

A SNAPCHAT ESSAY ON MUTUALITY, UTOPIA,
AND NON-INNOCENT CONVERSATIONS

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Objectivity is not about disengagement but about mutual and usually unequal structuring, about taking risks ... We are not in charge of the world. We just live here and try to strike up noninnocent conversations by means of our prosthetic devices, including our visualization technologies. (Haraway 1988: 595-596; 594)

Introduction

This visual essay argues for reciprocity between interlocutors and anthropologist as an underlying premise for obtaining access and qualitative insight into private platforms of social media. I use interaction with interlocutors through the *Snapchat* platform, a photo- and video-messaging application for mobile devices, as my example here. Mutuality is built into Snapchat, making it a poignant example of how the principle of reciprocity applies as much to the online sphere as to any other field site of the anthropologist.

Utopia² to me is an ideal, non-existing place worth striving for, even if it can never be (found): what is meant by such a place or plane of existence for different people is open to interrogation through encounters. The commitment to this openness, to mutuality, is ethical: it is at once utopian and, to paraphrase Donna Haraway (1988: 579), a non-nonsense commitment to situated, partial and faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world that can be partially shared. The smartphone and my video camera were my ‘prosthetic devices’

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² Anthropology teaches us to question our own categories in the encounter with others in the field and to be wary of translating in any straightforward way between concepts, thus flattening the worlds that can be in a word. This goes for *utopia* too, as pointed out by Henry Corbin, who writes: ‘Na-koja-Abad is a strange term. It does not occur in any Persian dictionary, and it was coined, as far as I know, by Sohravardi himself, from the resources of the purest Persian language. Literally...it signifies the city, the country or land (*abad*) of No-where (*Na-koja*). That is why we are here in the presence of a term that, at first sight, may appear to us as the exact equivalent of the term ou-topia, which, for its part, does not occur in the classical Greek dictionaries, and was coined by Thomas More as an abstract noun to designate the absence of any localization, of any given situs in a space that is discoverable and verifiable by the experience of our senses. Etymologically and literally, it would perhaps be exact to translate Na-koja-Abad by outopia, utopia, and yet with regard to the concept, the intention, and the true meaning, I believe that we would be guilty of mistranslation.’ (Corbin 1976: 3).

and my ‘visualization technologies’, as I made use of both classical participant observation and a variety of social media platforms, as well as working with my video camera in the field (Waltorp 2015).

My prior fieldwork in urban areas dubbed ‘ghettos’ in Cape Town, and later in Paris and Copenhagen (Waltorp 2010, Waltorp and Vium 2010), had insistently drawn my attention to the importance of mobile telephones and social media in relation to place-making, belonging, networking and self-representation. In my PhD fieldwork and film-making with young Muslim women in a social housing estate in the Danish capital of Copenhagen, I had set out to explore these themes with a starting point in the affordances of the smartphone for a group of young second-generation immigrant women in Danish society with origins in the Middle East. The women were all born and brought up in Denmark, in a specific local urban setting, but with transnational networks in Arab countries, Iran and Pakistan. The notion of ‘affordance’ is used in the relational sense, rather than as qualities intrinsic to an object: I was interested in the affordances of a built environment with specific groups of inhabitants, at specific historical junctures, as well as the affordances of an object, such as a smartphone, in relation to the person using it (Waltorp, forthcoming). In this sense the project was from the outset not *on* social media, the urban social housing milieu or young Muslim women in Denmark, but situated at the junction of these.

I did not decide which particular social media applications I would be using before embarking on fieldwork, but instead let my interaction with interlocutors lead the process. One of the most frequently used apps among interlocutors is Snapchat. This photo-messaging application allows users to take so-called *snap*s: photos or short videos, onto which they can add text and drawings, and send them to a controlled list of recipients *immediately*. The users of Snapchat so to speak ‘chat’ using ‘snapshots’ from their lives. The snap is automatically deleted after a set time limit of up to ten seconds. You can make a selection of snaps into ‘MyStory’, which all of your contacts can see for a limited time, or you can send snaps individually. The focus is not on editing, filtering and framing things, as with other platforms such as Instagram. As the snap is only seen once, the ephemeral feel *is* the framing³. A snap cannot be saved and sent at a later point in

³ In this essay, I have chosen to be true to this aesthetic in not editing any of the pictures.

time: it is for sharing the fleeting moment you are in with persons you choose. Should the receiver choose to take a screenshot of the snap, and thus save it, the sender will be notified of this.

