COMMONING ETHNOGRAPHY

On Reflexivity in Ethnographic Practice and Knowledge Production
Thoughts from the Arab Region

Ethnography and Knowledge Collective[1]

ABSTRACT | Deployed as much during fieldwork as in writing, reflexivity is itself positioned, its saliency as an epistemological device having transformed over time and space. Re-tracing its initial absence, subsequent rise in popularity and eventual routinization in academia, we position ourselves against reflexivity's near-total displacement today by a narrow and increasingly prevalent understanding of positionality. We argue for a return to a broader and more relational understanding of reflexivity, proposing a methodological program to achieve and maintain its critical, ethical and political edge. Our aim is to engage in conversation about the value of reflexivity as an iterative and collaborative ethnographic endeavour with potential to produce more relational and engaged knowledge about increasingly overbearing field-sites in the Arab region and beyond.

Keywords: Reflexivity; Ethnography; Knowledge; Collaboration; Arab Region.

A Prelude Vignette of our Fragmented World

The world has radically changed since we last came together as a collective to discuss ethnographic collaboration as a form of praxis. In Lebanon, the Revolution of October 2019 saw the mass uprising of people protesting and challenging the legitimacy of a corrupt and exploitative oligarchy, making many of us hopeful of long-awaited change. The COVID pandemic atomized us. Protests we planned for were postponed. We became preoccupied with our health and well-being and that of our families and friends. The Beirut port explosion on August 4, 2020 shattered our capital, suspending all of our activities. The event left some of us broken and shocked, frozen in our places. All the while, a severe economic crisis where hyperinflation drastically depreciated the value of the Lebanese pound led to medical and fuel shortages and even more severe power outages than already existed for decades. Getting by was becoming increasingly impossible for most people.

It has been two years since our last retreat in the Lebanese mountain town of Ehden, where we met to conceptualize and start co-writing the first draft of this essay. When, in August 2021, we started preparing for departure from Beirut to another mountain town of Tannourine, two of our members had already left Lebanon, a third had recently travelled, and a fourth was preparing to emigrate the following month. It felt like quite the feat to be planning the retreat that would see this essay finished. However, that summer was a rare moment when most of us were back in Lebanon. Still, two of our members had doubts about making the trip up the mountain. They felt unsure about whether we should even hold the retreat at all. They wondered if it would be egocentric to resume our collective writing as planned in the midst of chaos. After all, a weekend away engaging in theoretical and intellectual discussions on reflexivity appeared like a luxury that we were not entitled to at a time when the country was collapsing. There were many practical challenges too. How would we be able to reach our retreat destination outside the capital with most taxi services on standstill? What if we could not find a hotel reservation given how many people were seeking get-away from electricity blackouts in the cities? What if we found a reservation but the hotel suddenly lost electricity? What if we found transportation but the roads were blocked by protests – as they periodically have been since 2019? What if we found a booking and transportation there, but got stuck and could not return home afterwards to our children and families? And, do we take PCR tests ahead of our retreat, to protect ourselves and frail parents back home?

Other group members, however, felt that precisely because conditions are so harsh and uncertain, it is important for us to meet in order to protect and nurture some continuity in our work as a collective. Many anticipated that our collective would become even more scattered across the diaspora in the coming years. If we didn't meet then – albeit with one attending virtually by way of haphazard internet – who knew when we would be able to meet again? We all felt burnt-out and uncertain how – if at all – we would be able to engage in collective writing on this essay. Nevertheless, we all agreed that it was crucial we met both for the continuity of our collective and for our personal well-being. We longed for each other's moral and intellectual support.

We decided to meet despite all the risks, cobbling together a reservation, round-trip, and the enthusiasm to be together. On August 15, the morning of our meeting, a fuel tanker exploded in a village in the impoverished Northern region

of Akkar, killing over 35 and injuring over 80 people who were waiting for their gasoline shares. With our shock, sadness, and despair in tow, we made our way to a hotel on a river bank nestled into a forested valley in Tannourine. There, we were greeted by the equally shaken mood of the hotel's remaining employees. Settling in as much as possible, we delved into our retreat's agenda: personal updates, professional updates, essay writing, collective's plans, and future vision. As we tuned gradually into the theme of our paper, reflexivity, we found ourselves compelled to perform the scholarly position we were trying to elaborate in our paper. We asked ourselves, beyond how the accumulated and current events have affected our personal material, emotional and hence intellectual experiences, what is our role as researchers in these turbulent times? How are we implicated, not just as individual ethnographers, but as an aspiring collectivity, in producing engaged and relevant knowledge about our field? The essay below is an attempt to think collectively on these matters.

