a space that erases borders, blurs identities and levels inequalities; or a space where those 'unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation' are made equal and even (Bhabha 1994). The challenge is how such a space can be made lasting, a more permanent space where these new, restructured and more egalitarian relationships can continue to exist, to grow and to disrupt previous power dynamics. For in the world today,

the possibility of a Third Space is still limited by its impermanence, by its predictable dissolution resulting in large part from the resistance of



Eurocentric-dominated structures and institutions to facilitate such lasting changes.

But the reality is that no matter what kind of resistance these actors may have, the changes themselves could very well be inevitable. As the shared experiences within Third Spaces increase, without oppressive relationships and where the particularity of individuals, in fact the complex hybridity that makes up the post-Orientalist person, rises above the stereotyped collectivity of entire peoples and places rooted in older models of Orientalism, it will become less and less likely that the oppressed or Othered will accept a return to their previously imposed inferior position. This unwillingness could be the spark that ignites a revolution of sorts in the way that the arts and artists of the Othered engage, and/or are engaged, within the global art world of exhibitions, institutions and markets.

When looking at societal class struggles throughout history, there is always a dominant class that is then challenged by the dominated in an attempt to bring about greater equality between classes. What I am talking about in terms of the possibilities that a Third Space could provide to Othered artists is in much the same vein as a class struggle, whereby Othered artists could in essence rise up against those who dominate the art world and demand greater equality in terms not only of access to but ownership of the production, dissemination, interpretation, exhibition, etc. of Othered art and artistic activity on a global level. In the same way that sources of capital are controlled by the dominant economic class, the sources of Third Spaces today where Eurocentrics and Othered artists interact are also still largely controlled by the Eurocentrics. Therefore, in order to achieve a truly revolutionary use of Third Spaces, the response would then include, and indeed necessitate, the increased participation of Othered curators, galleries, museums, collectors and institutions that, through their experiences in Third Spaces, establish their own artistic structures to challenge the dominant paradigms of today.

An example of just such an Othered institutional response is the Palestinian



Museum which opened in May 2016. It has been developed as an institution that will 'act as a dynamic, innovative forum for the exchange and development of knowledge and ideas' and, furthermore, 'be capable of transcending political and geographical borders, resisting the social divisions and restrictions to mobility imposed by the Israeli occupation . . . to resist the ghettoization and fragmentation of the Palestinian people' (The Palestinian Museum 2015). Many involved with developing the museum project have been otherwise engaged in Third Space experiences for some time through the many Biennales, fairs, etc. that make up the international art 'scene'. As mentioned before, these interactions and experiences can serve as the foundational potential for ambitious revolutionary projects such as the Palestinian Museum.

However, as with the museum, the new knowledge structures formed through Third Space interactions are not, in and of themselves, enough for this 'revolution' of sorts to reach its full potential across conflicted countries of the Othered. Another crucial component will be access to, and sources of, funding. All artists and institutions, anywhere in the world, look for funding to help realize their projects and exhibitions. But it is a fact that most sources of funding still come from Eurocentric individuals and institutions, with their own perspectives and agendas when it comes to Othered art and artists. This brings us back to the issue of the art market, and how Eurocentric institutions continue to hold the upper hand when it comes to funding Othered art, artists and institutions. Even with the Palestinian Museum, one sees many Eurocentric institutions serving as funding sources. Therefore although the museum has transcended certain Eurocentric constructs in its establishment, it still may potentially face some of the restrictions and/or limitations that come with Eurocentric funding structures. Othered artists and institutions, therefore, when looking for funds from Eurocentric sources, might be limited in terms of what kind of work or project they could get funding for because it may or may not fit what the Eurocentrics expect of them.

It will therefore be necessary for Othered countries to also invest significantly in their own artistic and cultural futures.



The investment should come from several sources, including governmental ones such as culture ministries and foundations for the arts, and the private sector. With this sort of investment, Othered art and artists will be able to free themselves from economic dependency on Eurocentric art structures and institutions. If this funding came from their own countries, there could very well be a more supportive synergy between funder and funded. This is not to say of course that Othered artists and institutions from conflicted countries (or any country for that matter) should only get funding from their own nations, but it is to say that if the sources of funding were more widely dispersed between the Eurocentrics and the Othered, then there could also be a more disseminated degree of control over the artistic and/or institutional production. One example of such an initiative can be found in the [Samdani Art Foundation](#) in Dhaka, formed by Bangladeshi entrepreneurs as a platform through which to support and promote contemporary art from Bangladeshi artists.

Therefore it is important that the Othered begin to create Third Spaces as well, so that these spaces are not only initiated by Eurocentrics. Whether they are exhibitions (such as the Dhaka Art Summit created by the Samdani Art Foundation), exchange programmes, collaborative projects, etc., by doing so the Othered will be able to further facilitate a new power structure both within these Third Spaces and outside of them. The experiences then had within Third Spaces could very well contribute to not only realizing a new economic model as discussed above for funding Othered artists and institutions, but also new knowledge structures that then ultimately can create more egalitarian power structures as well. Although not by any means self-evident, I argue that it will only be through these various Third Spaces that the Eurocentric-dominated field of arts in the global arena, particularly the recent popularity of Othered art and artists from conflicted countries in Asia and the Middle East, can be dismantled, reshaped and re-established in a more egalitarian form.

I have tried in this chapter to explore the complexities of a renewed interest by Eurocentric art circles, including galleries, museums, curators and institutions in Othered art and artists from conflicted countries in Asia and the Middle East. Not



an easy task, nor one that I pretend to have made less complicated nor any less convoluted. It is a sticky mess when attempting to untangle the threads of history and their impact on our relational structures today. Furthermore, attempts at bringing about a sort of Derrida-esque deconstruction of Eurocentric assumptions regarding their own power in respect to Othered art and artists from conflicted countries is neither straightforward nor without its own set of limitations.

Perhaps this is why the concept of a Third Space is the most relevant here.

What a Third Space does is take the disproportionate nature of the relevant power relationships and provide an opportunity to reset it so that the different actors, the Eurocentrics and the Othered, can play more equal roles in the construction of the relationships within that space.

But, more importantly, it is through the Third Space that Eurocentrics and the Othered alike can accept each other in new ways, and then carry those new ways of understanding and interacting outside of the Third Space and embed them into the everyday spaces of their lives.

But it is more than simply the will to do so that is needed. Eurocentrics must acknowledge the lingering forms of stereotyping and dominance that continue to colour their attitudes and approaches towards Othered art and artists from conflicted countries. They must realize that the burden is no longer (in fact never was) theirs to bear when it comes to 'discovering' Othered artists or introducing their work to the world. Simultaneously, Othered artists, curators and institutions must understand that although there is much that can be learned from, taught to and shared with the Eurocentrics through interactions within the Third Spaces of art exhibitions, Biennales and so on, it is not necessary to simply shape themselves into the particular mould that may be expected of them. Instead, the Othered should create work, projects, exhibitions and institutions that tell the stories they want to tell, in whatever voices they want to tell them.

There are no quick or easy solutions to the complexities inherent in this new vigor



with which Eurocentrics are pursuing Othered art and artists in conflicted countries of Asia and the Middle East. I have attempted to shed light on some of the issues, as well as on possible paths through which these issues could be dealt with. Some may argue with me that I am being too judgmental, or putting too much into the situation by referencing colonialist structures and attitudes that in theory at least have not existed for decades. But I would beg to counter by referencing simply that just because there was a civil rights movement that resulted in a Civil Rights Act in the United States does not mean that racism, and its effects on the lives of black Americans, has disappeared.

However, with all of the now more complicated structures apparent in the art relationship between the Eurocentrics and the Othered, it is of course impossible to imply that there has been no loosening of the grip on power that has been historically held by Eurocentrics over the Othered. We also cannot say that Othered artists who come from conflicted countries of Asia and the Middle East are always and inevitably at the mercy of Eurocentric prejudices and agendas. Reality is never black and white, and it is true that today there is perhaps more grey, largely in the form of Third Spaces, found in the world than ever before. And this is likely to continue. But this is not a natural state of change. Rather, it is the culmination of the actions of many individuals, collectives and institutions – artists, curators, foundations, museums – who have, through the existence and experience of Third Space exhibitions, programmes, conferences, etc. disrupted the status quo and forged new relationships between the Eurocentrics and the Othered.

Will these new relationships last? Will the shifting power structures continue to challenge old models and help bring about a more not only global, but globally representative, art world? These are difficult questions to answer as they require the ability not only to be optimistic, but also to trust that the art world is perhaps made from a different kind of material in comparison to other Eurocentric/Othered relationships we might find both historically and today; a material that is more malleable, more willing to take new forms.



We must also be willing to acknowledge that art, and the international space it inhabits, is perhaps the one vehicle through which these old relationships can be altered – a space where political acts such as this can, through their abstraction, not only reach a wider audience but also transcend the banality of historical limitations when it comes to defining this relationship.

The Othered artists from conflicted countries will no doubt continue to seek a more equal playing field, positioning themselves as serious artists with the will to work on the global level, rather than some form of endangered species in need of being saved and paraded internationally through a variety of venues. But it is still within these venues, as well as the ones that will be created by not only the Othered artists themselves but also Othered curators, institutions, and so on, that will provide the necessary Third Spaces where the traditionally oppressed and oppressor can reset the terms and forms of their engagement. By doing so, conflict could cease to be chic; entire places and peoples could cease to be homogeneously exotic; and the Othered could find themselves at the end of the search for a post-Orientalist condition.

Perhaps then the Othered would no longer need to whisper in the corners of taverns and bazaars.

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Protest Matters! #AAA2017 Installation and Virtual Museum

Siobhán McGuirk
October, 2017



RESIST!

Protest Matters! is an interactive temporary museum of protest objects that will run in conjunction with the AAA meetings in Washington DC next month. The project invites academics, activists, and local community members to come together and consider the dynamic relationships that exist between art and activism, feelings and things, politics and materiality, and creativity and community, all in the context of social justice action.

*We invite **you** to [contribute objects](#) to display, in DC or virtually. Visit [our website](#) to learn more. You can also find us on [Facebook](#).*

Virtual Museum

Items already uploaded to the *Protest Matters!* [Virtual Museum](#) include the following, shared with Allegra Lab readers — who are invited to contribute their



own objects to the collection:

Conference Report: An American at the German Anthropological Association

Heath Cabot
October, 2017





My introduction to the [German Anthropological Association](#) was from the podium of the Opening Plenary Panel in the Audimax of the Freie Universität Berlin, looking out at what I imagined was a sea of austere faces waiting for me to fail. I was one of two explicit “outsiders” on the panel, along with [Alessandro Monsutti](#) (a bit of a hero of mine), who had flown in just that day from Switzerland for the occasion. Alongside the third panelist, [Žiga Podgornik-Jakil](#) (himself an insider/outsider, an anthropologist from Slovenia doing his PhD at the Freie Universität, and his fieldwork in Berlin), we were to respond to the provocation that Olaf Zenker, the panel organizer, had set out: [“Refuge Europe at its Limits?”](#) Monsutti would speak about Afghans on the move in Europe, framing their mobility as a political act; Podgornik-Jakil on the topic of protests at a Berlin emergency shelter for refugees. I was going to talk about how austerity in Greece has positioned many Greeks and refugees on the same precarity continuum. The topic was political and politicized, and it promised to be a provocative discussion. Thus began my appearance as an American interloper at the [German Anthropological Association conference](#).

Let me be clear: my networks with European academics are crucial to my professional life, and I prioritize these collaborations. I am actually a naturalized Italian citizen, and I consider my chosen Europeanness to be a central aspect of my identity (I was most pleased when Monsutti asked me if my real name was Caboto, as in Giovanni. It is not. Cabot is a French-Anglo surname, which is as [“WASPy”](#) as they come. I am Italian only thanks to marriage). But almost all of my time in Europe is spent in the South: in Italy, where I have family, friends, and valued colleagues; and of course, [in my fieldsite of Greece](#), which has become a second home to me, with many of my closest friendships and most valued professional networks. And if I am truly honest, having not been to Germany since the imposition of austerity in Greece, I was carrying a bit of a chip on my shoulder. It’s hard not to imbibe some of the, most justified, bitterness that many in Greece now express toward this rich country of the North (though not often personally toward Germans). And so I even had a picture of Schäuble colonizing the Acropolis on my power point, which I kind of hoped would offend someone



just a little (especially a progressive anthropologist).

Before the plenary session, I had spent two days at a fabulous [socio-legal studies workshop at Humboldt University](#), and had been slightly unsettled by the direct and perhaps even confrontational style of some more senior German academics. Having voiced my nervousness to some supportive German colleagues, I was told not to worry: confrontational questions mean that there is intellectual traction and interest. The worst possible scenario, said a new friend, is if people do not engage at all. This did little to assuage my nerves, though, and even Monsutti began his talk with a charming little aside about being intimidated.

Fast-forward through the whirlwinds of the papers to our discussion.