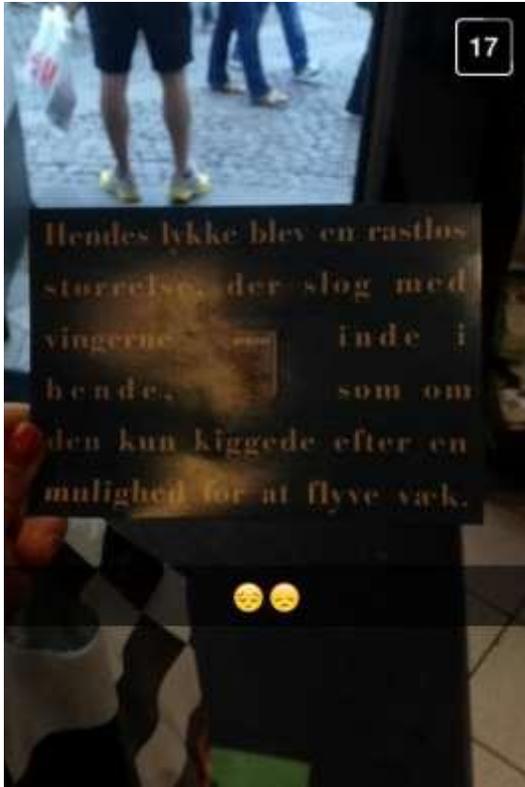
I was allowed by interlocutors to take screenshots of the snaps they sent me, and in that sense I went against the ephemeral nature of the app because of my need to go back to the snaps and analyse them in juxtaposition with other material. I am not able to share here the intimacy of the platform, as the message and its ‘encoding’ and ‘decoding’ in Stuart Hall’s terms (1980) are changed fundamentally when taken out of their initial context and put into an open-access online journal article that can be linked, shared, and the pictures viewed publicly over time (as opposed to appearing in a private online space for up to only ten seconds). It is thus only the snaps of less private situations that I have included in this essay. Not all of my interlocutors wear a hijab or veil, but most of them do. They will not have their hair covered, though, in the privacy of their homes, in the company of other women or men of the immediate family, and it is often in the private sphere of the home that they use Snapchat.

How to communicate intimate and visual aspects without revealing and exposing interlocutors has been a continuous challenge. It has been a ‘creative obstruction’ in that working visually has prompted reflection on representation, as well as on the public imperative and the variously configured and historically contingent understandings of visibility and concealment in (gendered) public and private spaces. The young Muslim women I worked with engage in experimentation with self-representations and the possibilities of identification on a daily basis in various media platforms. They carve out distinct private spaces for themselves within what are otherwise very ‘public’ platforms, which they modify, censor, or make revealing, depending on audience and context (Waltorp 2015). Snapchat works particularly well for this purpose as it can be controlled (or at least feels as though it can). Creative experimentation takes place within the confines of various (opposing) dominant socio-cultural conceptions of ‘the virtuous woman’, ‘the free, modern woman’ etc. (for a critique of these notions and their supposed opposition, see Hirschkind 2006, Mahmood 2004).

If you do not share the fleeting moments in your life with someone on Snapchat, most likely that someone will not share with you. The fact that you can follow someone’s

open profile on Instagram or on Facebook without befriending them might give a sense of having access to someone's life and self-representation, yet these platforms have private functions and spaces for interaction that imply mutuality, and these are not easily accessible. 'Big Data' research and methods building on mining the Internet allows for one kind of insights, yet in-depth ethnographic fieldwork that follows the interlocutors into the digital sphere as an inextricably entangled dimension of social life raises questions of another sort than 'Big Data' does on its own. There is access to interesting information online *without* mutuality, yet it is the multitude of surfaces, self-representations and performances across the digital and physical spheres that I find interesting as an anthropologist, and reciprocity and mutuality are implied in getting at them.