Re-harnessing Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a conscious process that defines the researcher's relationship to ethnographic fieldwork and has the potential to harness a phenomenological and affective experience in and of the field (Behar 2012:20). Yet reflexive accounts in anthropology have often restricted the process of reflexivity to the researcher's self-awareness and her own identity categories as the primary analytical lens for generating knowledge.[2] The reflexive experience, however, encompasses multiple dimensions of reckoning with and representing the field, which exceed considerations of social positioning.

Reflexivity as an ethnographic practice and an epistemological device, deployed during fieldwork as in writing, is itself positioned, having transformed over time and space. Re-tracing its initial absence, subsequent rise in popularity, and eventual routinization in academia, we join others in challenging the near-total displacement today of reflexivity by a narrow, identity-based, and increasingly popular understanding of positionality (Adams 2003; Myerhoff and Ruby 1982; Nagar 2014), that forecloses a wider scope of interpretation (Lichterman 2017; Robertson 2002). We then discuss the broader and more relational understanding of reflexivity that we feel academia needs instead, before proposing to hone in on the methodological craft of ethnography as a way to achieve and maintain reflexivity's critical, ethical, and political edge. Our aim is to further the conversation about the value of reflexivity as an iterative and collaborative endeavour with potential to produce more relevant and engaged ethnographic knowledge about increasingly troubled fields, in the Arab region and perhaps beyond.

Re-positioning Reflexivity in Ethnographic Practice and Knowledge

Reflexivity is typically used in social anthropology as a subjective entry point into ethnographic knowledge (Clifford and Marcus 1986). It is a mirroring process through which a deeper understanding of the researchers and their subjects is accomplished (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982). The act of reflecting is an essential part of anthropological praxis as it is used to examine problems encountered in the field, to study the so-called natives' own reflexive actions and the discipline itself (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982). A concept that links theory to praxis, reflexivity highlights certain politics of difference between the researcher's social conditions

and identity and that of her interlocutors, framing the possibilities and limitations of knowledge (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982). The reflexive account of the ethnographer is often a source of important data that is conducive to defining in more vigorous terms, the conditions and nature of fieldwork itself, such as social relation (Bourdieu 1999) or academic predisposition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Reflexivity's emergent role in the social sciences, and more specifically in anthropology around the 1980s, was vital from the perspective of racial, feminist, and postcolonial struggles (see Altorki and El-Solh 1988). It called into question the neutral value of knowledge claims made predominantly by middle-class white men from colonising states and privileged social groups, about the social reality of marginalised and underprivileged people, groups, cultures. or nations (Behar and Gordon 1996). It foregrounded knowledge as only ever situated, held by embodied and partial perspectives (Haraway 1988). More generally, it revealed how imbalanced power relations of class, gender, race, and nationality – and the restricted mobilities these entail – are embedded in the process of knowledge production and eventually in the formation of public discourse where they become normative. In asking whose narrative of reality gets legitimized as the truth and why, reflexivity took on the emancipatory role of making other truths visible and enabling a critique of judgmental and demeaning depictions of the other, be these intentional or not (Okely 1992). In such instances, we see reflexivity as a useful means to an end, not as an end in itself. It is a research tool that allows us to examine and contrast our own responses and impressions of the field with interlocutors' own experiences and interpretations of it.

Three decades ago, reflexivity was marginal to social sciences in the Arab region and the knowledge it produced (Morsy et al. 1991). Yet recent ethnographic scholarship has grappled with it in more nuanced and productive ways. These include critiquing multi-sited ethnography within migration and mobility (Hage 2005), researching protracted conflict as lived-in violence versus as eventful encounters (Al-Masri 2017; Hermez 2017; Moghnieh 2017) and recognising the concerns of over-research (Sukarieh and Tannock 2012). Others include ethnographic reflections in comparative Indigenous studies (Eqeiq 2017), analyses of the positionality of researchers within the global academic workforce and the political economy of overseas academic research (Sukarieh and Tannock 2019), and scholarship that grapples with political emotions in times of crisis (Hage 2010; Yousfi and Abdallah 2020), particularly with fear (Chiti and Abaza 2017; Nassif 2017). They have been joined by a call for 'political reflexivity' when researching violent contexts (Abdelnour and Abu Moghli 2021). In our own work, we challenge reflexivity's narrow focus on the gender and national positioning of the researcher, which we and many of our peers have been routinely trained to practice. In a special journal issue we published, we sought to nurture new paradigms of reflexive labour and attention that have the potential to yield knowledge, which is more relevant to current political, economic, and social crises in our region (Kanafani and Sawaf 2017).

The racialized, feminist, and postcolonial struggles of the 1980s are far from won and still strongly felt in various ways across many regions of the world, ours notwithstanding. Some have even noted the growing wholesale rejection of reflexivity within rising reactionary politics today (Hage 2019). This is well-served not only by its conflation with 'positionality' and the latter's focus on identity politics rather than the intersection of those identities with broader institutional, geopolitical, ethical, and epistemological facets (Nagar 2014). It is

also served by the lofty scepticism over reflexivity's role in making the politics of knowledge production recognisable and the seeming blind-spot over the ethical importance of such recognition (Salzman 2002).

