

Hurting towards impact: reflections on academic outreach amid the ‘refugee crisis’

In June 2015, I’m sitting in a closed-doors dinner gathering at my institution. Outside, in the real world, chaos is mounting at the borders, with back-to-back coverage of people clambering onto lorries in Calais or sinking into the Mediterranean. Around our table sit some half dozen suited civil servants – all men – working in the highest rungs of government. Dinner finished, wine sipped, I speak briefly, doing a spiel that has become second nature to me by this point. Based on my research in the Euro-African borderlands, I argue that Europe’s ‘fight against irregular migration’ is counterproductive, and that ‘we’ need a radical rethink. The officials are receptive and one of the civil servants even offers: ‘If I was in their situation, I’d do the same’. Yet a younger colleague of his pushes me on two points. As we debate, I describe how perverse border security incentives have allowed non-EU countries to use the threat of migration strategically vis-a-vis Europe. I give the example of Morocco: over two days in August 2014, its forces stopped controlling the country’s maritime borders, and suddenly more than 100 small migrant vessels set off across the Strait of Gibraltar. Soon after, ‘agreements’ were reached – meaning money and other Spanish favours. ‘But what’s wrong with that?’ the civil servant exclaims. I hesitate. Indeed, from the government’s perspective, what’s wrong? ‘You scratch my back, I scratch yours,’ is the thinking. I try again, saying this means our leaders give unscrupulous ‘partner states’ leverage to use migration as a threat, knowing what panic it may trigger in European capitals. The civil servant looks unconvinced, and adds: ‘You say maritime migration is a small phenomenon statistically’ – as it still was back in mid-2015, relative to overall migration into Europe – ‘but so what? If it’s big politically, if it’s in the news, it’s a priority.’ It is like a terror attack versus traffic mortalities; and we know which politicians care about the most. After dinner, the older civil servant who had expressed sympathy for migrants and an understanding of the risks in ‘fighting migration’, confides he still thinks it is possible to halt unwanted migration for good; we just need to push the price of the journey and the cost of failure high enough.

I start with this vignette to highlight some of the obstacles scholars face when we reach out and ‘cross the borders’ into other spheres at a time when emotions are running higher than ever about migration. Indeed, the ‘refugee crisis’ (or, more accurately, crisis of European border politics) hardly left the front pages in 2015 across Europe, and as such constitutes quite a test case for public engagement. The (long-running) political invocation of migration-as-crisis is productive on multiple fronts (cf Roitman 2014), and rarely more so

than in 2015. Vast amounts of research and reporting has been carried out on the dramas at the Union's borders; acres of newsprint have been dedicated to the chaos while 'urgency grants' have been announced by research funding bodies; event after panel event has been staged at European universities and think-tanks; and policymakers and politicians have gathered time and again to work out new 'solutions' – meaning, by and large, more of the same old medicine of 'border security', mass encampment and outsourced (non-European) policing.

This is the conflictive, repressive and rather depressing topic of policing migration in 'dark times' (Fassin 2011) that I will explore in the coming pages. Building on my long-running ethnographic research on 'the business of bordering Europe' (Author 2014), I will consider how anthropologists may position ourselves in a highly politicised field such as migration controls as we seek (or not) to make our voices heard.

It is rather easy to despair as another border fence goes up, a new deportation scheme is unveiled or another family drowns in the Mediterranean. It is also quite comforting to withdraw from this world into our academic cocoon, safe among mostly like-minded people. I've certainly felt like that many times. But as I will argue, breaking across the borders that separate the policy, media and academic spheres is no longer much of a choice when it comes to pressing political problems. Rather, our feeble academic fences are already being encroached upon, our scholarly garden patch trampled or tended by the powers that be. Academics must take charge of this situation through a more strategic approach to reaching beyond our flimsy fences – setting as far as possible the terms of those unavoidable engagements amid, at one extreme, neoliberal calls for metrics on 'research impact' and, at the other, the populist denigration of 'expert voices'.