Below, I share *my* selection of a few of the snaps that *we* exchanged, a few snaps out of thousands. As captions I have offered snippets of *our* conversations around the snaps and *my* contextualization or juxtaposition of the snaps with other texts. This is now shared with *you* as an audience, and altered by *your* reading. All of this is enabled through – and invariably shaped by – various technological devices: software and hardware. In this sense it can never only be *my* text, and throughout this essay I ponder what forms mutuality has taken in the work.



'Her happiness became a restless creature, flapping its wings inside her, as if only looking for an opportunity to fly away'.

The first image is a snap of a woman's hand, fingernails painted in light red, holding a postcard. As is typical of a snap, the legs of strangers, who happened to be in front of the window where the snap was taken, can be seen within the frame. The snap is about a mood that is shared, a state of mind that the juxtaposition of the postcard and the emoticons convey.

Waltorp, Snapchat essay

The text on the postcard reads: *'Her happiness became a restless creature, flapping its wings inside her, as if only looking for an opportunity to fly away'*. Two emoticons are on top of the picture, two different 'smiley' faces, both expressing sadness.

The mood and the poem reminded me of another poem recited by an interlocutor of Stefania Pandolfo, and reflected on by her in her monograph *Impasse of the Angels* (1997): On the power of poetry and the imaginary:

'The house of my love is empty. Birds flying in it...I feel oppressed, confined, anguished, exasperated... At the moment of Impasse, then, an overflowing, and a passage to another scene: hâj khâtrî, my mind, thoughts, and desires rise and overflow, like water is moved by the wind. They spill out and depart from my body, from my narrow and confining present, and journey away. They migrate back to my blâd, the land from which I am separated, for the intemporal and atypical journey of a 'saying'. The kelma, the poem, is an impossible return. However much I cry I can't reach: my wings are broken... Yet the broken wings of the body, the powerlessness in the real world, liberates the wings of the imaginary.' (Pandolfo 1997: 268-9)

The second image is a screenshot of a short video-snap: a woman is filmed from behind dancing to the music in the car while driving in a city at nighttime. Driving around is about socializing and having fun. Sending a snap to girlfriends who are not there with you physically in the car is inviting them into the moment and mood with you.

Waltorp, Snapchat essay



The Everyday, the mundane: The text on the first snap above left reads: ‘Fajr (morning prayer). Breakfast. School. Routine’. The text is followed by a smiley having a hard time, and a heart-emoticon. In the picture is a plate with an omelette, hummus, bell peppers and cucumber. A cup of coffee is standing next to the plate on a table. In the background, the television is tuned in to a Danish television show.

The text on the second snap reads ‘Morning Gymnastics’, followed by a happy smiley with a drop of sweat on its forehead. The television is showing a man working out in an exercise program on the national broadcaster Danish Radio (DR).



The text on the first snap reads: ‘Hard work’, with a smiley that looks perplexed or lost for words, followed by ‘but you made it’ and a smiley with hearts as eyes. The picture shows the author in the living room of an interlocutor, having just finished presenting a paper. On the table are my smartphone and video camera, and her laptop, and books. She was studying for an exam, I was working, and her cousin was taking a nap on the couch.

The text on the second snap reads: ‘How did it go, sweetheart?’ referring to the presentation I did on which she had given me feedback. The text is placed in front of her eyes, her face partly covered by smoke from her cigarette. When moving around the local neighbourhood of Nørrebro, none of the women I worked with would ever be caught standing in the middle of the street smoking: instead we would find a quiet courtyard, a hidden corner or a back alley. This was out of respect for one’s parents as it would reflect back upon them should their daughters (or sons) behave badly in public. In this regard, a Snapchat is a private space, defined just for the eyes of the carefully chosen recipient. So it is my indiscretion to show the picture in this essay, though with the permission of the interlocutor in the snap.