I was not to be disappointed. [Sarah Green](#) began with a challenging but generous question about how to analyze experiences of displacement and precarity without producing the very discourses one hopes to critique. The next two interventions, though, set the tone for the rest of the Q and A, which even my German colleagues would later characterize as “provocative.” Both highlighted a certain one sidedness of the panel and the overarching message as being overly focused on “the underdogs”. [Carola Lentz](#) from the University of Mainz “provocatively” noted that she thought we had all indulged a bit in “moral high ground”, and raised the point that it surely would be useful to also study bureaucrats or decision-makers in their encounters with migrants. (A point that, as an American, I couldn’t help but read as an invocation of Laura Nader’s well-established call to “study up,” though it actually referenced their work in Mainz on [studying the state](#)). The point was well taken, although Zenker had addressed it, in part, in his closing statements, highlighting that while all such perspectives are important, with limited space and time he had chosen to foreground work on refugees and activists. [Thomas Bierschenk](#), also from the University of Mainz, made a comment that found its way onto Allegra’s rolling twitter feed as “provocative,” and had real staying power in the conversations I had over the next few days. He noted that the refugee crisis seems to have been a bit of a “windfall” for anthropologists. And furthermore, we were all speaking “for” refugees — but



can't the subaltern speak for themselves? My response was yes, and yes ([I had actually written about this](#)).

But the point hit home more than I cared to admit at the time. After all, I was speaking about asylum at this opening plenary largely thanks to the “refugee crisis.”

And so, great: I'd had twenty minutes to introduce myself and my work to 300 or so German anthropologists—and I had probably just failed.

But after a while, as the discussion went on (and on), I relaxed. I was free. This was an opportunity to field questions from people who had listened and were now engaging critically. The tension eased with some nervous laughs when migration scholar [Heike Drotbohm](#) (as a consolation: also from the University of Mainz) gently reprimanded her colleagues for traumatizing the foreigners. A jovial American accent on a smiling bearded face from the back of the room entered the discussion in the figure of legal and linguistic anthropologist [Justin Richland](#), asking at the top of his lungs—foregoing the mic—about how we distinguished between morality and justice.

In my view, in hindsight, the most truly provocative question was [Christopher Hann](#)'s which he “gently” put forward: whether there was any merit to his Hungarian interlocutors' assertions that everyone has the right to flourish in “one's native land.” The implications were perhaps too uncomfortable to be sufficiently engaged with, even by this “provocative” group of anthropologists.

Later, the public contest having fizzled out, I was exposed to rounds of niceties over wine and finger food, and was graciously greeted and thanked for my talk. I exchanged sincere sentiments of appreciation with people whose work I had only known from afar. Sure, predictably (for a still-junior woman scholar), my presentation was not always noted for its substance but as “enthusiastic” and “lively.” My “youth” was noted a couple of times. (Such well-intended paternalism is dominant everywhere). But overall, I was pleasantly surprised at the generosity and friendliness of these conversations. I went seeking out the angry-seeming



folks from the University of Mainz who, to my surprise, were smiling over their wine. One person noted, quite sagely I think, that this “confrontational style” is really about the premise that “there is always room for improvement.”

Good point!

I also received some useful direct advice, which may or may not be representative of “German academic culture” as a whole but was presented to me as such: that in Northern Europe it’s not seen as very attractive to show a slide of one’s book, as I had done - that it is too much self-promotion. But that I was forgiven since people know I was from the US. (And indeed, Ulla Berg from Rutgers, showed a slide of her book during her lovely talk at the closing plenary a couple of days later. I have always been told by mentors that I am “my own best advocate.” Perhaps not in Germany!).

Noted!

I sought out Bierschenk a couple of days later for a longer conversation, and he thanked me for taking up his challenge, so to speak, and we had a lively exchange about the meaning of anthropology, the role of the political, and how to study the state. I’m still thinking about his comments.

Having gotten my big talk out of the way, I was left to relax and try out my conferencing style on the German anthropologists. To get through the social tension and exhaustion of professional conferences, I tend to employ a mix of formal interaction and ice breakers to cultivate rapport - mostly jokes and slightly unexpected comments. Here I was forced to adapt. In private and public interactions, direct questions and comments I made were received with generosity, and sincere new collegial relationships were formed. What didn’t work so well were my attempts at generating a kind of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 1997) with my new German friends which, as a reminder, is “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality.” In hindsight my lack of success is no surprise; I was not an



insider, and I do not speak German. So my occasional quips about German time and formality were not dignified with a response, and I started to wonder if maybe they really weren't all that funny. (Still, do Germans joke about punctuality among each other?) On the plus side, although some laughed when I myself made sassy asides about my Americanness, not once did anyone throw it in my face (which my Greek and Italian colleagues often do, though always in the form of a joke or something to laugh at—jokes being, in the South at least, particularly devastating venues for social commentary).

Overall, I realized that I may have spent a bit too much time only in the European South, where commentary (both romantic and derogatory) about the North is par for the course; and where stereotypes around “culture” are crucial idioms for negotiating hierarchies and establishing rapport. My few days with the German anthropologists exposed me to another kind of warmth, though: which seems to emphasize saying what one means, in public and in private; and a new version of hospitality than that to which I am most accustomed, which seemed to be grounded on sincerely offering what one intends, no more and no less. More than once I was relieved not to have to engage in a ritual end-of-dinner fight over the bill.

As an outsider, I also did not have sufficient insight into the stakes of the contested discussion which ended in the name change of the association from the study of *Völkerkunde* to the perhaps more Anglicized but also more contemporary *Sozial- und Kulturanthropologie* (the more continental *Ethnologie* was also a contender). Still, I had many discussions which highlighted the merits of all sides. My closer colleagues (in age and political orientation) supported the name change, in part as a departure from what many found to be disconcertingly nationalist implications embedded in the notion of the *Volk* (of separate and discreet peoples), as well as the term's current use by people on the political right. But I also heard the important argument in favor of highlighting anthropology's German roots rather than, as one new friend put it, submitting to the “cultural imperialism” of an Anglo-American tradition. And of course, I couldn't possibly forget my encounter with the gregarious and charming Flemish



expert on German anthropology, [Han Vermeulen](#), the champion of *Völkerkunde*, whom I met in the courtyard of the building as he (and his cigarette) were almost blown away by the impending (literal) [storm Xavier](#).

I also learned some important lessons from inhabiting, if just briefly, a “public” anthropology role in a place where, to be frank, many might be justified in thinking I have little business doing so. Even if I do believe reflexive participation in public engagement of diverse kinds is appropriate for anthropologists working on topics of urgent current import. I did a short interview with [Der Spiegel Online](#), and was pleased to learn that [our opening plenary was covered in the press](#). The interest was a testament to Zenker’s decision to frame a topic in a manner that may not have pleased everyone but which built a message and gave it scope. And I believe

our panel consensus was that Refuge Europe is at its limits. That is certainly the message that I would deliver, based on my research in Greece.

And yet this too demands a new kind of reflexivity, to avoid that annoying “moral high ground” (thank you again, Professor Dr. Lentz) which I myself find so problematic in many anthropological public interventions. In Greece, as a foreigner doing research on politically charged issues, I always caution visitors from getting into political debates before learning the local context. And Greece is overflowing with interlopers – not just with anthropologists like myself, but also with humanitarian actors (including many German NGOs) as well as voluntourists and professional anarchist types from the European North (again, often Germans). There is also a thriving community of expat artists (many Germans) who find Athens vibrant, livable, and “cheap.” Athens, my Greek friends have joked, is becoming a bit the “new Berlin”: hip, affordable (if you are not Greek, that is), and where you don’t have to learn the local language since “everyone speaks English” (not unlike both German and Greek anthropologists). The parallels are accumulating, across the North and the South.

I have been up on my high horse about these interlopers parachuting into Greece



for the past number of years – certainly since the imposition of austerity. But this time, I ironically found myself speaking to a room full of (then unfamiliar) faces about refuge in Europe – the American speaking about the Greeks to the Germans. And as I watched my Der Spiegel interview circulate on Twitter, I was gratified for the platform, and I still do believe in the message – but I cringed a little at the headline: “American migration expert says that the EU countries missed a chance.” The moralizing tone, from the “expert” on migration, coming all the way from the land of Trump to call out the Germans on how they treat the refugees and the Greeks.

My new German friends probably won't find that funny. Probably because it isn't.

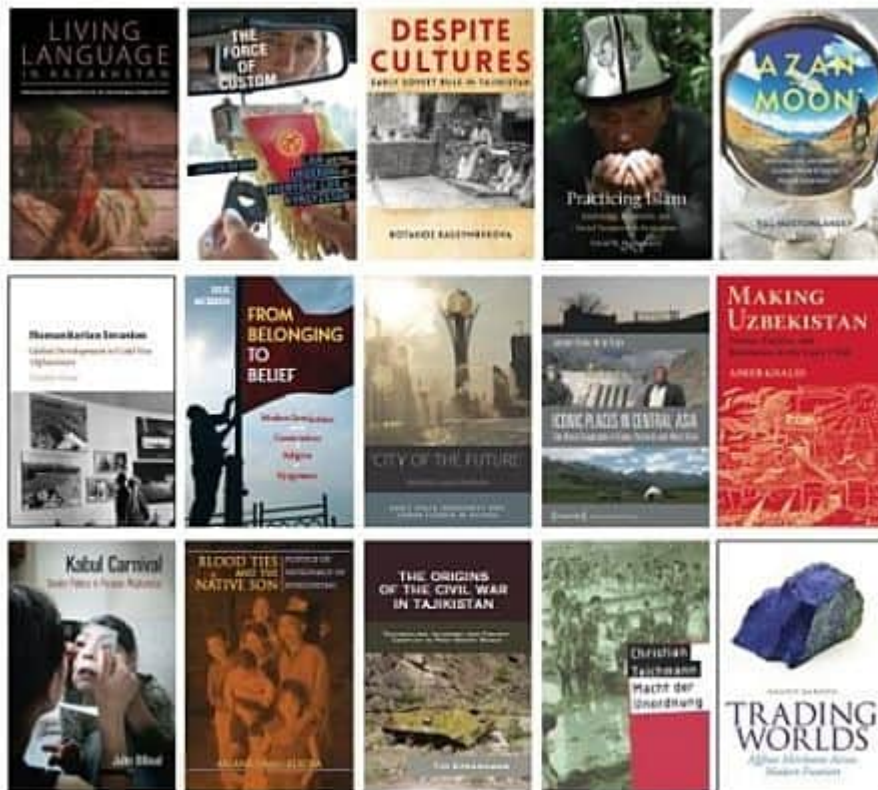
I can hardly wait for the next conference of the re-christened DGSKA, to be convened in Konstanz in 2019.

Reference

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Reflections on “The Future of Central Asian Studies”

Eva-Marie Dubuisson
October, 2017



The workshop “The Future of Central Asian Studies” was organized by [Judith Beyer](#) and [Madeleine Reeves](#) at the University of Konstanz and held on the 11-13th of September 2017.

The purpose of this innovative workshop format was to bring together the authors of recent monographs in the history and anthropology of Central Asia in order to encourage cross-regional and interdisciplinary conversations, and to think about how we can build from the collective insights of these works: how should we imagine our way forward in the field? Organizers Judith Beyer (University of Konstanz) and Madeleine Reeves (University of Manchester) ask: “How can material from Central Asia inform conceptual debates about order, knowledge, modernity, empire, religion and resources in the widest sense?”[1] Panels of authors read monographs by other participants in groups of three, then discussed

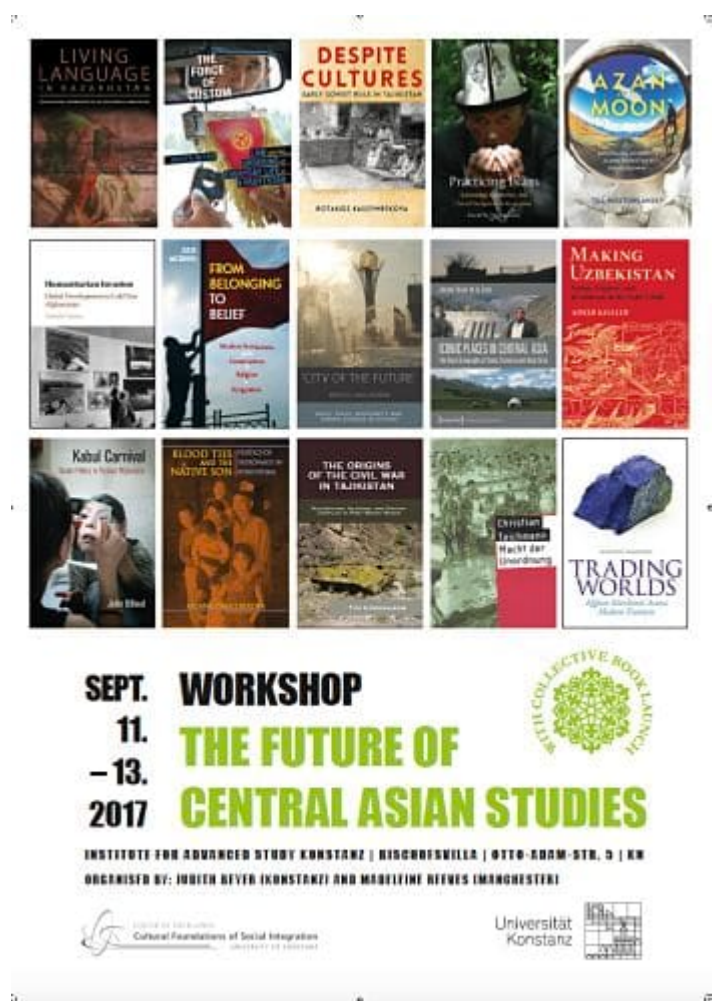


the books together in order to draw out comparative observations and to provoke conceptual questions.