Within the global precarisation of academic labour today, anthropologists everywhere are struggling more and more to produce relevant and engaged knowledge.[3] In the Arab region, there is a growing concern that academic social science research is marginal to preoccupations in both the wider society and critical scholarship (Hanafi and Arvanitis 2016). First, the post-independence welfarism of the developmentalist state and its nation-building projects have largely failed in our region, paving the way for the rise of the neoliberal state (Elyachar 2005; Ismail 2006:200; Obeid 2015). Liberation struggles have come home to target regimes that are unable to provide a decent and dignified life for their citizens, unfurling internal conflict, strife, and mass displacement. Second, a growing number of anthropologists in the Arab region do not have institutional affiliation, as there is a scarcity of social science research centres in the region's academic universities, and anthropology does not exceed two percent of the current social science faculties (a number that is decreasing) (Bamyeh 2015). There is also a growing gap between intellectual and academic knowledge production and societies' struggles. Many scholars who are dissatisfied with academic institutions are still seeking knowledge – particularly in social sciences – through alternative tracks.[4] The potential for a more engaged role for the social sciences can be seen in the interest in anthropology during the Egyptian revolution (Rouchdy and Saad 2018) and the many academic discussions and teaching in the protest squares in Lebanon in 2019 (Al-Masri 2022; Kosmatopoulos 2021; Mouawad 2021).

Elsewhere, we note that the precarisation of academia in the region is further compounded by 'overbearing conditions', defined as 'impinging on the lifeworlds we research and on the methods we devise to comprehend them' (Kanafani and Sawaf 2017: 7). These conditions do not just restrict fieldwork, they shape productive sites of knowledge and offer the foundations for more critical and innovative approaches to the study of violence, gendered spatial mobility, and state authoritarianism, while mobilizing local and gendered reciprocities and writer's block and fear toward understanding the field (Kanafani and Sawaf 2017). Here we want to further emphasise that atomised and individualised research is less productive epistemologically speaking, and even economically untenable, for ethnographers working under similar overbearing conditions. By extension, reflexivity continues to be practiced today as a solo affair. It is important to note here that the Malinowskian style of solo-ethnographer only came about through particular historical circumstances. The long-held rites of passage where fieldwork is carried out as an individual affair must thus be further situated into the political context of the time (see for example Stocking 1992). Critical reflection is urgently needed to understand the political consequences of this historical shift toward solo-ethnography. With this in mind, we ask: What happens to ethnographic research if reflexivity moves beyond individually-centred considerations? What alternative ways are there of doing – and making/creating – ethnography, which can best meet the epistemological and ethical concerns of our overbearing times?

Our proposition here is that deploying the relational qualities of reflexivity contains this potential. This approach to reflexivity in itself is not new. Scholars and anthropologists have long addressed the inter-relational essence of reflexivity,

comparing it to a 'permanent ethno-dialogue' and to entering a 'hall of mirrors', where both anthropologists and natives transform and change their attitudes towards themselves and each other (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982). Furthermore, scholars have pointed out the importance of acknowledging the many ways of being reflexive in various cultural and social contexts (Adams 2003). Nagar (2014) stresses the need to rethink both reflexivity and positionality, away from an obligation on the researcher to 'reveal' herself, using the same set of categories that they – and feminist scholarship more broadly – seek to challenge. We propose a return to reflexivity as a process that is not just inward-looking, but also an intersubjective and unfolding engagement (Scholte 1972), a process of critical reflection on the research and not merely a post-fieldwork exercise (Nagar 2014), with temporal commitment that extends both to the past and the future (Fabian 2014), and as a process of identifying and relating to multiple standpoints in the field. Reflexivity in social interaction, therefore, becomes the capacity of researchers and interlocutors to posit each other and become conscious of themselves as situated subjects. From this perspective, it no longer becomes about a relationship between a 'foreign' researcher and her native informants nor that of a 'native/indigenous' researcher returning to do research in her field. Rather, we are suggesting to popularise a form of reflexivity that calls for sensitivity to the way ethnographic knowledge is 'co-produced', requiring continuous negotiation with the world at large, which recognises and articulates partiality as the condition for making knowledge claims (Haraway 1988). Entering into dialogue with Harawayian situated knowledge, we consider reflexivity to be a relational process that works across and through time and space. That is to say, the type of reflexive knowledge brought to the fore is not focused on proving truths, based on essentialist identity categories nor on abandoning knowledge production altogether. Rather, we are concerned with examining and shedding light on the kinds of tensions and harmonies that surface during different encounters.