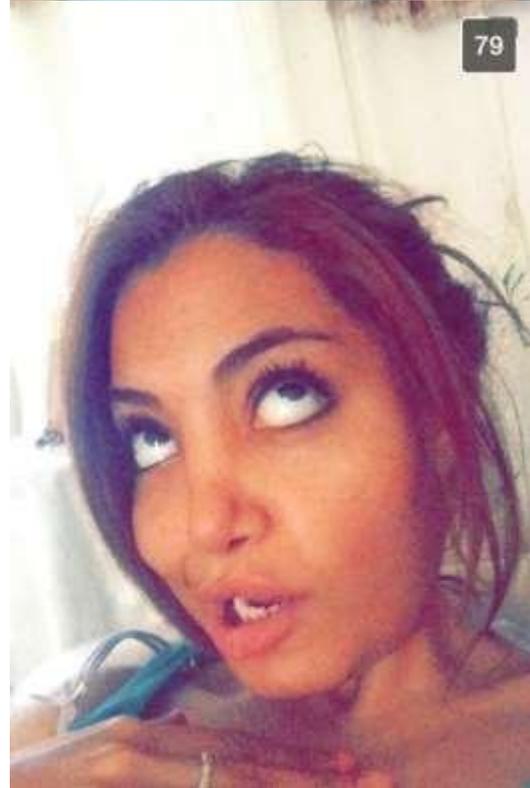
A snap of the Kaaba – the cube-formed building at the centre of Islam's most sacred mosque, Al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. It is the most sacred Muslim site in the world and is here surrounded by pilgrims. The text reads: 'Goodbye Mecca' – emoticons of a waving hand, a sad smiley and a heart – 'on to Madinah' and an emoticon of a bus. Religion is an integral part of the everyday for the majority of my interlocutors. Some go to the mosques in Copenhagen, some pray five times a day, others rarely pray. The Qur'an and the life of the Prophet Muhammad as set forth in the *hadith* provide a set of fundamental guidelines for navigating everyday life. Negotiations with oneself and others regarding how to understand and implement these guidelines in Denmark prompt debates about autonomy, sexuality, modesty and possible futures. These negotiations, I have argued elsewhere (Waltorp 2015), take place in dynamic ways among these young women, including through the use of social media.



An informant of Iranian descent snapped the Arab Idols contestant she was cheering for from her living room in Nørrebro, Copenhagen. The format of Arab Idols is American, the show broadcast by MBC. The former chairman of the right-wing Danish People's Party, Pia Kjærsgård, asked rhetorically in an interview with the daily newspaper *Berlingske Tidende* in 2010: 'Should it really be allowed that, for example, Vollsmose (an area designated a ghetto) is plastered with satellite dishes directed towards the Middle Eastern world? Remove the satellite dishes...it's indoctrination from the Middle Eastern world. Controlling minds...?'

The majority of flats in Nørrebro have satellite dishes, but spending time with the young women inside and outside the home provides a more diverse picture of how the mass media are received by this part of the Danish population and how this overlaps and entwines with other kinds of media use. The young Muslim second-generation immigrant women combine inspiration and influences from different worlds, while their everyday lives are played out in the specific places of Copenhagen. (see Waltorp 2013).