I attended this workshop as both author and reader, and was very grateful for the opportunity to read the work of my talented peers. Given the sheer volume of newly published scholarship on Central Asia in recent years, it is important to create spaces in which to critically and communally engage each of these projects. Each monograph represents years of engagement in fieldwork, archival research, writing, and revision, and it is a rare opportunity to share the results with others who have been through the same process. It is also exciting to read across the region and to explore concepts from a geographic and theoretical terrain – similar and connected, but often startlingly different – than one's own. This blog post reflects my own subjective interpretation of some of the major topics and questions emerging from the workshop space.



GEOGRAPHY OF 'THE FIELD'



As is often the case in conversations on Central Asia, the basic question of what geographically, historically, or ethnographically constitutes our “field” was at stake in this workshop, a question that appeared over our days of conversation in many forms. Of the fourteen books we discussed, half came from contexts in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, five from Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and two from Uzbekistan.[2] None of these authors assumed or premised the frame of Soviet history or geography as a boundary for the region, unless it was explicitly a topic of analysis, for example the Soviet techniques of bureaucratic rule in Tajikistan from a personalistic perspective in Botakoz Kassymbekova’s fascinating analysis. As Jeanne Feaux de la Croix noted about her ethnographic work in Kyrgyzstan, her informants tended to reference the Soviet period in a rhetorically significant way – what is the talk of the Soviet period doing in a current ethnographic context? (My own research in Kazakhstan certainly supports this point). While we



did touch upon the question of the potential overlap between ‘postsocialism’ and ‘postcolonialism’ (cf Adams 2008; Chari and Verdery 2009), as Mateusz Laszczkowski pointed out, to which imperial projects do we actually refer when using the latter term? Are we, for example, critiquing the ‘great game’ model of Central Asian history, or tracing the fracturing of a Persianate world? This is obviously critical for understanding the complicated and conflicted idea of nation-building across these spaces in the present, as well as for the inclusion of Afghanistan in a Central Asian geographic imaginary. Julie McBrien noted that in the works of Tim Epkenhans (Tajikistan), Adeeb Khalid (Uzbekistan), and Timothy Nunan (Afghanistan), the ‘nation’ is presented as a subject of contestation or ruin – as desired, thwarted, or even collapsed across the 20th century; we could compare this to the work of Julie Billaud on Afghanistan, where she presents the nation as a container of ‘carnival’ – such visions of fantasy and failure further unravel our concepts of ‘the state’ itself as well (cf Navaro-Yashin 2002; Reeves et.al. 2014). In his work on global traders, Magnus Mardsen moves away from the country itself (as well as from the war) in an effort to trace the category of ‘Afghan’ across Eurasia instead, in his mapping of trading routes across a much broader region.

GRAND NARRATIVES

Our group also made an effort to investigate the idea of ‘grand narratives’ structuring ideas of the region, which continue to be silent interlocutors, in our engagement with the field. The group was arguably most successful in displacing the tired idea of ‘tradition’ as something located outside of ‘modernity.’ For example, the books in this collective go far in their examination of political action under conditions of extreme restraint, in their complication and critique of ‘democracy,’ and in their presentation of plural rule. Aksana Ismailbekova argues that it is imperative to look at local forms of kinship and politicking, to see how strategies of patronage may actually coincide with (both fostering and shaping) elections and collective decision-making. Similarly, in my own work I have shown how ‘ancestral tradition’ is actually a contemporary means of political action and critique. Nonetheless, Mateusz Laszczkowski rightly questioned whether in our



political analysis of the region, democracy is (in line with the thinking of Gayatri Spivak) something one can not want. He noted that in Timothy Nunan's work, which presents a sustained critique of the ideologies of humanism and territorial nationalism underlying development projects in Afghanistan, democracy is perhaps most conspicuous by its absence. Christian Teichmann also picked up this line of critique, noting that we still see other grand narratives of modernity in our work, such as the idea of 'development' itself or the 'enduring strain of utopias' seen in Laszczkowski's description of Astana city. Both within and beyond statist projects, religion itself has also been an object of both development and utopia in Central Asia: while for example it is certainly true that forms of Islam have presented a project of modernization in Central Asia alternative to Russian/European rule (as we see in the corps de travail of Adeeb Khalid), ethnographers like David Montgomery and Julie McBrien also show clearly in their work that a focus on well-being and meaning-making complicates our understanding of Islam as a category in and of itself for practitioners and analysts alike, firmly intertwining emic articulation and lived traditions of 'modernity' or 'tradition' alike in another unfolding search for understanding.



Another success of recent historical and anthropological research on Central Asia is to disrupt static understandings of 'the state' and 'state rule.' Jeanne Feaux de la Croix asked, why do we need or expect consistency from concepts like 'the state'? Till Mostowlansky agreed, arguing that inconsistency is what we might premise more in our analysis. In his own work, Mostowlansky looked at the (post) Soviet project of modernity from the perspective of particular lives for particular purposes - 'state-building' it is not a linear process but a highly contingent one (cf Reeves 2014). A second and related question was that of the built infrastructure of statist projects, which reflect at once the ideologies of 'forever' (cf Yurchak 2005) and the realities of instability and incompleteness in the present. These ideas were also strongly echoed in the historiography of Bota Kassymbekova, Christian Teichmann and Tim Epkenhans, who all variously premise contingency in their analysis of history itself: under what conditions did a particular configuration of people, relationships, events, and structures come to be, and why? In our discussion, Teichmann reminded us further that insecurity itself can be calculated, and can produce the state effects of disorder and control. Our



group also discussed the ways in which expectations of the future should also be taken seriously as a condition of the past and present, and harnessed as a way of describing society, turning the question of ‘grand narrative’ on its head as an emic form of analysis. What are we searching for, in our descriptions of life in Central Asia? As Jeanne Feaux de la Croix put it, perhaps our interest is ultimately in “a life that is more or less present, heterogeneous, and where sites of power or institutions – from ancestors to states – become more dense or more dispersed.” Madeleine Reeves similarly argued that the collective of books seem to engage the question of “what it is to live well – why might people [across Central Asia] be invested in a vision of a future or belonging somewhere.” She noted that scholars often bring to their work an agenda of ‘problem-solving’, which doesn’t always match lived reality; in our collective case, for example, the idea of joy is so central to the Central Asian experience but often gets side-lined in our analyses which, as a whole, may (over)emphasize conditions of conflict or hardship.

AUTHORSHIP AND AUDIENCES

From the perspective of authorship, an important question emerged: for whom are we writing, and why? In her comments to the authors, Judith Beyer rightly noted that even our introductory comments in monographs begin the complicated (and sometimes emotional) process of authorial positioning with regard to method, field, and potential interlocutors. Every choice we make as authors conditions the writing and ‘reading’ of our texts and, as Julie McBrien also reflected, the different theoretical ‘conversations’ of which we are part. The question of writing is an urgent and practical one; several of our discussions pivoted around the current disconnect between researchers and policy makers, the need to publish in different arenas, and to make our work accessible to different audiences in global politics. In a world where academic and policy circles are divided, where many of us feel a certain urge to be – as Julie Billaud put it – a “disturbing element” in the constant deconstruction of grand narratives, stereotypes, and misunderstandings of the region, where does our writing itself travel? As Botakoz Kassymbekova noted, ultimately we are also writing for



ourselves, and for the worlds we wish to see; this is perhaps most clear in the work of Julie Billaud or Timothy Nunan, writing to combat narratives of oppression that structured a 'humanitarian' war in Afghanistan, or for those like Adeeb Khalid, Julie McBrien, and David Montgomery, whose research writes against false narratives of 'Islamic extremism' in Central Asia. If these lessons are not heard or learned, the consequences may quite literally be (continued) war.

Further, in the institutional and publication forms generated by the academy, is our work always oriented toward, for example, the United States and Europe? Our challenge is equally to work toward the dissemination of knowledge in Central Asia. Projects of translation, publication, and circulation are among the most necessary tasks, and some of the most promising avenues for these include the development of online knowledge portals and an increased engagement with online forms of knowledge and imagination coming from the region itself. The future of our field lies equally in forms of collaboration across regional and national lines and the promotion of scholarship from Central Asian colleagues, for example in the structuring of research workgroups. This raises new ethical concerns and challenges for researchers on the ground: what are the limits of collaboration, in the face of real forms of violence and suppression? Academic freedom is directly challenged in a number of locations – we could look at any number of recent examples from Russia, Central Asia, Hungary, Turkey, China, and the United States. Finally, we must also face the conditions of precariousness in global academia itself; it is simply true as the number of wonderfully qualified candidates increases, the number of available research positions is limited. How can we create more opportunities not only for the dissemination of research, but practical employment in these fields as well? The creation and protection of transnational scholarship networks is imperative: we must be mindful of one another, our colleagues, and the conditions under which we all work and live.

I would like to thank the organizers as well as all those colleagues who participated in this workshop, for all their efforts. Let's keep writing!

Videos of the individual panels will be uploaded on Allegra shortly.



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[1] A link to the program can be found [here](#).

[2] Christian Teichmann's work deals primarily with Uzbekistan from 1920-1945/50. None of the books in this groups came from Mongolia, Turkmenistan, or Xinjiang, although these would readily be included in our collective geographic imagination, and there is certainly interesting work from many colleagues happening in these locales, which is represented at the Annual Meetings of the Central Eurasian Studies Society.

[This post was first published on 2 October 2017 on The CESS Blog.](#)

Is it time for Finnish celebrities to save the black girls of a “developing country”?

Liina Mustonen
October, 2017



Is it time for Finnish celebrities to save black girls of a “developing country”? This is the question that might occur to someone familiar with post-colonial studies observing the newest campaign of the Finnish section of the international aid agency [Plan International](#). The recent advert of the aid agency portrays a black pregnant girl, too young to become a mother, in her maternity clothes. Entitled [“Maternity wear for a 12-year old by Paola Suhonen”](#), the campaign, didn’t go unnoticed by those using Finnish public transportation, Finnish-language online spaces, or skimming through national newspapers. Advertisement portraying pregnant women is uncommon in Finland, and advertisement showing black women is equally rare. So why then black pregnant girls? The text, “Make sure they are not needed,” which accompanies the picture of the pregnant girl in her new clothes designed and delivered to her by a well-known Finnish fashion designer reveals that Finnish celebrities seem to have turned humanitarian.



Led by two public figures in Finland, the campaign "Maternity wear for a 12-year old by Paola Suhonen" follows the pattern of celebrity humanitarianism. Yet, in view of the history of Finland, the campaign should also be situated within the nation's self-understanding as a 'developed' and 'progressive nation'. The ways in which the campaign relies on racialization in order to define a certain unlimited geographic region – 'a developing country', needs to be challenged.

Celebrities' adoption of humanitarianism causes is not a new phenomenon for anthropologists and scholars of international development. Yet, until recently we had not witnessed Finnish celebrities in this particular savior role.

It has been missionaries, development aid workers sponsored by the state and self-proclaimed peacebuilders such as the former president of Finland who have taken on the responsibility as the country's ambassadors in saving the "distant Other" in faraway places plagued by conflict. Following the opening of the markets, it has only been in the past decades that such global initiatives have found their way to Finland. Notably, Plan International was established in 1937 but it only opened an office in Finland in 1998. Plan's campaign "Maternity wear for a 12-year old by Paola Suhonen", therefore, does not only speak for the global power relations and hierarchies but is says a lot about Finland's changing self-image as a story of progress: from a poor post- second world nation to a pioneering nation in international development.

For the stars of the global entertainment world, humanitarianism has functioned as a tool to boost their brand.

They all have in common, that they operate in the 'Aidland', that is, the part of the world that is defined as in need of humanitarian assistance and where different development aid agencies operate. Anthropologists have critically engaged with several such initiatives including Bob Geldof's Band Aid in 1984 and other, more recent, initiatives by celebrities of the global entertainment world such as Bono, Angelina Jolie, Leonardo DiCaprio, Madonna and others (Biccum 2016; Kapoor



2012; Nickel & Eickenberry 2008; Yrjölä, 2014).

<https://youtu.be/AvcbPvSRZ-I>

The short videos are the campaign's most effective tool for familiarizing the audience with the "distant Other", and consolidating the donor's own position as they introduce the "shocking" context of a "developing country" to the Finnish audience. Big numbers make the campaign meaningful, give it justification and legitimacy. One of the short campaign videos entitled "Making of Maternity Wear For a 12-Year-Old" precisely begins with big shocking numbers: "Every year 7 million children in developing countries become mothers". Yet, the number – the amount of "child pregnancies" – remains without a context as does the term "developing countries" where these child pregnancies occur. Sally Merry (2016) has pointed to the downside of explaining such phenomena (violence against women or child pregnancies in this case) with statistical information; it homogenizes and separates problems from larger structural issues. The Plan campaign operates with such homogenizing categories "developing countries" and "child pregnancies."