In this way, reflexivity is not just conducive to situated knowledge but also gives rise to 'situated solidarity' (Nagar 2014), which entails evoking 'the global in relation to the intimate' and recognizing the implications of a researcher's geographic location and sites of research, the institutions from which knowledge is produced, and their theoretical and ideological space (Nagar 2014: 88). Indeed, the feminist praxis of reflexive activism and collective analysis have furthered solidarity among women themselves (Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006). Thus, reflexivity calls for an engaged mode of research-making, namely being attentive to the ethical and political significance of the multiple points of view that get created as data, in a 'responsible relation to land, to history, and to each other' (Simpson 2020: 689). The overbearing conditions that researchers face become not only challenges for access or achieving insider status, but tools through which to understand and read the field in which they are situated (Yousfi and Abdallah 2020). We believe that reflexivity in and of the Arab region offers new ways to rethink the dual modality of fieldwork/post-fieldwork and how this affects knowledge production.

Ethnographic Craft: Empirical Vigilance, Epistemological Rigor, and Collaboration

Having stated our position towards the transformations in the premise and promise of reflexivity, we propose here to develop ethnography's methodological craft (the *how* of ethnographic research) to reinforce reflexivity's relational vitality and

processual forms of reflexivity that we value. Going beyond individual researchers' assessment of their position and identity in the field, we rethink the modes and conditions of ethnographic knowledge production more comprehensively to inform our fieldwork practice. Reflexivity predicates a critical and intersubjective engagement in all the bottom-up levels of research, starting from research design through ethnographic fieldwork and on to writing. This sort of engagement should ideally start at the beginning and continue into the multiple stages of ethnographic research-making, rather than *post facto* when data has become cast as textual knowledge (Nagar 2014), having been milled through the conventions of academic literature and publication, and possibly also inscribed within established theoretical norms or trends. The following assemblage of methodological principles and procedures aspire to retool the ethnographic method in critical and engaging ways, enabling learning by reflecting (on) the relationships we build and the conversations we have in our field-sites and scholarly fields.

Since fieldwork is at the core of ethnography, practicing reflexivity starts with the ways in which we do field research, with our ethnographic craft and with the link between empirical vigilance and epistemological rigor. We invite a sharpening of our methodological and epistemological tools to better capture how research participants make sense of the realities they live, and call for more scrutiny of the links between the claims we make and evidence from the field. By evidence here we are not discussing 'positive evidence' or 'objective', 'factual' or 'replicable' evidence (Hastrup 2004) as natural sciences or quantitative research aspires. Rather, it is the effort to 'get it right' by 'being true to the world under study and to the epistemological premises of anthropology' (Hastrup 2004: 469); by rendering our accounts of others – and of our own lived experiences as native anthropologists – 'more faithful to the realities of the field' (Stoller 1989: 9). Thinking about ethnography as a craft helps us not only value the various tools this methodology offers us, but also provides insights into how through our skills as researchers we can hone these methods to better capture the essence of what our field offers us and account for the obstacles and doubts in our positional perspectives. This includes continuously checking and improving basic research skills like observing, listening, interviewing, and note taking, as well as expanding our attention to include sensory registers and digital domains.

Yet the craft of anthropology is not merely skilful 'data collection' but rather the 'production of knowledge through being and action' (Shah 2017: 48) or 'data production' where ethnographic subjects are constructed by researchers through their decisions and theoretical point of view (Jensen and Auyero 2019: 73). Our ethnography might be affected not only by our positional biases, but by our intellectual biases too. To overcome intellectual bias, Jensen and Auyero (2019) call for 'analytical reflexivity' and 'epistemological vigilance'. It is accepting fieldwork's invitation to 'question our fundamental assumptions and pre-existing theories about the world, … to discover new ways of thinking about, seeing, and acting in the world' (Shah 2017: 47). Scrutinising the ways in which our understanding has been and continues to be disciplined by our normative and theoretical perspectives, asks that we are aware of the intellectual traditions – often laden with colonial baggage – on which we base our work. A relational reflexivity has the ability to produce dialogical theory that converses with more than one scholarly tradition and with an eye for reassessing the very priorities of theory-