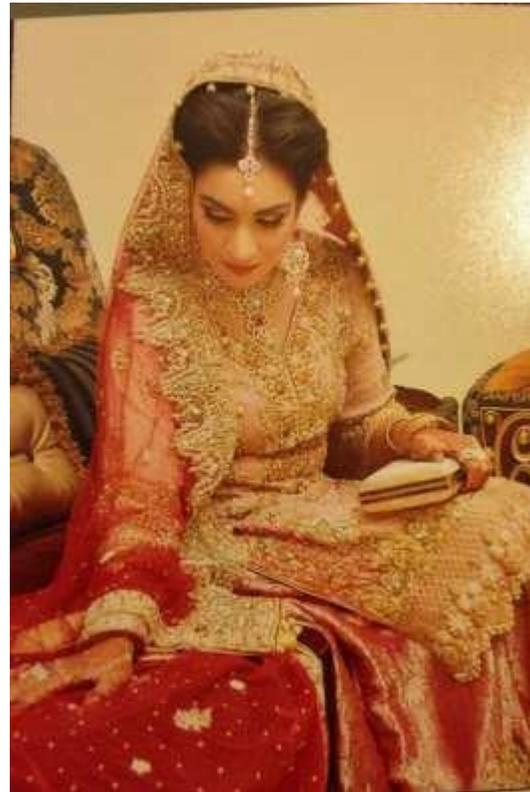
Waltorp, Snapchat essay



Above are four snaps from a longer series of ‘selfies’. So-called selfies (self-portraits made in a reflective object or at arm’s length) are seen by some as frivolous and self-absorbed, by some as a way to assert control, agency and power, and by others as power-ambiguous or even an oppressive reinforcement of consumerist, hetero- and body-normative discourses that create a commodified body (Tiidenberg and Gómez-Cruz 2015: 2, 4). Kathrin Tiidenberg and Edgar Gómez-Cruz point to the tensions between the act of self-shooting, normative assumptions about gender and body image, and the ecology of the images themselves in the practices of looking and being seen (2015). Keeping these aspects in mind, here I juxtapose the selfies above, taken in an apartment in Copenhagen, with the selfie below, taken while we were on the metro in Tehran.



Group selfie on the metro in the ‘women only carriage’ in Tehran.



The weddings I have attended are extravagant, and the women look like movie stars or singers from one of the popular shows, whether U.S. reality shows, Danish shows or Arab/Middle Eastern *musalsalat* (Arab soap operas). One informant, Fatima, of Pakistani descent discussed this essay with me, and we agreed that love and marriage should be represented somehow. The first image above is a picture of her cousin who recently married: she works in a pharmacy in downtown Copenhagen, and the image presents her as a vision of beauty, traditions, histories and new figurations of all of this. Most of the pictures from Arab weddings I cannot share in this essay, as the women have taken off their hijabs and are in festive attire while celebrating only with other women. The second snap above is from one such wedding and shows the ‘thrones’ where the couple will be seated for picture-taking etc. prior to the groom leaving the women’s wedding celebration (along with the fathers and brothers of the bride and groom).



The first snap above is of a dinner table filled with mezes and a text reading: ‘Once again she is cooking food/lunch’ followed by a smiley with heart-eyes.

The second image is of café lattes and hot cocoa in a Copenhagen café: everyday socializing in the house and out of the house. As there is no alcohol involved when the women socialize because of their religious beliefs, it is cafés that are preferred meeting places, never bars or clubs. Dancing and partying is done in private spaces such as the home, the car or at large events such as weddings and engagement parties, where hundreds of women will attend and dance to music played by a DJ all night.



The picture above was taken in the Milad Tower, in Tehran by a professional photographer. The women in the picture are wearing historical costumes. They work, in random sequence, at McDonalds, as a receptionist, as a stay-at-home mom, and as a PhD student (i.e. the author of this essay).

The text on the snap reads: 'Tehran', followed by emoticons of a hand signalling 'excellent', a smiley with heart-eyes, a smiley crying with laughter and a monkey with its hands in front of its eyes (the monkey here signals 'it is embarrassing'. This is the meaning of the monkey emoticon as used by my interlocutors, even though it is in fact one of the 'three wise monkeys', who 'see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil'). The text continues: 'Can I use this picture in an article?'



Two interlocutors broke out in laughter (*flækkede af grin*) at one of them parodying me when I wanted to ‘talk about my project’. She imitated my voice, but in a particularly slow and monotonous way. ‘...then you start talking really “Dane-like”’, she says, directed at me, and turns to her friend, who is also participating in the project: ‘And after half an hour you’ll hear Karen ask: “But did I get it right? Do you see it this way?” And you’ll just affirm, “Eh yeah yeah, and you didn’t understand a word, ha ha ha ha”’.