After the campaign video has revealed the "shocking amount" of child mothers in "developing countries", these anonymous seven million child pregnancies are concretized by footage of young black girls carrying their babies in the courtyard of an unnamed place. The video presents the girls as idle and passive. In order to ensure that the reader will not misinterpret what she sees, the video also brings to the viewer's screen the girls' teacher who explains what the video tries to visualize: "They [the girls] will be in their village doing nothing and at the end they will be engaged in other activities like prostitution so that they can have money to feed themselves and the kids". It seems that for the campaign designers the black skin color tells enough about the context. The skin color is meant to indicate to the Finnish audience that it is a question of one of those "developing countries" where girls become pregnant at a too young age. The girls are racialized – their black skin color speaks for their lower social, cultural and economic status. Through the pre-existing knowledge that the audience already



possess about “developing countries”, it can easily access the information and make the necessary connections between the space portrayed in the video and the category “developing country”.

“Maternity wear for a 12-year old by Paola Suhonen” relies on a third generalizable category, that of a “girl”. Feminists have long posed the question of whether all women share enough in order to constitute a universal category “girls” (or “women” for that matter) (Mohanty 1991; Hooks 2000; Abu-Lughold 2013). Think of an encounter between a white, Finnish 12-year old girl and a billboard portraying the “12-year old black girl in her new maternity clothes” at a bus stop in Helsinki. What kinds of associations does the white girl make when she stares at the objectified black pregnant girl? Her associations would most likely build on the overall politics and demographics prevalent in Finland, in which black people are mostly seen on the pages of aid brochures calling for help for the abstract place called “developing country”. The street picture, mainstream media and politics in Finland are predominantly occupied by white people and portray a high degree of homogeneity. The image of the black pregnant girl provides a sufficient contrast to the rapid progress of Finland from a colonized country to a nation pioneering gender equality – the new gender-neutral school curriculum is a most recent attestation of this. It suggests that children should not be divided according to the categories “girl” and “boy” anymore. The campaign therefore serves to juxtapose the white, Finnish 12-year old girl, an individualized person as the above-mentioned school curriculum advocates, and the black child mother of the billboard who is meant to represent all the seven million pregnant girls of “developing countries”? Projects that aim at saving others can enforce the feeling of one’s superiority (Abu-Lughold 2013). Instead of generating solidarity between the donor and the recipient, such campaigns could easily consolidate feelings of superiority and self-image of one’s own progress seen in relation to the ‘Others’, enforce racist attitudes locally and make the “distant Other” more distant. The challenge is how to create non-hierarchical and emancipatory relationships. And how to give voice to the story’s protagonist instead of silencing her and depriving her of her agency.



The campaign only functions on the abstract level (Kapoor 2012) producing knowledge about developing countries, or 'Aidland' (Mosse, 2011). That the distant 'Other' is located in Zambia is barely mentioned in the campaign materials. The local complexities and problems plaguing Zambia such as extractive forms of capitalism, mine industry in particular, reminiscent of the colonial period would otherwise overwhelm the campaign planners (Fredriksen 2014). In fact, Zambia is mentioned in the campaign video only when two Finnish celebrities travel there with their crew. It is not Angelina Jolie, a familiar face in images of humanitarian action, but a photographer Meeri Koutaniemi, who made her career by picturing female genital mutilation practices in Kenya to global audiences, who climbs to the SAS plane by holding a café latte. The other celebrity of the campaign is fashion designer Paola Suhonen. The mission of the Nordic artists is to produce knowledge about "developing countries" and "black racialized girls" to the Finnish audience. In order to sell the campaign to broad audiences and attract donors, early motherhood is isolated from other issues and global power relations (Kapoor 2012). The campaign stars' ability to narrate a story of an abstract "developing country" by using Zambia as the stage of their theater play best visualizes this power relation and speaks for the self-image of the Finnish audience.

Photographing "black pregnant girls" and telling stories about them becomes glorified as a heroic act. It normalizes the position of Finland among the developed and progressive nations.

With an astonishing accuracy, the campaign video follows the pattern of celebrity humanitarianism seen in other contexts. When the white Finnish celebrities step out of the Ethiopia Airlines aircraft in the unidentified "developing country", they are followed by a group of black men. Soon the scenes on the screen change – clean airport environment and the take away latte are replaced by shantytowns. From behind their sunglasses in the safety of the SUV-car, the two white Finnish women glance outdoors. Upon their arrival in the destination, the Finnish celebrity assumes the role of an expert. From the unnamed location, she explains



to the Finnish audience the causal relationship between child marriages and child pregnancies.

As post-colonial scholars frequently remind us, representations of third world women as passive and deprived of their agency have a long history. Nothing would visualize this better than what ensues in the video: while we hear the voice of the Finnish speaker in the background, the camera turns to the black girls. Mute women, standing speechless in the picture and wearing worn out clothes made of colorful fabrics are again represented with their babies as passive – speechless and not moving much – transmitting an image of them waiting for the help of Finnish donors. Indeed, the girls constitute the opposite image of the Finnish photographer who sits her back straight and wears jewelry. The child mothers of “developing countries”, whose stories are being told, become a resource for the two Finnish celebrities (Kapoor 2012; Yúdice 2005). Hence, the campaign follows a market logic – everything becomes sellable, even the big belly of an under aged girl (Biccum 2016).

The “third world” or “developing countries” and former colonies provide career opportunities and resources for specialists of International development (Petreus 1999) and for the colonizer respectively. Just as the careers of development aid workers are connected to their places of origin (Smirli 2008) or their organizations with headquarters in Western capitals, so is the fame of the Finnish celebrities connected to their place of origin – art circles, fashion world and Finland. The child mothers of “developing countries” provide a resource for the celebrities that contributes to their uncritical celebration as part of the Finnish elite society by their constituency (Nickel & Eickenberry 2009). The celebrities take on the role of ambassadors with the mission of reminding the Finnish audience how advanced Finland is and how underdeveloped the “Others” are. This constitutes a form of “proxy humanitarianism”. Proxy humanitarianism involves the principle of deresponsibilization of the constituency, that is, a text message worth of 15 euros to Plan international becomes an act of charity that delegates the humanitarian work to the celebrities – “global [Finnish] super models”. (De Lauri 2016)



The campaign video ends with a short fashion shoot. The potential Finnish donor witnesses how three fashionable white women meet (to borrow their words) the story's "main girl". In contrast to the fashionable Finnish women, "the main girl" is wrapped in a blanket. As in most fashion shoots, the "main girl," Fridah becomes objectified, instrumentalized for the campaign's purposes. Fridah poses on the field while the Finnish fashion designer explains the reasons behind her choices of color and style. Instead of local colors, the designer searched for tones in children's fashion world and chose "Hamptons style" – soft tones such as light blue and creamy colors. Oppositions are at play again – the maritime spirit was chosen as a contrast to the girls' living conditions, the designer explains. The pictures of mute and passive girls in colorful worn-out clothes change to pictures of kids who play in "Hampton's style clothing". The international fashion world brought to an abstract place called "a developing country" by representatives of the Finnish donor audience is portrayed as a talisman that brings happiness and change. The video limits the conditions of possibility to the benevolence of the white Finnish donors. At the same time the local meanings, such as the colorful fabrics and daily joys of the people are not given any value but obliterated. The campaign that is sold to the Finnish audience by statistical numbers, technical knowledge and racialized images, further normalizes the position of the Finns on the side of the saviors.

[A shorter version of this essay](#) appeared originally in the Finnish-language *AntroBlogi* as a part of the online publication's new 'Current Affairs' section.

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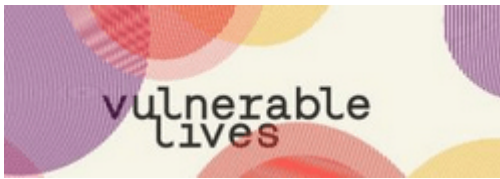
#EVENTS: Spaces, surfaces and borders

Allegra
October, 2017



You guessed it: it's yet again time for events! This month, we bring you a selection of exciting events addressing vulnerability, borders, spaces and surfaces. From conferences to workshops, exhibits and performances, there is something for every taste!

As always, if you want your event to feature in our next events list or if you wish to write a short report, don't hesitate to get in touch with our events assistant Aude at audef@allegralaboratory.net.



International Conference: [How does vulnerability matter?](#)

30 November-1 December 2017, The House of Science and Letters, Helsinki, Finland

Vulnerability has been widely used as a *descriptive concept* in the study of fragile life situations, socially excluded people and minorities and, e.g. dependent human beings and animals. However, this articulation of the concept has been criticized for being human-centered. The concept can also have a *normative character*, which refers to biological life, especially climate change and non-human lives. In a normative sense and from a Foucauldian take on productivity, vulnerability in current neo-liberal societies can also be understood as a vehicle for individualization and identity politics. Vulnerability has also been used as an *ontological concept*, a necessary feature of the human condition. This is probably the oldest meaning of vulnerability which has been extensively discussed e.g. in religious and ethical settings. When studying current societies, vulnerability as an ontological concept is frequently modified to serve political ends.

This seminar examines the range of definitions that vulnerability is given today. **Does vulnerability matter - how?** With increasingly broad articulations of the term, is it in the danger of losing its meaning? What kind of common denominators do the various articulations share? How can researchers of vulnerability communicate with one another?

In addition, we invite papers, which discuss materiality, affects and mediations between social relations and the politics of vulnerability. We invite participants from all relevant subjects, such as ***social sciences, humanities and the arts, philosophy and medicine.*** [[more](#)]

Deadline for submission of abstracts: 15 October 2017



**2018 Working-Class Studies Association
Conference: [Class at the border: migration,
confinement, and \(im\)mobility](#)**

6-9 June 2018, Stony Brook University, USA

Against the backdrop of globalization, where capital flows across borders more easily than people, we are living in increasingly walled-off societies. The conference theme, **Class at the Border: Migration, Confinement, and (Im)mobility**, explores how an explicit recognition of class can deepen our understanding of the structures and ideas that divide individuals, communities, societies, and nations across the globe. Presentations for this conference will consider how walls, borders, and other dividing lines-of both the material and figurative variety-are constructed, upheld, resisted, and dismantled.

Presenters are encouraged to submit individual proposals as well as full panels, poster submissions, roundtables, and workshops that address, in some fashion, either within or across disciplinary boundaries, literal or figurative concepts of walls through class analysis. While we strongly encourage submissions that focus on the cluster themes such as labor, immigration, incarceration, and mobility in relation to class, presenters are encouraged to submit proposals in other areas and from various fields of study that advance our understanding of walls and class. [[more](#)]

Deadline for submission of proposals: 15 December 2017



**Interdisciplinary symposium: Apparition:
the (im)materiality of modern surface**

9 March 2018, De Montfort University, Leicester, UK

This one-day symposium examines the contemporary fascination with the surfaces, surveying the (im)material surface qualities of our everyday environment. It brings together scholars and practitioners from a range of disciplines—creative arts and design, architecture, performance, cultural studies, anthropology, sociology, history, literary studies and social studies of science and technology—to discuss the construction, dissolution and deconstruction of the surface.

Siegfried Kracauer wrote, in the 1920s when the Western world was captivated by technology and mechanised production, that urban mass culture was defined by surface affects and described the experience of modernity as being that of a surface condition. Modernity's obsession with the surface was revealed most clearly in built, designed and manufactured everyday things. The 'surface splendour' filled picture palaces; glass architecture alluded to utopian milieu that breeds revolutionary subjectivity; Josephine Baker wore her naked skin like a shimmering sheath; factory spaces full of gleaming machinery were worshiped like a temple; the sleek surface of Bakelite signaled a new era of consumer goods.

Today, almost 100 years on, in the midst of another technological revolution, the creative industries are again preoccupied with the surface and its dissolution, disintegration or efflorescence, accentuating the surface's function of mediation or passage, rather than that of separation or boundary. The surface evaporates, percolates, become blurred or spectral in Diller and Scofidio's Cloud Machine; Bill Morrison's Decasia; Bart Hess's Digital Artefact; Sruli Recht's translucent leather collection Apparition. James Turrell's light architecture is simultaneously material and immaterial, and the surface seems to disappear altogether with Surrey Nanosystems' Vantablack.



If the everyday surface can be regarded as a site for the projection and display of psychical, cultural, social, and political values, what is the implication of the dissolving surface? How does the (im)materiality of surface affect our experience of the body, self and society today? What is our attitude towards these surface qualities? In what forms does surface materiality exist in the virtual age? What kind of moral, functional, aesthetic values does the surface conceal or reveal? [[more](#)]

Deadline for submission of abstracts: 1 December 2017



Northwestern

Interdisciplinary graduate student conference/performance festival: [In motion: performance and unsettling borders](#)

27-29 April 2018, Northwestern University, USA

How do borders echo and reverberate as cultural geographies, unsettling space and forcing bodies to move, to organize, and to perform? How do performers and scholars account for and navigate their bordered existence, when traversing them can regularly (re)produce the conditions for both precarious and secure living? What conditions arise amongst bodies, boundaries, and the spaces there in between? The 2018 Department of Performance Studies Graduate Student Conference, **In Motion: Performance and Unsettling Borders**, invites graduate students—practitioners and scholars—to generate dialogue and debate by coming together around artistic work and interdisciplinary thinking.