building. We seek a questioning of the kinds of theories we adopt, use, and propagate when generating knowledge in and about the field, and an expansion and deepening of our social science canon and heritage. In line with global calls and efforts to decolonize social sciences (Mignolo 2009) and reassess its dominant assumptions (Englund and Leach 2000), we recognize the claims of Indigenous feminist critique in refusing for their fields to be a 'site through which the claims of theory "transit", hollowing out the inherited burdens of past, material concerns of present and worry for the future of dominated and marginalized peoples' (Simpson 2020: 693). Such critique questions, for instance, the all-encompassing relevance of class-based solidarity over contexts where land-based solidarities, involving human/non-human and Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations of practice and shared knowledge make up everyday existence (Coulthard and Simpson 2016). Such decolonisation goes beyond the displacement of the 'foreign' ethnographer by the seemingly more credible auto-ethnographer, but entails 'a long-term process involving the cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial parameters' that reproduce inequality in depictions and daily life (Smith 1999: 98). The epistemological rigor that gives value to empirical experience requires ensuring that our assumptions and learning from the field are continuously interrogated through our field relationships, and that the conclusions we draw are subject to the appraisal and objection of our interlocutors (Mosse 2006). It also asks that we give more space for, and collaborate with, voices outside of the mainstream academic or European and North American traditions (Kennedy 1991), and rediscover other 'theoretical ancestors', including those of female writers, and intellectual or academic production mostly published in local languages. This could necessitate liaising and forging partnerships with research communities across national and regional contexts that deal with comparable ethnographic themes and concerns. It also entails giving more value to non-academic forms of knowledge production including oral traditions, literature, memoirs, and autobiographies, in addition to the arts and digital media. Such sources are of considerable value given the scarcity of ethnographies from the Arab region and can help balance the writing about the region with more self-reflexive voices from within it.

The past four decades have seen institutions of higher education increasingly governed as corporate enterprises, fostering hard competition over teamwork within the scholarly community, and naturalising the liberal model of the atomized individual researcher/subject (Gottlieb 1995; Shore and Wright 2015). Troubled by these effects, we seek to explore more collaborative ways of producing knowledge (Nagar 2014) that open the reflexive gesture to a wider set of subjects at various stages of ethnographic research.

Based partially on our own experiences, we envisage various ways of collaborating. For example, in the 'ethnographic diaries project', we invited Lebanon-based researchers to collectively document everyday life in the country that experienced immense changes, plunged into an acute economic crisis and political upheaval, and continues to endure the aftermath of a massive explosion that destroyed half of its capital city. Twelve researchers wrote weekly diaries of their everyday lives and observations in the cities they lived in, with the aim of privileging the 'living in' perspective of the field as opposed to time-bound encounters of it. Writers read each other's weekly entries, met regularly, and experimented with various forms of collaborative writing. Themes that described

the personal and intimate – yet widely shared – experiences emerged. Together they wrote about the temporality of the collapse they lived through, questions of place, belonging and immigration, and the survival and resistance strategies they practiced. The result was an intricate textual tapestry of an ailing country woven together by the self-reflexive words of women and men, young and not so young, Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian writers (Al-Masri and Obeid 2021). The researchers who were involved in this project wrote for themselves, for each other, and for their friends and loved ones in Lebanon with the hope of comprehending the calamity they were living through. They also wrote together as ethnographers who were aware that this moment needed to be captured, and taking on the responsibility as clerks of the record, to make their knowledge of those times available for a research community that had no access to the field at that time due to Covid 19 lockdown.

Meanwhile, during her extended fieldwork since 2014, one of the authors, Samar Kanafani, became both member and in-house ethnographer in Mansion, the Beirut-based collective of artists, activists, and academics. Established in a large rundown borrowed villa, Mansion was restored without funding and without any formal rights to its property, only through a collective commitment to dwell together and open up the space to the public amid rampant spatial privatization. Seeking to understand the conditions that made Mansion possible and the ethos by which it ran, she involved fellow 'Mansioners' in the process of her ethnographic fieldwork and writing. She presented early versions during formal and casual feedback sessions, consulted with them individually and in groups, and shared drafts of the paper for review with them. Conversations she raised in conjunction with other Mansioners began by dealing with the expected behaviour and effects of space sharing, and speculations about why and for how long the villa's owner would lend his property. These gave rise to the concept of precarity as a peculiar opportunity for commoning, which began crystalizing both in Samar's material experiences of the place and her descriptions and interpretations about it in the final paper. Emerging iteratively from the author's enmeshed vantage point, such conceptualisation evolved from the supportive and self-reflexive environment that Mansion aspires to be, where not only material and affective, but also epistemological resources can be refracted and shared (Kanafani 2021).

Another author, Elizabeth Saleh, explored another modality of collaboration by way of inviting an historian, Adrien Zakar, to join her on visits to a small Beirut scrapyard where she was conducting ethnographic fieldwork with underage Syrian waste pickers. She first discussed the possibility of his participation with scrapyard interlocutors. With their permission, he was allowed to make several calls with her. Following these outings, they discussed their experiences, some of which culminated in a short piece focusing on the issues of play and irony (Saleh and Zakar 2018). This sort of collaboration, which was to some degree a spontaneous one, necessitated a process of relational reflexivity involving extensive consideration of topics ranging from gender and the ethics of different epistemological frameworks. Whereas she was trained and had conducted ethnographic study for well over a decade, he was in training to be a historian. Nevertheless, the two managed to find points of imbrication in the ethical foundations of their respective disciplines. These entry points especially came to the fore when we arrived at our stage of co-writing. For instance, at a

conceptual level, there was some debate pertaining to the politics of ethnographic present and that led to broader questions pertaining to (a) how one should write history and (b) what kind of history-writing is ethnographic writing? These questions were eventually posed by the author to her interlocutors who shared their perspectives of history narration that were entangled with ideas such as those pertaining to home, displacement, rurality, and nomadism. As such, collaboration has the potential to unexpectedly open up new avenues of research – and most importantly, it can allow for the forging of new sorts of encounters in the field and beyond. The value of these encounters is only really made apparent through different intersecting processes of relational reflexivity.