We are out having a coffee in a café in downtown Copenhagen and talking about what has been happening in our lives since we saw each other last. I have moved to another city, and we do not see each other so often. However, we keep updated via the social media platforms. As I go into the mode of formally talking project and feedback, I apparently become the most boring person to be around. What happens when the encounter turns into the mode of official ‘feedback’, I wonder? Am I to determine the form of the feedback encounter? Whom am I having this conversation with, after all? The

principle I believe in first and foremost in fieldwork is that we should not forget to follow our interlocutors' leads. So where does this lead me? In what shifting registers does mutuality emerge and come to 'count', and for whom? Above is a picture of an interlocutor taking a picture of me in a train carriage that is about to leave Copenhagen, her friend standing next to her laughing. I am taking a picture of my interlocutor as she is taking a picture of me, and my reflection in the window is caught on the picture I am taking. A moment later, I receive the picture she took of me as a snap. Mirror-images, mutuality, morality?

Non-innocent conversations and the anthropologist as trickster

'Our relation with the Other (*autrui*) certainly consists in wanting to comprehend him, but this relation overflows comprehension' (Levinas 1996: 6). Accordingly, ethics comes before the epistemological in our encounter with an Other. I discussed moral and ethics with the women I worked with. In one of our conversations Noor, a close interlocutor, used the word *moralhed* (moralness), which is not in the Danish vocabulary, when she explained to me what she understood by the concept:

Nour 'Moralness is, let me explain it like this: How do I treat you?'

Me 'Ehmmm – Good, good, I think' (not prepared to be quizzed).

Nour 'What do you think of me!'

Me 'Well, I think well of you, I like you!'

Nour 'Yes, I know, I feel that as I get the same thing back from you. Sometimes you don't, I mean...even though you treat people well. But then you know yourself, deep down inside, I know I'm a good person – and Allah knows, he sees everything and keeps score...''

(Excerpt from field notes, April, 2014)

I repeatedly discussed themes and emerging insights with the young women I worked with. Sometimes the feedback process was straightforward and sometimes I was laughed at, as described above; but layers and new understandings were, and are, continually added through this process. I prioritized a dialogical approach grounded in the belief that the communication of knowledge to interlocutors, different audiences and publics should

be a central part of the knowledge production itself. Technology- and media-related activities are inextricably entwined in this, as is the anthropologist, inadvertently or not. The methods we apply in our research do not just describe social realities but are integral to their creation: being a body and knowing go together, and representation and intervention are wilfully bound together (Law 2004; Law 2015:9). Being a body – *with* the prosthetic devices, visualization techniques and other technology we make use of – and *knowing*, go together, what I have elsewhere conceptualized as fieldwork as an interface (Waltorp, forthcoming).



The image above was received as a WhatsApp message (as my Snapchat did not work). It was a reaction to my choice of pictures for this essay, which the two interlocutors in the photo did not find beautiful enough.

It is never ‘non-innocent conversations’ we are having, or non-innocent interventions or representations that we craft. In this light it might be an overstatement, or misrepresentation of our work, to describe our projects as participatory or collaborative, as many anthropologists have done, myself included. A nuanced account or qualification of the work done by interlocutors tracking, tracing and documenting themselves should be pursued. There is a fine line between ‘giving voice to’ and letting people form the representation of themselves on the one hand, and the simple extraction of labour, and thus of surplus value, for the anthropologist wrapped up in correct buzzwords with the prefix ‘co-’ on the other hand.⁴

Rather than inviting people to create data according to our project design, fitted to a certain output while checking boxes of co-creation and co-analysis, mutuality is about the anthropologist doing the uneasy job of learning to become ‘other-wise’ and of straddling worlds. The anthropologist in his or her ‘in-betweenness’ (Stoller 2008) might come to work as a trickster: ‘...during episodes of personal crisis, frustration, attempted integration, incorporation, or absorption into others’ worlds and so on, the anthropologist becomes the trickster, a participatory agent in the context he is studying, and is able to engage in a process of mutual, creative understanding’ (Maskens and Blanes 2013: 261). What effects could this trickster-role imply when the anthropologist is doing fieldwork at home?