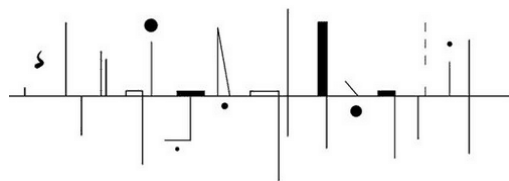
Recent international, national, and local political and social events have brought increased attention to the reality of borderlands as contentious sites of movement and activity. History demonstrates that borders—immaterial and material— have always existed and that movement has always been central in their negotiation. For some, borders are porous and easy to cross, a mere nuisance or pit stop. For



others, borders are an integral part of *being*, continuously looming, shaping entire lives. If the border affirms its presence through constant yet imperfect iteration (repetition), then how might we employ performance (and practice) to interrogate its rigidity? How does performance elicit a mode of thinking and doing that allows us to consider how borders, contemporary and historical, demand both imaginary and tangible forces to be maintained—and how might we come to unsettle (or secure them) through our practice(s)?

We seek proposals for traditional academic papers, performance-lectures, live performances, and other experimental formats. [[more](#)]

Deadline for submission of film proposals: 1 December 2017



Films, exhibit, performances and workshops: [Anthropologies Numériques #5: Believe, create, desire: make with the other](#)

15-17 November 2017, Le Cube, Issy-les-Moulineaux, France & 18-19 November 2017, Point Éphémère, Paris, France

In a political climate where the desires, creations and beliefs that animate us are increasingly endangered, the 5th edition of Digital Anthropologies calls for the creation of a collective space-time.

Filmmakers, visual artists, digital practitioners, researchers in the social sciences and the humanities, as well as performing artists, will come together and share their research methods, methodologies and representational strategies. Our intention is to offer a rightful place to their works while creating space for dialogue between creators and the public. By encouraging the sustained dialogue and interaction with the public, these interventions allow for the transmission of



multiple narratives in myriad forms: corporeal, visual, audio, and the otherwise immaterial.

During our five days together, we hope to disrupt the divides between artistic expression, scientific production and technical intervention. All are encouraged to actively participate. As intercessors, each of us will have the opportunity to interrogate different modes of expression in a space where individual trajectories and collective fates meet, collide, and mutually enrich each other. [[more](#)]

Featured image by [ricardo lago](#) (flickr, [CC BY-SA 2.0](#))

Violence and Vulnerability in Anthropology

Alix Johnson
October, 2017



Three years ago, after being sexually assaulted while conducting dissertation research in Iceland, [I joined others in insisting that our discipline take more seriously the prevalence of sexual violence in the field](#) (see: Backe 2017, Huang 2017). As I learned in writing about my experience, sexual violence happens often, its impacts are immeasurable, and our institutions are woefully unprepared to address its aftermath. In raising this issue, I have had the immense privilege of being encouraged.

The vast majority of anthropologists I've spoken to have told me they believe me, agree with me, and they too feel that we need disciplinary conversations – even structures and policies – specifically addressing fieldwork sexual assault. And still, in 2017, most of us don't have them.



In [her introduction to *The New Ethnographer*](#), Anya Evans asks, of gendered violence, “Why aren’t we talking about this?”. Since joining the conversation on anthropology and sexual violence, I have come to feel this question is a real and not rhetorical one. I see the challenges of already limited resources and slow-moving institutions, now under threat of being dismantled by the state. These are issues that cut across and beyond academia. But in this short piece I want to suggest that part of the problem – and its solution – is specific to anthropology. I believe that one source of our collective reluctance is the way sexual violence raises uncomfortable questions about the fact and practice of being in the field. Confronting rape will require, if not answering them, at least posing them openly and honestly to ourselves.

Anthropological fieldwork was once a masculine endeavor, framed in terms of adventure, survival, and the triumph of the “penetrating intellect” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, Killick 1995). Arrival scenes, modeled after Malinowski’s, drove home the dangerous difference of the field site, and the legitimacy of the fieldworker who dared explore it. Such performances of masculinity were both specific to and enabled by, the colonial relations from which anthropological knowledge emerged. A key element of anthropology’s filling the “Savage slot,” then, was the impression of willfully taken risk (Trouillot 2003).

Queer, feminist, and “halfie” anthropologists, however, have since chipped away at this “prevailing machismo mystique” (Abu-Lughod 1991, Scheper-Hughes 1983). They have theorized and modeled other modes of engagement, more akin to actual, equitable relations, and more suited to ethnography as imagined today: intimacy, interdependence, vulnerability (Behar 1996, Visveswaran 1994, Weston 1991). Critically, these theorists took traits seen as inherent weaknesses, and re-imagined them as specific disciplinary tools. In doing so they not only addressed the growing diversity of the discipline, but also the inequalities encoded in fieldwork, itself.



This work has been hugely important and influential – it's palpable in the anthropology into which I was trained. Though certainly the mode of the masculine explorer is still present in ethnographic writing and research, I was instead educated in the practice of openness, empathy, honesty, and rapport.

But in the ongoing diffusion of these critical interventions, I see an important difference: although our vulnerability is now valued, it is framed as selected and strategic – not as written on our bodies, regardless of our choice.

Chosen vulnerability works in this way as a compromise that settles questions of unequal difference in the field. It sanctions the idea that, with some significant effort, we can show up anywhere and take a respectful, rightful place. If we can open ourselves adequately, radically, we experience an impact that counterbalances the impact we make. Clearly, these are questions long asked and answered (for example: Trouillot 2003, Willis 1974), but they remain resolutely unresolved. While many continue to problematize the possibility that individual choices meaningfully offset structural inequalities in the field, on the whole anthropologists do not routinely question our very right to presence in places far from home.

When sexual violence happens, that question gets forced.

What do we do when a student is sexually assaulted during fieldwork? We ignore it. Or, we bring the student “home.” Or, we provide that student with the financial, medical, and legal resources they need to complete their research in the field. We encourage the student to press criminal charges. Or, we discourage the student from involving police.

Consider how each option makes its own statement. Questions of safety and justice quickly bleed into questions of rights and responsibilities. To what are we entitled, where, and from whom? What does it mean to assert that we have the right to safety? What would it mean to say that we don't? Here I want to be extremely careful: I believe that sexual violence is categorically unacceptable. I



believe survivors know best how to care for themselves, and deserve the resources to pursue safety as they choose. My point is that these choices aren't merely logistical- they are statements about who the ethnographer is and should be, in relation to wherever it is that they are.

They break the peace of the pretense that we choose vulnerability – and that we all get to choose it the same. And when vulnerability is revealed as involuntary, the rest of our structuring assumptions come unstuck.

After all, what would it mean to have strong, shared responses to the incidence of sexual violence in the field? It would mean asserting that we have a right to be there – precisely wherever we choose to be. It would mean saying that we deserve the same treatment we expect (whether or not we receive it) at home. It would mean claiming the righteousness of voluntary vulnerability. These are not things we are sure of, nor should we be. These are vexing problems of power that cut to the heart of the anthropological enterprise.

And so, to reframe Spector's question, why aren't we talking about *this*? These are complex and unsettling questions about relating to distance and difference well. But grappling with such questions is, essentially, what anthropology today claims to do. We are not unfamiliar with the general principle and practice of struggling in the direction of a more just world.

Confronting rape during fieldwork brings into focus the ways that we are vulnerable, as well as the ways that we are not. If we fail to engage this issue directly, I worry that we'll stay where we seem to be stuck: doing nothing, or subjecting students to responses that seem to harm more than they heal. If we don't work through our own relationship to vulnerability, I worry that we will treat the concept without care. We see this in the responses to sexual violence most readily available in the U.S.A.: responses that turn on protection and punishment. Responses that reify the victimhood of the white woman (or in another variation, the oppression of the brown woman) and the criminality of the black or brown man. Responses that render sexual violence a "women's issue,"



and define womanhood in narrow, exclusive ways (for example, invisibilizing trans women, most at risk for violence of all). All are examples of vulnerability deliberately simplified and strategically deployed. All illustrate ways that vulnerability, unexamined, gets affixed to particular bodies, enrolling them in or excluding them from relations of care.

In Iceland, two days after I was assaulted, an Icelandic friend brought me to the police. As a mixed-race American with ten years of experience in political organizing around sexual violence, calling law enforcement was not my first thought. I had no reason to believe the state would not cause more violence, so I asked Icelandic women what they would do. The women I asked told me to report it – if not for my sake, then on their behalf. In doing so they were telling me that I was of and like them, that the legal system would work for them and should work for me.

When I gave my statement that day to the detective, still moving slow from the shock, he asked me about my assailant: “Was he Icelandic?” I told him I didn’t think so – I didn’t know. He held my gaze steadily, kindly, persistently. “He looked like me,” is what I said. The man reasoned with my ambiguous features, my dark curly hair and my summer-brown skin, and at that point my investigation shifted registers. At that moment I knew that I was believed. In a justice system significantly more likely to pursue rape cases against foreigners (though 71% of perpetrators are Icelandic), he too was telling me that I could be of and like them, provided that my assailant was not (Antonsdóttir 2014).

Asking for safety and justice is always a claim to belonging; arbitrating access to them is even more fraught and bold. No less is required when we ask ourselves and our institutions to confront the problem of sexual violence in the field. I believe this is a piece of why we’ve struggled with it so long. But we can draw upon our very own theory, principles, and practices, and choose an engagement with violence and vulnerability that puts something of ourselves at stake.



I am certain that we do not know all the answers, but as anthropologists, we should know what it means to really, truly ask.

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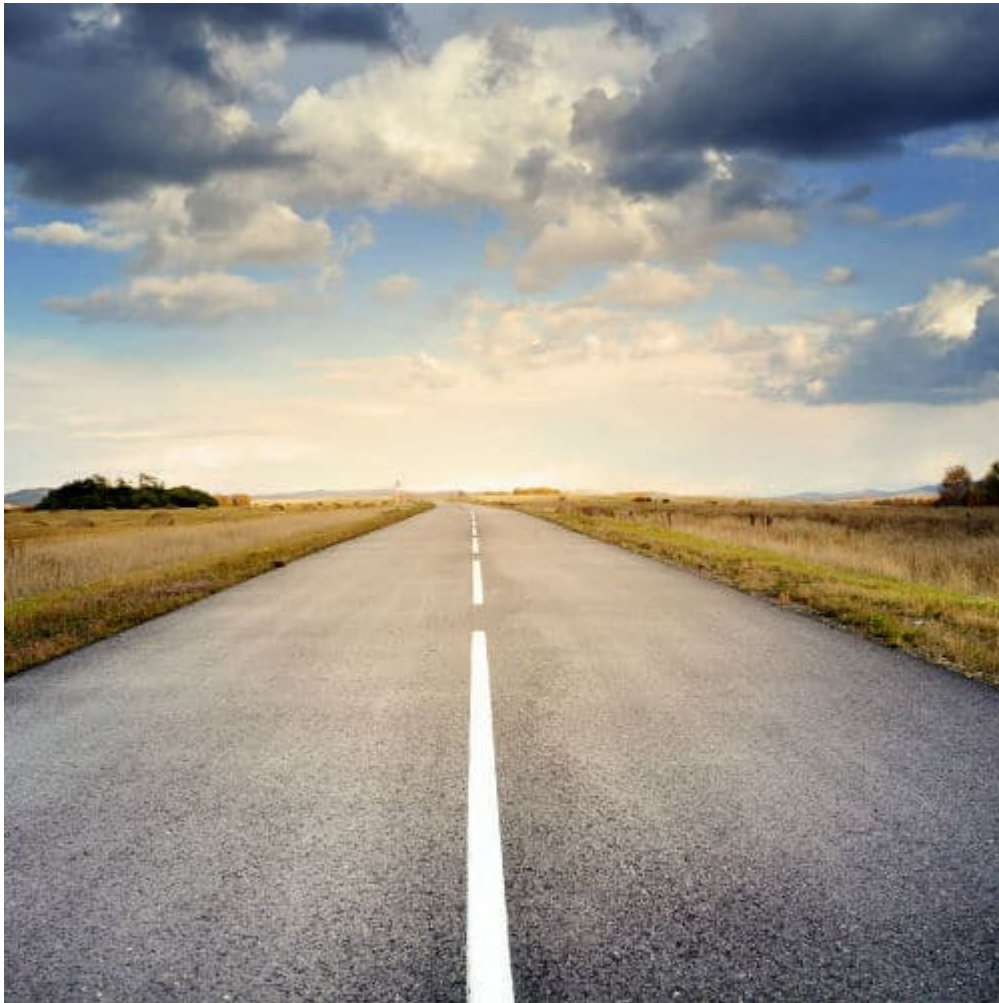
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“The Road Goes Ever On and On”: The PhD Candidate, Uncertainty and Creative #Blogging

Christopher Diming
October, 2017



To say that a PhD in anthropology represents a journey is equal parts cliché and “social fact,” at least for some students. In this short blog post, I will first present a narrative journey of a PhD candidate in anthropology from the beginning of their programme of study to fieldwork, the thesis defence and, finally, the commencement of the post-doctoral period.