In addition to encouraging dialogical theorising, which considers the relevance of a wider geography of intellectual traditions, we propose putting collaboration in the service of a more humane and egalitarian work ethic and environment within academic institutions themselves. In one iteration, collaboration could entail conducting ethnographic fieldwork through collectives and affiliations of different researchers and their networks (Kennedy 1995). The collective journey of the Sangtin Writers is an example of compelling feminist praxis and solidarity (Sangtin Writers and Nagar 2006). In another context, and in conjunction with soliciting interlocutors' feedback on research outcomes, it involves sharing data with fellow researchers early on in the inquiry. Such an approach would neces-sitate making data available and open for debate through accessible platforms and languages. It also means attending to the political and ethical consequences of sharing the process of data analysis, serving to extend in both space and time the research community's ethical responsibility toward entities in the field and to representing them in ways that do justice to the overbearing conditions they exist in.

With these purposeful methodological strategies, which we are seeking to develop and implement together in our own ethnographic research, we aspire to strengthen solidarity within and beyond the academic milieu, while also making the ethnographic practice and the knowledge it generates more situated and engaged.

Rethinking Reflexivity

In this paper, we re-examined the trajectory and role of reflexivity to explore its potential in maintaining the critical and ethical edge of ethnographic knowledge production. Our incentive comes from the aspiration to change ourselves and our roles as academics and in so doing to rethink and reshape the conversation on how we produce knowledge in this moment. We started by unpacking reflexivity that centres on positionality. Then, we discussed the epistemological and ethical values of maintaining a relational reflexivity. Finally, we suggested a return to ethnography as a set of methodological approaches and procedures that amplify reflexivity's relational potentials and, we argue, its ethical and political engagement and pertinence to both our field-sites and disciplinary fields.

We contend that reflexivity achieves its potential through attention to particular crafts and principles available to ethnography, including empirical vigilance, epistemological rigor, and collaboration. While empirical vigilance implies the honing of the researcher's fieldwork skills, epistemological rigor entails scrutinising the theoretical norms and traditions underpinning our analyses and understandings of the realities we study. These are well served by

ethnographic collaboration, understood here as a methodological intersubjectivity by establishing and maintaining an open, dialogic, and consultative relationship with fellow researchers and interlocutors. The kind of social and political engagements we envisage amount to integrating and consolidating a research community around the knowledge-making process, and actively practicing our crafts from the inception of any research project. This is critical throughout, from research design, conceptualisation, data collection, writing, and beyond, to feedback from the field, including possible objections to representation and ethnographic depiction that can occur as the distance between 'field and desk' narrows (Mosse 2006), both before publication or after.

In its various potential forms and practices, and in contrast to identity-based and didactic approaches to reflexive knowledge making, the reflexivity we propose here is a continuous co-production of knowledge through the kinds of encounters that while often spontaneous, are ethically attentive and unfolding through the social and political engagements of the field.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. This paper was written collectively by six authors: Muzna Al-Masri, Samar Kanafani, Lamia Moghnieh, Helena Nassif, Elizabeth Saleh, and Zina Sawaf. The sequence of authors is random and is not indicative of the amount of effort and input that went into accomplishing this paper. The content speaks for all of us.

2. For example, students of anthropology and scholars of other social science disciplines such as political science continue to grapple with, or feel the need to respond to, their gender position, particularly when conducting ethnographic field research in the Arab region (Evans 2017; Schwedler 2006).

3. See for example the conference of the EASA Applied Anthropology Network (AAN), 'Why The World Needs Anthropologists' organized annually since 2013.

4. See for example the 'Cairo Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences' (CILAS), and the Alternative Academy – JIBAL in Lebanon. Both organizations provide academic level teaching in a non-academic context and without providing academic certification to learners.

References Cited

Abdelnour, Samer, and Mai Abu Moghli
      2021. Researching violent contexts: A call for political reflexivity. *Organization* Online First: 1–24.

Adams, Matthew
      2003. The reflexive self and culture: a critique. *The British Journal of Sociology* 54(2): 221–238.

Al-Masri, Muzna
      2017. Sensory reverberations: rethinking the temporal and experiential boundaries of war ethnography. *Contemporary Levant* 2(1): 37–48.

      2022. Witnessing the Emergence of Future Worlds: Ethnographic Research in Turbulent Times. In *World Humanities Report*, Arab Region Section.