Here I offer my subjective perspective of how we may trace a path through the borderlands between policy, media and academia at these tense times. Rather than ethnographically exploring media work or policymaking in their own right, I will put focus on the 'public afterlife' of research (Fassin 2015) through a brief 'auto-ethnography' of the awkward making of anthropological migration expertise at times of purported crisis. As in auto-ethnography writ large, including on migration (Khosravi 2010), the subjective positioning deployed here allows me to analyse missteps and peak into the dead ends of public engagement, as well as to reflect on the researcher's ambivalent position and embodied experience in relation to larger political and social shifts, including as regards the UK-mandated research 'impact agenda' that is in different incarnations also making inroads in mainland Europe.

To emphasise the trial-and-error involved in crossing the borderlines of different kinds of expertise, I borrow the term *navigation* from the migration scholarship of Henrik Vigh (2009). Reliving my own faltering attempt at navigating the choppy waters of the border crisis, I highlight the difference between risks of capture and co-optation. Building on my own systemic perspective on migration controls, I conclude by arguing that we need to bring our analytical powers to bear on the institutional field of impact and outreach itself. Evading ‘capture’ by media, policy and academic impact agendas, we may be able to forge a position from which to help unsettle dominant public and policy discourses on whatever ‘crisis’ is the latest to hit our research fields and newsstands.

The public fields of migration

I start with a spot of anthropological navel-gazing. In an earlier draft of this article, I had portrayed my position as somehow unexceptional as I attended meetings such as the one above – with the risk of coming across, as one peer reviewer put it, as ‘an extremely privileged academic’ assuming his position was shared by all. I thus need to delineate the particular conditions underpinning my outreach efforts in 2015 before proceeding.

In 2015, I was halfway through a postdoctoral research fellowship at the London School of Economics – that is, I was in a junior (and rather precarious) academic position yet had access to the most ‘impactful’ institution in UK social sciences. At this time, a cross-departmental Migration Initiative was also being launched with the aim of having impact on public debates and policy, adding further to the potential for privileged access. In hindsight, interpreting this situation in an auto-ethnographic vein, I was in the ideal position for ethnographic research – in the ‘system’ yet not of it, straddling the roles of befuddled outsider and connected insider. My examples should be read in this spirit: they delineate attempts at outreach by a junior anthropologist working with a rather exceptional set of structural conditions favouring ‘impact’, which at times lent me the power to speak authoritatively to broad audiences on a scale not available at less privileged institutions. In setting out my own institutional positioning, however, I do not intend for this article to be read as a criticism of LSE’s outreach efforts. It was doing pretty much what universities large and small are trying to do: to facilitate the government-mandated impact agenda (on which more below) and to push research findings into the public sphere. In other words, I believe my experience at LSE helps illuminate, as a rather special scenario, broader challenges shared by many academics.

It is also worth reflecting on *kinds* of outreach. Besteman's (2013) distinguishes between 'public' and 'engaged' anthropology, with the former referring to contributions to political and media debates for non-specialist audiences and the latter to values-driven activist work with research communities. As I came to 'reach out' in 2015, I did so in a 'public' anthropological vein. I had made a tacit choice of where to focus my efforts, in direct interaction with the structural possibilities afforded by my institution.

Calls for anthropology to be more 'public' have been coming thick and fast – to the point of saturation for some commentators (e.g. Golub 2014) – alongside an often-painful recognition of our limited reach. Eriksen (2006) has contrasted anthropologists' current marginal role with that of our ancestors, ranging from the influential voice of a Tylor, a Boas or a Mead to the dearth of voices today. To remedy this, Eriksen (2006) has urged anthropologists to up their game by, for instance, learning from historians how to tell effective *stories* rather than getting lost in the fog of abstract analysis. However, he has also identified key obstacles, including those imposed through our ingrained habits. There is an ambivalence around outreach, or as Eriksen puts it, 'whenever anthropologists endeavour to write in a popular vein, they tend to surround themselves with an air of coyness and self-mockery, or they stress that the topic at hand is of such a burning importance that they see no other option than (God forbid) addressing non-anthropologists' (Eriksen 2006:1). The habit, also evident in my own first drafts of this article, speaks of how our discipline has sometimes positioned itself 'above the fray', adding to difficulties of speaking up without risking a multitude of 'representational' questions from our peers. These are tendencies we need to systematically address in a strategic manner, a point I will return to in the conclusion.