Through this description, the journey can be seen as a dialogue with uncertainty.

With a general context established, I will then describe the role played by online blogging in shaping my experience as a doctoral student, in which blogging, as a form of writing, emerges as a creative means of addressing the uncertainty of the PhD process.



In the beginning, the fledgling scholar emerges from the comforting cocoon of their previous studies, either within anthropology or another discipline, into a simultaneously erratic and directed context, in which, as Samimian-Darash and others write, the measures taken to bring more control instead prompt additional uncertainty (Samimian-Darash 2013; Zeiderman 2015; Zeiderman et al. 2016). The activities and contingencies planned for the eventual fieldwork begin to pile up, as the candidate pours through journal articles and scholarly books deemed necessary for their future endeavours and perhaps constructs a research proposal for review, an early instance of bureaucratic regulation faced in their career.

And so the narrative continues, and the at-first eager pilgrim, after a series of zealous steps, enters into the threshold of a spatiotemporal “waiting room”. The concept was first utilised by Jansen to describe perceptions held by Sarajevans of living in a spatially-defined city where the future is undefined and movement towards it feels non-existent (Jansen 2015; Jansen et al 2016). In this instance, rather than using the image to describe a post-Yugoslav city, I use it to describe an experience of fieldwork, a space both of fluidity and an unpredictable trajectory, where the people and concepts encountered often shift the student-anthropologist’s perceptions of identity, as they come to terms with their new, yet often temporary, surroundings.

Here, in this time period often described as a ritual rite of passage, the pilgrim faces challenges to their perhaps formerly firm views of life, as in a tense encounter with someone new or in the shape of ambiguous conceptual forms, recently-met ideas that lie just beyond understanding and on the edge of comprehension.

The planned measures and (perhaps obsessively) perused texts provide little preparation for what the student-fieldworker often encounters.

The once-mythical field site is located in the fore, as, rather than being a location in the candidate’s near future, its joys and difficulties are negotiated daily. Meanwhile, the protagonist’s movement towards their eventual destinations, the



thesis defence and the doctorate, appears doubtful and static.

After coming face-to-face with their “new” environments, the formerly eager and now hardened traveler returns from their pilgrimage to the university, a site referred to wistfully and disparagingly in many circles as the academy. Now, they arrive at the threshold of the deadline where, officially, they have the freedom to create and be innovative, but, practically, thanks to the academy’s neoliberal transformations, they are limited by the spectre of funding withdrawal and the confining walls of accepted buzzwords and rhetorical images. The link between neoliberalism and academic images can be seen in the necessity of writing with concepts that are attractive to prospective employers, publishers and funding bodies, entities whose priorities are increasingly driven by the demands of producing quantified and marketable “impacts.”

We must create, but only within circumscribing boundaries. After all, we want to be employed someday, right?

Hence, between bouts of ambitiously accelerated writing and fruitless fog, the weary pilgrim arrives at the threshold of the thesis defence (or “viva,” in the United Kingdom), a mystical room of requirements at the conclusion of the PhD programme. During the defence, the candidate has what in the UK is frequently described as an intense-yet-friendly conversation which, strangely enough, often provides the most direction the pilgrim has experienced throughout their entire process in the form of structured feedback. However, the defence’s place in time represents a definitive blip amidst an ambiguous trajectory, as the former-candidate-now-doctor becomes enmeshed in a reproducing milieu of article deadlines and applications for fixed-term post-doctorate fellowships, where the limiting boundaries first experienced during the PhD become codified as impact factors, writing guidelines and indicators of future success. Fixed-term academic positions come and go, and the murky fog faced during the PhD process re-configured with the post-doctorate experience.

Thus far, I have presented a narrative of the PhD to post-doctorate experience in



socio-cultural anthropology, and, in the process, I portray a general context of uncertainty. In the following section, I reflect further on this context by drawing on my experiences as a PhD student and particularly my use of blogging during fieldwork. During my fieldwork, blogging with Allegra was a creative means to engage with and reflect on my field site, an activity which both confronts uncertainty and utilises it for prompting ethnographic insights.

In terms of my PhD process, “writing out” my thoughts presented a means of clarifying my interpretations of Pristina, Kosovo’s capital city and my field site.

In a context where I was exploring interactions between Prishtinalis in public spaces, I became familiar with the café as a site of such interpersonal dialogues, and, consequently, I wrote about it (and in particular, the coffee cup) as part of a piece for Allegra’s [AVMOFA](#). At the time, I used the experience to distill the ethnographic observations both within my field notes and in my head into a short body of work for others to read. In doing so, I attempted to transplant the encounters I had with people as part of my life within the city and crystallise the amorphous forms that I began to encounter, both in conversation with others in Pristina and in my field notes.





Although this process is characteristic of writing in general, it occurred differently when blogging, as I was able to publicise my thoughts to others, both anthropologists and generally interested readers, outside a set academic hierarchy. This difference makes blogging distinct from publishing a scholarly article, for example, as the writer is less affected by the publisher's demands, and it is different from jotting down thoughts in field notes, as the final text can be read and commented upon by others. For the doctoral student, the benefit is that the writing can occur while the research is still being undertaken, while scholarly articles and books are often written long after the burgeoning anthropologist has "left" the field site.

Blogging with Allegra proved to be quite fruitful, in the pragmatic sense that it prompted me to reflect on my fieldwork surroundings and [explore](#) abstract ideas in a creative way. However, in a more abstract sense, the activity also allowed me a means to confront the precariousness I was feeling as part of my "pilgrimage" from my university to Pristina and back. The letters being typed, deleted, and typed again, as part of stuttering sentences, made the uncertainty appear just certain enough that I realised what it was that I would soon be writing about as part of my return journey to the academy.

When I wrote "Caffeinated Politics," I was primarily interested in the café as a space for social interactions between acquaintances. I began to perceive it as a space where actors projected rhetorical images towards others, often in order to modify their relationships with people they were in conversation with. For example, the phrase *e shti dorën më zjarrin* (meaning "to put your hand in the fire") refers to a performance of steadfastness, where the actor displays their trustworthiness within view of others as a persuasive attempt to gain another's respect and thereby their acquaintance. These performances play out in the city's public spaces such as cafes and often occur alongside images bolstered by Prishtinalis through projected images referred to as "masks," or representations meant for nearby onlookers to view. As explained to me by informants, these masks are impressions that are consciously formed by actors through techniques such as fashion choices and practices like making a point to pay for a drinking



partner when in a cafe.

Indeed, when I was writing the dissertation, I had started to become aware of the images that were being projected around me in Pristina's cafes. As I write in the blog post's final line, "As I sit silently in this café, slowly drinking my makiato and watching the discussion to my left unfold, I wonder whether I'm actually interpreting what I'm seeing or if I'm simply projecting images." Although I had begun to make inferences from my encounters, there was still much doubt in terms of whether those observations were merely illusions caused by my then-recent arrival in the city. In a way, this illustrates an effect of the blog post in that, although I had begun to interpret my surroundings in Pristina, putting the observations on "paper" (or, in this case, the computer screen) revealed their fragility.

An example is this statement, which appears as a preliminary observation of my fieldwork thus far: "In effect, [my fieldwork on rhetoric and politics in Pristina](#) is also very much about space, perhaps even more than before my arrival." As I write earlier, I was still new in Pristina and unsure of my surroundings. By putting this observation into writing, I distilled my thoughts into a digestible format for others as well as myself. However, although the statement resonates with my dissertation on protest and public space, it reads as if I have just become acquainted with my new themes.

In effect, the blog post illustrates a tension between an attempt by the anthropologist to write down their observations and the ambiguous haze they enter into dialogue with. In many ways, the writing process generated more confusion, as it prompted me to question further during my fieldwork how the café, as a material location in public space, affected, and was impacted by Prishtinalis' rhetorical performances and dialogues.

This reflective process, centred around the blog post, prompted me to engage with my research material which ultimately prepared me for the long-process known as the "writing up" period. During this long stretch of my journey, I wrote



piece after piece of my dissertation, eventually completing it and passing through the vaunted viva (Diming 2016).

However, the foundation for the dissertation was laid during the fieldwork in Pristina, a process that in some ways could be seen as an attempt to become more confident about uncertainty.

For my intellectual and academic development, the creative space provided by Allegra allowed me an opportunity to present my first observations and fieldwork-related thoughts in a way which allowed me to “write out” what I was thinking in a flexible way, where, in writing about what was effectively a coffee cup, I was able to contribute to my own understandings as well as a collection of other items “found” by Allegra bloggers. It was an outlet to reflect on my uncertain, fieldwork surroundings in a constructive way outside of the academic institution and its buzzwords, as part of the pilgrimage to the field site and back.

And here, following the PhD journey and past the defence, I return to the blog in an effort to reflect on an uncertain context, build ideas and reflect again.

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Why Deportation to Afghanistan is Wrong

Shahram Khosravi
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Since the first week of August, hundreds of young Afghan asylum seekers have been holding a sit-down protest against deportation in central Stockholm. The protest is staged on the stairs of *Meborgarhuset* (the citizen hall) in *Medborgarplatsen* (citizen's square). While the spatial connotation cannot be missed, the form of the protest could not be more expressive.

To sit down, to occupy a place, to be settled and immobile, is what Afghan people on the move desire and deserve.

Forced migration within and from Afghanistan is undoubtedly one of the largest and most complex examples of forced migration ever experienced by a single nation. A rough estimate shows that between 10 and 12 per cent of the whole Afghan population are displaced (either inside or outside the country). This rate is



several times higher than the general worldwide rate of displacement, which is 3.3 per cent. For many Afghans, forced displacement has become protracted. Almost four decades of foreign occupation, civil war and disastrous environmental degradation have resulted in the destruction of large parts of infrastructure, the educational system, agriculture and industries. Accordingly, seeking a better life abroad is still the only option for many young Afghans. Along with Syria, Afghanistan was one of the top two source countries of refugees in the world in 2016, and the country of origin for the largest number of *unaccompanied asylum-seeking children*. In the same year, EU countries declared that 80,000 rejected asylum seekers will be expelled to Afghanistan. Moreover, over 1.3 million are internally displaced inside the country. The urgent question is not *where* people are deported to but to *what* they are deported.

Experience of deported Afghans is an experience of being expelled from Europe and being outcast in Afghanistan.

Many Afghan deportees are abandoned and left with no support from the moment of their arrival. I recurrently hear them commenting on their arrival this way: ‘no one was there’ [at the airport]. For many of them, deportation often means the forced return to a situation worse than the situation prior to the initial departure, politically, financially, and socially. Consequently, adjustment into the country of citizenship is usually uncertain and difficult. Opposite to the what European states attempt to show, the deportees do not go back *home*, but they re(join) a transnational space of expulsion, oscillating between re-departure and re-deportation.

There are multiple factors that make adjustment difficult, if not impossible, for the deportees. First, the majority of the Afghan asylum seekers in Europe belong to the Shia Hazara ethnic minority, who have historically been exposed to racial harassments and institutionalized discrimination by the powerful Sunni Pashto majority. Reports by *Human Rights Watch* and *Amnesty International* have documented systematic sectarian attacks targeting Hazara people by Taliban



forces. Many Afghan deportees cannot return to their hometowns or villages due to armed conflicts. Travelling between cities has become so risky that the main road from Kabul to Hazarajat, the region inhabited by the Hazaras in central Afghanistan, has gotten the name 'Death Road'. The deportees have to take great risks, sometimes greater than when they crossed the border between Iran and Turkey or across the Mediterranean Sea, to reach their village or town from Kabul. Moreover, four decades of armed conflicts have resulted in not only the destruction of physical homes, but have also torn apart families.

Second, many of the Afghan asylum seekers in Europe were born and grew up in Iran. They are the second generation of undocumented Afghans in Iran, lived their whole clandestine lives outside the official sphere of social life, rights, and norms. Afghanistan is for them a foreign country. Some of them have never been there before. When deported to Kabul they have nowhere to be integrated, no one to reunify with. Accordingly, in order to join their families, the majority of them have to cross borders irregularly to Iran, where they constantly face institutional discrimination. Third, the cost of the initial migration, often in forms of debt, is often not refunded. Deportation means also deletion of remittances, i.e. the source of livelihood for many poor families. Therefore, the whole household economy is affected by deportation. Generally, deportation negatively affects both the deportees and the receiving communities. Thus, the financial insecurity and unpaid debt force them to hide themselves or leave the country again.

Fourth, a common post-deportation experience is stigmatization due to the failure of the migratory project. Not unusually, deportees experience cultural estrangement, stigmatization, and high levels of violence. In the case of Afghan deportees, stigmatization has a cultural aspect as well, in terms of being 'culturally contaminated' by foreign cultures. Deportees are stigmatized and harassed for their accent, clothing, and behavior. Deportees who grew up in Iran face harassment and derision by being called *iranigak* (acting Iranian). For deportees from Europe, being associated with the West increases their vulnerability. Deportees are objects of suspicion and can be regarded as spies or *kafir* (unbeliever), since some asylum seekers convert to Christianity in Europe.