Anthropology is always already entwined in power relations, political agendas and public debates, so what role do the personal and political ideals of the anthropologist play in the understanding of fieldwork and its products and effects, as Maïté Maskens and Ruy Blanes asked when they invited me to contribute to this special issue on ‘Mutualizing Utopias’. I continuously grapple with how to avoid political correctness, stereotypes, (mis)understandings and my own fear of playing into the stereotypes blending together. The choice of methods is always also a political choice, as is the choice of knowledge dissemination. It is difficult to wrestle oneself free of ‘scripts’ that are already in place (Rabinow and Marcus 2008).

My project is entwined in political debates about integration, minority-majority relations, ‘ghettos’ and the notions of freedom, gender roles and democracy in Denmark

⁴ See Foster (2007) for a similar argument on value creation within marketing and business.

that I share with my interlocutors. My home city of Copenhagen has changed during fieldwork, having turned into multiple, overlapping cities to me at a time when Denmark has turned into a somewhat dystopian place in terms of the very harsh rhetoric used by several Danish political parties of immigrants and foreigners. Political measures against letting refugees and immigrants into the country (and bringing their families with them) have been implemented. The symbolically potent ‘Migrant Bill’ (L87), whereby valuables are taken from refugees when they arrive at the Danish border (among other measures), has just been approved by Parliament as of 26 January 2016, being passed with 81 Members of Parliament voting in favour, 27 against and one abstention.

As I write this text, Danish citizens are taking to the streets to protest and, paraphrasing Hannah Arendt ((1998 [1958])), letting their voices be heard in the (semi)public spaces of social media. Others agree with those politicians who perceive the integration of people from the Middle East as utopian. Among them is the MP for the Danish People’s Party, Kenneth Kristensen Berth, who stated, ‘We know, *as a fact*, it’s impossible to integrate these people’ (*The world right now with Hala Gorani*, CNN London, 26 January 2016).⁵ The stakes are high: how can one write in a climate where it seems that everything you write about your interlocutors can and will be used against them?

Taking responsibility and committing ourselves to be accountable for the representations and projects we pursue might begin by speaking of our research projects as *overlapping* with others’ projects, and being more open to those occasions when they do not overlap and the mutuality is absent. Anthropologists should be alert to the oscillations between different modes of working together, alongside and adjacently, as well as alone. Following George Marcus, our purposes are bound to differ from those of our counterparts, yet generative relationships in fieldwork are predicated on mutual usefulness – on stakes and mutual appropriations for different purposes (Rabinow and Marcus 2008: 66). If we are lucky, the knowledge we create, taking the encounter with the Other as starting point, overflows both comprehension and collaboration.

⁵ This interview was posted in full on Hala Gorani’s professional Facebook page on 26 January (<https://www.facebook.com/halagoraniCNN/?fref=ts>).

In 1942 Margaret Mead urged anthropologists to forget the Western script that deals in only *means* and *ends*: instead she suggested we should be:

...including the social scientist *within* his experimental material, and...recognizing that by working towards defined *ends* we commit ourselves to the manipulation of persons, and therefore to the negation of democracy. Only by working in terms of values which are limited to defining a *direction* is it possible for us to use scientific methods in the control of the process without the negation of the moral autonomy of the human spirit. (Mead 1942, cited in Bateson 2000 [1972]: 160)

I view this as a very relevant piece of advice: daring to let go of our own scripts, our 'means and end-thinking', and rigorously including ourselves within our experimental material. This is a utopian ideal, or rather a utopian *direction* worth pursuing in the 'real' world(s) we partially share, even if we cannot know where we are headed beforehand. Where we are headed cannot be foreclosed, which makes of the anthropologist more of a trickster than an activist, a trickster accountable and committed to both openness and mutuality in the encounter with others.

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