Al-Masri, Muzna, and Michelle Obeid
      2021. Ethnographic Diaries: Capturing the Everyday in Crisis. *Rusted Radishes: Beirut Literary and Art Journal*. www.rustedradishes.com

Altorki, Soraya, and Camilia Fawzi El-Solh (editors)
      1988. *Arab Women in the Field: Studying Your Own Society*. Contemporary Issues in the Middle East. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press.

Bamyeh, Mohammed
      2015. *Social Sciences in the Arab World: Forms of Presence*. Beirut: Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

Behar, Ruth
      2012. *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Behar, Ruth, and Deborah A. Gordon (editors)
      1996. *Women Writing Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre
      1999. Understanding. In *The weight of the world: Social suffering in contemporary society*, edited by Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Accardo, 607–626. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc J. D. Wacquant
      1992. *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Chiti, Elena, and Mona Abaza
    2017. The criminal, the victim, the policeman, the judge.
        openDemocracy. https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-
        west-asia/criminal-victim-policeman-judge/, accessed August 28,
        2020.

Clifford, James, and George E. Marcus (editors)
    1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*.
        Berkeley: University of California Press.

Coulthard, Glen, and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson
    2016. Grounded Normativity/Place-Based Solidarity. *American
        Quarterly* 68(2): 249–255.

Elyachar, Julia
    2005. *Markets of dispossession: NGOs, economic development, and the
        state in Cairo*. Politics, history, and culture. Durham: Duke
        University Press.

Englund, Harri, and James Leach
    2000. Ethnography and the Meta-Narratives of Modernity. *Current
        Anthropology* 41(2): 225–248.

Eqeiq, Amal
    2017. From Palestine to Mexico (and back): Reflections of a literary
        scholar. *Contemporary Levant* 2(1): 61–66.

Evans, Anya
    2017. The ethnographer's body is gendered. *The New Ethnographer*.
        https://www.thenewethnographer.org/the-new-
        ethnographer/2017/02/14/gendered-bodies-2, accessed May 11,
        2020.

Fabian, Johannes
    2014. Ethnography and intersubjectivity: Loose ends. *HAU: Journal of
        Ethnographic Theory* 4(1):199–209.

Gottlieb, Alma
    1995. Beyond the Lonely Anthropologist: Collaboration in Research and
        Writing. *American Anthropologist* 97(1): 21–26.

Hage, Ghassan
    2005. A not so multi-sited ethnography of a not so imagined community.
        Anthropological Theory 5(4): 463–475.

    2010. Hating Israel in the field: On ethnography and political emotions in
        Emotions in the Field: The Psychology and Anthropology of
        Fieldwork Experience. In *Emotions in the field: The psychology
        and anthropology of fieldwork experience*, edited by James Davies

and Dimitrina Spencer, 129–154. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

2019. The Reactionary Anti-Reflexive Turn. *Hage Ba'a*. http://hageba2a.blogspot.com/2019/08/the-reactionary-anti-reflexive-turn_15.html, accessed April 22, 2020.

Hanafi, Sari, and Rigas Arvanitis
2016. *Knowledge Production in the Arab World: The impossible promise.* London and New York: Routledge.

Haraway, Donna
1988. Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14(3): 575–599.

Hastrup, Kirsten
2004. Getting it right: Knowledge and evidence in anthropology. *Anthropological Theory* 4(4): 455–472.

Hermez, Sami Samir
2017. *War is coming: Between past and future violence in Lebanon.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ismail, Salwa
2006. *Political life in Cairo's new quarters: encountering the everyday state.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Jensen, Katherine, and Javier Auyero
2019. Teaching and Learning the Craft: The Construction of Ethnographic Objects. In *Urban Ethnography* (Research In Urban Sociology) 16: 69–87.

Kanafani, Samar
2021. *Commoning Mansion: Precarity as a Condition of Possibility.* Working Paper Series. Arab Council for the Social Sciences.

Kanafani, Samar, and Zina Sawaf
2017. Being, doing and knowing in the field: Reflections on ethnographic practice in the Arab region. *Contemporary Levant* 2(1): 3–11.

Kennedy, Elizabeth Lapovsky
1995. In Pursuit of Connection: Reflections on Collaborative Work. *American Anthropologist* 97(1): 26–33.

Kennedy, Mark
1991 Dilemmas in Middle Eastern Social Sciences: Contours of the Problem of the Relevance of Western Paradigms as Guides to Research, Policy and Practice. In *The Contemporary Study of the Arab World,* edited by Earl L. Sullivan and Jacqueline S. Ismael, 65–80. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.

Kosmatopoulos, Nikolas
> 2021. Unhatching the Egg in Lebanon's 2019 Protests. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120(2): 446–455.

Lichterman, Paul
> 2017. Interpretive reflexivity in ethnography. *Ethnography* 18(1): 35–45.