Some have been exposed to suspicion and even violence just for having a foreign telephone number in the contact list of their cellphones. Moreover, being associated with the West make them easy prey for swindlers and robbers who believe they have forging currencies. Deportees in their country of citizenship are turned into denizens with limited access to their citizenship rights. Deportees' rights can be suspended, rejected, delayed, and denied.

They are left vulnerable not only to the violence of the state, but also to the violence of ordinary citizens, without being able to protect or defend themselves.

Fifth, basically the main problem of deportees is disrecognition of their citizenship rights. In some cases, deportees even have difficulties obtaining ID cards. Since the majority of young Afghans who are deported from European countries to Afghanistan were born and grew up in Iran or Pakistan, it is not unusual for them to be denied Afghan national ID cards. Paradoxically, the same state that let them be deported to Afghanistan as Afghan nationals refuses to recognize them as citizens, since they “lack documentation” and are “not in the register system”. Sixth, another factor which makes life difficult and serves as a pull factor for remigration are the strong social ties remaining through relatives or friends in the departing country. During time spent in Europe, many deportees had learned the language, made friends, maybe fallen in love, and become accustomed to the European lifestyle. The desire to reunify with friends and family members and the desire for a missed lifestyle push them to start a new migration again towards what deportation had deprived them of. The paradox in the logic behind deportation is that while on the one hand, returning emphasises family values and reunification in the country of citizenship (deportation is presented as “going back home”), on the other hand, it causes separation of families in the country one is deported from.

Seventh, young Afghan deportees, who have spent their formative years in the country they were deported from, have more difficulties in establishing networks



and in finding their place in the society than middle-age deportees. Afghan asylum seekers are young. Afghanistan has been the country of origin for the largest number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Not unusually, those who grew up in the host country do not even master the language assumed to be their “mother tongue.” Furthermore, a gap between their education prior to deportation and the education system in the country they are deported to prevent them from moving forward. Likewise, skills they have obtained are not always relevant and their certificates, if even available, are not always translatable or recognized, and therefore not useful after deportation.

Eighth, deportees are sent to a country which is already struggling with a high rate of unemployment, widespread poverty, social insecurity, and large internal displacement. According to report by the United Nations, the poverty rate is 36%; unemployment amongst young people (15-24 year olds) is 47%; 3.5 million of school age children are out of school; and there is widespread and chronic food insecurity. Furthermore, the security situation in Afghanistan has dramatically deteriorated in the past years. The number of civilian casualties has almost doubled since 2009. Added to all these problems, according to International Organization for Migration, over 700,000 Afghans returned or were deported from Iran and Pakistan during 2016.

Finding themselves in radical insecurity outweighs the risk of being caught and deported once again. A UNHCR report from 2012 shows that up to 80 per cent of the forcibly removed people to Kabul attempt to start a new migratory adventure within a short period of time after the arrival. Interestingly, there is a dialectical interplay between deportation and human smuggling; each Afghan deportee is a new client for human smugglers. Despite all efforts to deter and remove Afghan migrants, Afghanistan is still second leading country of origin of refugees. The young Afghans are stuck between a powerful transnational apparatus which forcibly exclude and expels them from the Global North, and on the other side the circumstances and the forces which push them towards emigration from the Global South.



Deportation as a disciplinary measure which would deter migration fails because the structural realities behind why people leave are ignored.

Therefore deportation, rather than stopping aspirant migrants, contributes to the upholding of the global inequality. So if deportation does not deter Afghan migrants, what justifies deportation policies? Young Afghan asylum seekers are usually second generation refugees. They are children of undocumented migrants in Iran or Pakistan, and many of them started their flight before reaching age ten. I have interviewed Afghans who have been crossing borders for more than a decade. Perhaps the Swedish word 'flykting' (someone who takes flight, who is on move) might convey more about the situation of young Afghans than the word refugee (someone who has taken refuge).

To sit down, to be settled, to be immobile and fixed in one place, performed metaphorically by the protestors in Stockholm, is what these young men and women need after years of walking, running, swimming, hiding, and fleeing.

Afghans are expelled from the Global North, but at the same time Afghanistan has been a playground for the Global North since 1979. Almost all rich countries have military presence there. We are there. Why should they not be here then? We should not deport them. Deportation to Afghanistan is politically irresponsible, ethically incorrect, and financially illogical.

[Featured image](#) by [Jon Flobrant](#) (www.unsplash.com)



A fear that never ends #fieldnotes

Luminita-Anda Mandache

October, 2017



I started my own journey in the Brazilian northeast, on the plane from Rio de Janeiro to Fortaleza, Ceará, with a dream. After wandering around the airport, hot like an oven at 400 degrees, searching for the right gate like a shaman for the right answer, I found myself pushed onto a plane for Salvador de Bahia. Not my destination but a stop on my way to Fortaleza: “We will take you there too!” an airport employee told me. As if traveling by plane was somehow like a car ride. Exhausted and sweaty, I had finally managed to enjoy the benefits of air conditioning in my plane seat, wedged in between two Brazilian women. One of them, an old lady, soon started snoring, maybe dreaming of something remote



and peaceful. The other one didn't take long to share her story of migration with me, a tale about thieves and the solitude of life in Rio de Janeiro. Here I was, fieldworking sooner and more easily than I expected. But I wasn't ready for this abrupt beginning, so soon after she finished her story, I fell asleep. I fell asleep and I dreamt of an ample white valley, covered in snow and full of thin black trees. I woke up happy, energized, like after a good night of sleep.

My 2015 trip to Fortaleza, to the capital city of the Brazilian northeastern state of Ceará, was, like any ethnographic experience surprising and eventful. Interested in the symbolic dimension of money and the forms of trust and relationships it embeds, I landed here to understand closely how a poor community, at the margins of the city, managed to create its own money and its own bank. Fortaleza is Brazil's fifth largest city and a major tourist destination, with exotic beaches, skyscraper hotels, palm trees and relatively low prices for the Western pockets. But according to a recent study, Fortaleza also happens to be one of Brazil's most violent cities (Metodología del Ranking 2017), judging by the homicide rates, news that made it even to international media (de Oliveira 2016). Additionally, and somehow explaining the high homicide rates, Fortaleza is, according to a UN report, the world's second most unequal city (López Moreno, Oyeyinka, and Mboup 2008). Without romanticizing inequality, where there is a lot of poverty, there are also examples of human creativity and resiliency. While in Mireilles, one of the wealthiest neighborhoods of the city, situated close to the beach, the malls and supermarkets sell Brie, Belgian beer, Swiss watches, Apple products, and French perfumes, for the mainly "white" middle and upper class Brazilians, Conjunto Palmeiras is, judging by the human development index, the poorest neighborhood of Fortaleza, situated literally at the edge of the city. There, poverty taught the city's poorest residents, that without actively demanding their rights, they might have to wait long until the State will remember them.

Conjunto Palmeiras was created in 1973 as a place of and for the continually displaced — by economic "development", drought in the interior of the state, and flooding in the city — and the poorest citizens. The three buses that one needs to take from Mireilles to Conjunto Palmeiras take you, in a two-hours journey,



through the last one hundred years of the city's highly unequal development, but paradoxically the trip also keeps you very much in the present.

Colors change, people change, roads change.

Mireilles is mainly white but as you go deep into the heart of the city and then towards the periphery you see a slow but clear transition towards brown and black. As if someone had colored the city with a fine pen. It's right here, at the margins of the city, in Conjunto Palmeiras that community leaders created the Palmas Bank, a community bank circulating until recently the Palma, the most popular local currency of this type in Latin America and an example among activists in the region (Seyfang and Longhurst 2013). And it's this story of paradoxes and contradictions that brought me to Brazil each year since 2013. Many Latin American and Brazilian scholars had written about the Palmas Bank and when I started fieldwork, I considered myself "prepared"; as prepared as one can be.

The social disparities that became more obvious with Brazil's transition to democracy, and the symptom of these now visible social inequalities — the drug trade — have taken over major Latin American cities more than a decade ago; and Fortaleza is no exception. In Conjunto Palmeiras, like anywhere at the periphery of Fortaleza and even in its better-off areas, houses are fended in by high brick walls and tall metal gates bar at the entrance. The same applies to schools and public institutions, all guarded by the police officers, who often patrol around the school yard. Assaults in buses are part of the daily routine for most resident who have to rely on public transportation. Conjunto Palmeiras, once a "community" of 4,000 residents in 1970, grew to a neighborhood of 40,000 over 40 years, split into sometimes street level units by the invisible walls of the drug trafficking. With this in mind, the question of how do people work locally to change their condition became even more important. Their will to change the neighborhood has now to pass the test of the everyday fear generated by the drug trade and its new local divisions of space.



Even though the focus of my research was not urban violence, discussing the way my friends and acquaintances lived in a constant fear became a moral obligation. In my personal struggle to stay safe, as a white woman commuting two hours a day per bus, and wandering around Conjunto Palmeiras, nightmares became part of my daily routine. They would often reproduce in images stories that I had heard during the day. They were a vivid, loud, and distressing depiction of moments when I was – as my informants often put it- “lucky” not to be there. Luck was not really luck, because we were all aware that if a white European *gringa* was harmed, the Police would come to the neighborhood and try to find “a” culprit.

Where I grew up — a small town on the Black Sea coast in Romania — dreams are literally mystical moments that need to be disassembled of all their meanings around a coffee the next morning. In my dreams and the dreams of my relatives, departed dear ones from the afterlife send us news about their lives there. We respond back, like good Christians, by spending the next day making their favorite dishes and then sharing them with a friend, a neighbor, or a beggar. In other times, at night we receive clues or sprinkles of hope when we needed it most. Dreaming of snow is a good sign; something good will happen. Dreaming of water or a sea means that you are worried about something. Night dreams and daydreams are two different things. The night dreams inform what I fantasize about during the day, they act like street signs that direct the course of many of my decisions during the day.

In Brazil, my informants would often share their dreams, especially when in a group with other friends and colleagues. But there, the dreams they shared with me or my dreams didn’t seem to fit any of the interpretations I was familiar with. There was no snow, no water, no news from the other world. And therefore, no more clues and directions about where to head the next morning or the days after. This is not to say that they didn’t have the same dreams about departed loved ones that I used to have back home, but for some reason, these were not the dreams that they would share. When I asked about what they dreamed of, or when they told me without prompting, more stories of violence emerged, leading me to believe that both their night and day dreams seemed to be permeated by a



constant fear that they experienced every day.

This fear and expectancy that anything can happen anytime feels like a long and never-ending nightmare.

Just like Linda Green frames it, fear is a way of life that you don't get any breaks from, not even when you sleep. Perhaps even less, then (Green 1999). Each day one had to avoid assaults in buses, be alert and always decipher the geographies of fear and violence.

This included avoiding walking on empty streets at noon, when the sun hit the most and most people were indoors, and consequently, when many assaults took place. Or being mindful of empty streets with street bumps- probably a sign that an important drug dealer was living there and the street bumps warned him when the police car was nearby. And most importantly, learning when to take the bus: avoid the less busy hours of 9 am to 3 pm when people are at work; empty buses often mean assaults; when you see people moving in a group towards the front of the bus, you follow them, it means that in the back of the bus there is someone who will soon show a knife and ask everyone to leave their phones on the ground. With every bus stop, passengers would examine the new group of people who entered the bus and after a quick scan, continue watching their phones and relax until the next stop... There are countless examples of strategies that people put in place in order to learn how to live with violence and anthropologists have documented extensively many of these practices but less is known though about the role dreams play into such contexts.

Since the 1940s anthropologists started interpreting dreams as windows to the worlds they aimed at understanding. Many anthropologists have attempted to understand dreams as part of the symbolic life of remote populations from different corners of the world. In the 1940s, for example, Dorothy Eggan, taking as a reference of the Hopi dreams, hoped that anthropologists could study dreams to understand the extent to which fantasy was important for "nonliterate people" (1949). Others would seek to understand through dreams the different facets of



religious practices or the links between religion and power (Eves 2011). Dreams — just like the people studied — seemed one more exotic ethnographic material. But in the context of 21st-century inequality and structural violence, dreams seem to gain new meanings — now they speak loudly about the continuum between night and day and the fear that accompanies both. Probably more than this, dreams in a context of violence speak about how deeply engrained structural problems are in the lives of people situated literally at the margins of the economy and the state.

“I would like to buy a car. We had a motorcycle. We had to sell it because there were too many assaults. We made some changes at the house. They could have stolen the car; it would be better parking inside the house, in a garage, instead of having it stolen. For my kids, I want them to have a college degree ... study law, become a lawyer, a doctor. But not a cop. Only if they want to become judges. Because the laws here — if you don’t have someone inside — you die if you don’t have laws or someone to defend you. We don’t trust them. Look, the other day no one could sleep in our block. They started playing music really loud. The police came by because we called but they left. Why? Because they gave them money. The police stopped by again, took more money and left. What is the use of having the Police? I have cousins in the interior (of the state) and they think it’s better working there because it’s safer. Here you can die anytime.” (Maria, 30 years old, NGO worker, Fortaleza)

In this narrative Maria discusses her plans for the future, plans inspired by her living on “Esquina do Pecado,” or literally the Corner of the sin, a street corner in her neighborhood known for the “sins” that some have committed there. The collective naming of streets with reference to dramatic events that took place in the neighborhood speaks loudly about the violence that deeply penetrates places and people’s memories of their living spaces. Maria talked about changes in her house and strategies of both physical and social mobility, based on her broader strategies of staying safe and avoiding physical violence, which is the only type of violence that she can actually avoid. For many, like Maria, *violência* determines what you can and cannot do but also what you and your children might become



tomorrow. It could be said that in Eric Wolf's terms, *violência* is embedded with structural power (Wolf 1999) because it delimits what can and can't be done. If dreams reproduce and deepen a state of fear and insecurity that one experiences during the day, how can someone find an exit from this loop? Plans and expectations that one has about the future are limited by what one sees as opportunities.

Night dreams cannot go too far from the daily life in poverty and fear.

But paradoxically, violence, while keeping residents alert, also teaches new ways of caring and loving, and these interactions are capable of generating the so much needed hope.

For people with greater mobility, like the school teachers or the health agents (social workers employed by the local clinics), being able to navigate the streets of the neighborhood "freely" constitutes both a capital and a burden. School teachers and health agents are trusted and respected for the important job they do. This legitimacy and importance provide them with a certain protection from the drug gangs. They can move more easily from house to house, but in this movement they capture fragments of life they sometimes wish they didn't hear, or like Fatima, a friend of mine, puts it, "I get scared once I hear the patients talking to me because I might not want to hear what they have to tell me." Some health agents are commuters between day and night and use their legitimacy to do community activism in their very own way:

"I had a dream. The spirit of the death was around and wanted to grab my friend's son. I went to my friend's house and together we prayed and sought a rehab center for him. He stood there for two weeks and then he ran away with some other kid to find drugs." (Vera, 43 years old, health agent, Fortaleza)

Vera, for example, shared with me her dreams in one of the visits to the bedridden patients in her area. Since then, each time we met she shared these dreams with me like a big secret that you only share to close friends. In our visits,



I could also see how she acted upon her dreams and used the same mystery and secrecy with certain people to convince their children to distance themselves from the drug traffic. In the past, her warning dreams have proven correct, so many of her neighbors now saw her dreams as embedded with premonitory potential and therefore important to take into consideration. Such examples are an indication of the resiliency people find when living at the margins of the state and the economy, and even when their lives are being threatened every day. The need to hope and have faith that there is a logic that governs this absurd reality when resources are unreliable, makes people like my friends to creatively make sense of the unpredictable that characterizes their lives. In this way, they become creators of meaning and reinterpret mundane events in a process that we, anthropologists, like to call culture.

If health agents get stuck between the secrets of their patients, and the incapacity to do something about them, something similar could be said about the ethnographer, immobilized in a corner by guilt and pain. The stories people share are often poisoned gifts: they are signs of deep friendship and intimacy but they also leave the listener with the burden of doing something with and for them. Such would be the story of Bianca, a girl I have met when accompanying school teachers in their daily work:

"In the future when I will be old I want to study, get a degree, become a firefighter. I want to see the queen of the Indians, the indigenous people that the Portuguese attacked here. When I will be 25 I want to marry and have a son. I only want to have a son but I want to adopt him....because there are enough babies lying there. One of these days women threw away a baby in the garbage bin, there where I live. My mom picked him up and found a place for him. The woman said 'Thank you'. I think that woman didn't want to have the baby ... but why did she throw it in the bin? I think she had regrets in her little heart. I've never seen that woman again." (Bianca, 8 years old, Fortaleza)

Bianca shared this short reflection, which points to her need to make sense of cruel reality that she is embedded in, by talking out loud. But probably more



surprisingly than that, it was the shock to hear an 8-year-old child talking about violence with the normalcy and maturity of an adult. In her brief story cruelty is normalized but nonetheless not accepted. In a way, this reflection points to the fact that in the midst of all the violence she testifies every day, children like Bianca find – almost out of nowhere- the courage, power and energy to hope and see the future in a bright light. She is both mature and full of hope, which in this context seems like a contradiction or a paradox. The kind of maturity she displays here is, unfortunately, not uncommon among children of their age.

The first day when I started working as a volunteer for a local NGO one of the employees, Camila, an Argentinean woman of my age described in a few words the kind of teenagers I was going to work with: “They seem like all the others you have met so far with a single difference: they don’t have dreams.” In saying this Camila was probably making sense of her own despair towards the local problems and the future of children at the margins of the city. In her imaginary this was the worst thing that could happen to a child: not dreaming, not having hope, not being able to trust the future. But stories like Bianca’s stand as a proof that children at the margin of the city do dare to dream, and this is probably their greatest act of courage and power.

Considering that the problems of Fortaleza are the problems of most (Latin) American cities, and that structural violence is becoming more and more naturalized, anthropologists should reconsider the importance of dreams in such context and the meanings they have for the people who inhabit them. Dreams are no more glimpses of exotic worlds that we won’t have access to otherwise, nor are they remote realities. Instead, dreams mirror the deeply rooted nature of the structural violence and poverty that we become each day more familiar to. If resistance is possible when we decide not to take such reality for granted, and we reject its “normality”, dreams are a constant wakeup call reminding us of the deeply structural dimensions of power and poverty. Moreover, this time it’s also us, anthropologists, who get palpable glimpses of the worlds we are trying to make sense of and we have the moral duty to do something with and about them.



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Introduction: Vernacular Humanitarianisms

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Decentering humanitarianism

This thematic thread aims to contribute to the anthropology of humanitarianism, by focusing on vernacular humanitarianisms - local, grassroots forms of helping



others that are less visible and less dominant than the international ones. Vernacular humanitarianism refers to practices of help that are called humanitarian, although they do not fit with the work of organizations and agencies such as the UNHCR, *Medecins Sans Frontiers*, World Vision, Red Cross (...) or their local partners.

In the past several decades, humanitarianism has become a hub for business (De Lauri 2016) and a powerful industry of aid (Bornstein and Redfield 2011). Anthropologists and historians focused on the large-scale, international humanitarianism, illuminating its entanglements with global politics, international relations, and contemporary forms of power. By “large-scale international humanitarianism” I refer to a particular form of relief that developed since the late 1980s. While historians often look for continuities in the three-centuries-long field of humanitarianism (Barnett 2011, Kind Kovacs 2016), anthropological research suggests that something fairly new started happening in this field towards the end of the twentieth century. Humanitarianism marks a new logic of governance and a new politics of life (Fassin 2012); adhocism, or a rule of randomness (Dunn 2012); an intrusion of compassion into state politics and welfare systems (Ticktin 2011); a new form of mobile sovereignty (Pandolfi 2003), and so forth. Less analytical attention has been dedicated, up to this point, to other enactments of humanitarianism – those that may be more vernacular, grassroots, and grounded in local ethical traditions.

This thread showcases a strand of research that focuses on vernacular enactments of humanitarianism, demonstrating that local voluntary associations (Rozakou 2012, 2016), a single-person’s surgery (Brković 2014, 2016), an orphanage and religious gifts (Bornstein 2012), or even peace reconciliation projects (Weiss 2015) present legitimate instances of humanitarian concern.

In India, co-existence of incompatible ideas about humanitarianism – including unofficial or unregistered aid and religious donations – means that “a tremendous amount of humanitarian activity is off the radar of humanitarian organizations”



(Bornstein 2012: 19). Vernacular humanitarianisms often seem to be off the radar of academic research as well.

The thread on vernacular humanitarianism strives to provincialize the humanitarian tradition (cf. Weiss 2015). “Provincialization” here refers to an analytical move which aims to decentre a particular, dominant imaginary figure, in order to open up room to imagine its alternatives. This famously refers to decentering Europe as the only possible model of a future for societies of political modernity (Chakrabarty 2000).

Provincializing humanitarianism means assuming that there is no single humanitarianism “as such” and that everything people in a particular place call “humanitarian” presents a legitimate instance of humanitarianism.

The thread consists of four pieces on humanitarianism in contemporary US, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in communist Poland and Czechoslovakia. Read together, the four texts highlight several things about humanitarianism.

Multiple histories of humanitarianism

First, the thread reminds the readers of multiple histories that the term “humanitarianism” has had in various places. For instance, several communist countries had developed particular forms of humanitarianism, such as “Marxist humanitarianism” in China, “aimed at ‘safeguarding the dignity and rights of the working class’” (Krebs 2014: 11). Traces of such communist imaginaries and practices of humanitarianism are today largely forgotten. One authoritative history of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) glosses over decades of dedicated work of the Red Cross in socialist countries, suggesting that “most communist governments gave it little or no cooperation during the Cold War, seeing the organization – not entirely incorrectly – as a bourgeois organization of the liberal West” (Forsythe 2005: 53). The same author locates the roots of the ICRC “in Christian charity and the Swiss bourgeois variation of noblesse oblige” (Forsythe 2005: 251) and argues that “only toward the end of the



Cold War did the ICRC manage to carry out significant activities in a communist-controlled area” (Forsythe 2005: 54). Such accounts erase the rich history of humanitarian work that the Red Cross conducted in socialist Yugoslavia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia – to mention just some countries where national Red Cross societies operated in full force. The story of socialist humanitarianism – including the ways in which these Red Cross societies combined socialist and humanitarian principles in their work – is yet to be written (but see Hachmeister 2015 and her contribution to this thread). Unearthing such stories and their contemporary vernacular counterparts may help to decentre imaginaries and practices of the international humanitarianism and to figure out how they continue to shape contemporary practices of giving throughout the world.

Chaos of vernacular humanitarianism

Second, the texts in this thread demonstrate that contemporary grassroots forms of humanitarianism are as chaotic as their large-scale, international counterparts. Large international humanitarian projects today are enacted by many different actors. Their lack of coordination, fuelled by the sense of humanitarian urgency, results in numerous inconsistencies, paradoxes, and ambiguities. A closer look at vernacular expressions of humanitarianism in Greece, the US, and former Yugoslavia indicates that change of scale does not necessarily introduce order and predictability into humanitarian endeavours. Quite the contrary.

Small-scale, everyday forms of helping discussed in this thread are largely compassionate, chaotic, and confusing.

They are fine examples of what Dunn (2012: 2) calls adhocracy, “a form of power that creates chaos and vulnerability as much as it creates order”. Writing about the work of Bloomington Refugee Support Network, a local organization in Indiana, USA, that facilitates resettlement of refugees, Dunn shows that “vernacular humanitarianism is often held hostage to the emotional and social needs of its donors, leaving aid delivery uneven and unstable in both space and time” (contribution to this thread). This vernacular enactment of humanitarianism



offered compassionate responses to systematic problems of refugee resettlement. In doing so, it imploded. Adhocracy seems to be present in many large-scale international humanitarian operations, and in grassroots, local expressions of humanitarianism, although for different reasons.

Local, but universalist

The third point emphasized by this thread is that vernacular forms of humanitarianism are embedded into very particular local frameworks of morality and sociality. Vernacular humanitarianism cannot be fully understood if we do not take into account local ideas on humanness, personhood, and how one ought to behave towards others. This point is highlighted by Rozakou, who writes about culturally and historically specific ideas on how best to help refugees in contemporary Lesvos, Greece. Tracking how “humanitarianism proper” emerged in this context, Rozakou recounts how her interlocutors contrasted professionalism (and presumable disinterestedness) of “humanitarians” to culturally and historically informed actions of “solidarians”, producing various sorts of moral and social distinctions in the process.

Importantly, although vernacular humanitarianisms are grounded into local social worlds, they can also be thoroughly universalist. Grassroots forms of helping may not be able to reach people across the globe, like the large-scale international humanitarian projects do. Yet, their ideological underpinnings may have just as globalist and universalist pretensions. For instance, humanitarian actions in former Yugoslav countries are made possible through a socio-culturally specific notion of “humanness” (*ljudskost*, *čovječnost*, meaning a particular moral stance towards others). This understanding of “humanness” theoretically extends to all members of human race. The fact that humanitarian actions are actually organized for family, neighbours, and friends of friends – people firmly located in their local social communities – does not jeopardize conceptual universality of this vernacular form of humanitarianism.

There are many aspects of large-scale international humanitarian projects and



vernacular instances of humanitarianism that can be compared: from their ideological frameworks to their materialities, procedures, and infrastructures. My contribution to the thread suggests that cultural recognition of those who need help as political subjects with unique histories is important – but not necessarily enough to erase grievances of humanitarianism. Those who depend on humanitarian actions in former Yugoslav countries routinely express a mixture of gratefulness and dissatisfaction – gratefulness for the help, dissatisfaction with the randomness of compassion.

Their grievances reveal that both large-scale and vernacular expressions of humanitarianism often lack openly-discussed, democratically agreed-upon, standards, procedures, and objects – and instead offer ad hoc, immediate, something-is-better-than-nothing solutions.

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