Mignolo, Walter D.
> 2009. Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom. *Theory, Culture & Society* 26(7–8): 159–181.

Moghnieh, Lamia
> 2017. 'The violence we live in': Reading and experiencing violence in the field. *Contemporary Levant* 2(1): 24–36.

Morsy, Soheir, Cynthia Nelson, Reem Saad, and Hania Sholkamy
> 1991. Anthropology and the Call for Indigenization of Social Science in the Arab World. In *The Contemporary Study of the Arab World,* edited by Earl L. Sullivan and Jacqueline S. Ismael, 81–111. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press.

Mosse, David
> 2006. Anti-social anthropology? Objectivity, objection, and the ethnography of public policy and professional communities. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 12(4): 935–956.

Mouawad, Jamil
> 2021. Teaching Lebanon's Politics in Times of the Uprising. *South Atlantic Quarterly*: 473–480.

Myerhoff, Barbara, and Jay Ruby
> 1982. Introduction. In *A Crack in the Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology,* edited by Jay Ruby, 1–31. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Nagar, Richa
> 2014. *Muddying the waters: Coauthoring feminisms across scholarship and activism*. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press.

Nassif, Helena
> 2017. To fear and to defy: emotions in the field. *Contemporary Levant* 2(1): 49–54.

Obeid, Michelle
> 2015. States of aspiration. *A Companion to the Anthropology of the Middle East,* edited by Soraya Altorki, 434–451. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Okely, Judith
> 1992. Anthropology and autobiography: Participatory experience and embodied knowledge. In *Anthropology and autobiography*, edited by Judith Okely and Helen Callaway, 1–28. London and New York: Routledge.

Robertson, Jennifer
> 2002. Reflexivity Redux: A Pithy Polemic on "Positionality." *Anthropological Quarterly* 75(4): 785–792.

Rouchdy, Malak, and Reem Saad
> 2018. Beyond the University Gates: The Story of the Free Social Science Knowledge Circle. In *Mélanges offerts à Madiha Doss: la linguistique comme engagement*, edited by Aziza Boucherit, Héba Machhour, Malik Rušdi, and Madiha Doss, 245–252. RAPH 42. Institut français d'archéologie orientale, Le Caire.

Saleh, Elizabeth, and Adrien Zakar
> 2018. The joke is on us: Irony and community in a Beirut scrapyard. *Anthropology Today* 34(3): 3–6

Salzman, Philip Carl
> 2002. On Reflexivity. *American Anthropologist* 104(3): 805–813.

Sangtin Writers and Richa Nagar
> 2006. *Playing With Fire: Feminist Thought and Activism Through Seven Lives in India*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Scholte, Bob
> 1972. Toward a Reflexive and Critical Anthropology. In *Reinventing Anthropology,* edited by Dell Hymes, 430–457. New York: Vintage Books.

Schwedler, Jillian
> 2006. The Third Gender: Western Female Researchers in the Middle East. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 39(03): 425–428.

Shah, Alpa
> 2017 Ethnography? Participant observation, a potentially revolutionary praxis. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7(1): 45–59.

Shore, Cris, and Susan Wright
> 2015. Audit Culture Revisited: Rankings, Ratings, and the Reassembling of Society. *Current Anthropology* 56(3): 421–444.

Simpson, Audra
> 2020. The Sovereignty of Critique. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 119(4): 685–699.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai
1999. D*ecolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. London and New York: Zed Book.

Stocking, George W.
1992 *The ethnographers' magic: and other essays in the history of anthropology*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

Stoller, Paul
1989. *The taste of ethnographic things: The senses in anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Sukarieh, Mayssoun, and Stuart Tannock
2012. On the Problem of Over-researched Communities: The Case of the Shatila Palestinian Refugee Camp in Lebanon. *Sociology* 47(3): 494–508.

2019. Subcontracting Academia: Alienation, Exploitation and Disillusionment in the UK Overseas Syrian Refugee Research Industry. *Antipode* 51(2): 664–680. 2.

Yousfi, Hela, and Chahrazad Abdallah
2020. Ethnography in times of crisis: Reflections on the Tunisian revolution. In *The Routledge Companion to Anthropology and Business*, edited by Raza Mir and Anne-Laure Fayard, 443–449. New York: Routledge.

Muzna Al-Masri
Independent Researcher
muznamasri@gmail.com

Samar Kanafani
Independent Researcher
samarkanafani@gmail.com

Lamia Moghnieh
University of Copenhagen
lamiameister@gmail.com

Helena Nassif
Independent Researcher
helena.nassif@gmail.com

Elizabeth Saleh
IAS, Princeton Member 2020-2021
American University of Beirut
elizabethsaleh@gmail.com

Zina Sawaf
Lebanese American University (LAU)
zina.sawaf@gmail.com