To be fair to our discipline, doubts around 'going public' are not the exclusive reserve of anthropology, as Besteman and Haugerud (2013) note. Concerns about misquotation and misappropriation by journalists and political forces are real enough, a point raised by Ferrándiz (2013:22) and Pelkmans (2013) among others, yet again anthropologists may feel this more urgently than others owing to our usual research focus on long-term engagement with those less powerful than ourselves, and owing to research ethics requirements emphasising the protection of 'informants'. Indeed, my reticence to 'reach out', discussed below, at times puzzled non-anthropologists who would take a much more liberal approach.

Nor should we assume that, if only we could 'break free', we would have an eager audience. As some critics of the public anthropology agenda have quite rightly pointed out, there is no reason why a rather peculiar discipline borne out of the colonial encounter 'should' have privileged access to wider publics (Forte 2011). Some time ago, Grimshaw and

Hart (1996) memorably related the ‘crisis’ of anthropology not just to a wider crisis of intellectualism, but also to our waning ethnographic authority – raising fundamental question about our epistemic baggage and its power (or lack of it) to convince outsiders.

As the broader disciplinary crisis has waned, this crisis of relevance has lingered. Eriksen (2006) has noted how other fields have had far more public ‘impact’ than anthropology, quite despite their frequently sketchy claims to in-depth insights in fields as varied as high finance (Haugerud 2013) and warfare (Robben 2010). It is precisely in such areas of high political relevance that anthropologists could have a strong voice, yet as Gusterson (2013) argues, the problem is compounded by our historical baggage and attendant popular assumptions. We may still be somewhat stuck with the ‘trope of the pith helmet’ (di Leonardo cited in Gusterson 2013:12), seen as an exotic and exoticising discipline on the margins of broader social and political debates. This ingrained view has impacted on the *kinds* of anthropology that get a public airing in mainstream newspapers, Gusterson says, as he argues for breaking through the ‘invisible sound barrier’ that prevents anthropological work on topics such as militarism and inequality from reaching larger audiences.

For all these obstacles, my own forays have convinced me there is sufficient suppleness in public and policy spheres for engagement with ‘anthropological’ perspectives. We need not be hemmed in by accrued (mis)understandings of what our discipline is about, nor paralysed by fears over misuse, if we play our cards right. Yet the larger question, which the remainder of this article will address, is how far we can avoid being ‘swallowed up’ by more powerful epistemologies and narratives while remaining faithful to our own voice, our material and our participants. I will argue that we need to risk getting our hands dirty – indeed, some degree of co-optation is almost unavoidable once we step out of our comfort zone – in order to have an audience beyond captive academic ones (Eriksen 2006). If the risk of co-optation is part of the ‘game’, we must however avoid *capture*, which may occur on various interrelated levels. As the coming sections will show, we may find ourselves and our language captured by more powerful discourses in the sense delineated by Apthorpe (1996) in development and Pécoud (2015) on migration. We may also face a more insidious form of capture as our anthropological *habitus* shifts through day-to-day engagement with stronger sectors in policy, the media and other parts of academia. Bourdieu’s (1988) notion of fields is useful here in thinking through how, as the anthropological *homo academicus* steps onto larger fields of praxis and knowledge, we find ourselves very much the ‘dominated’ party subject to rules of the game set by the dominant actors. Not losing sight – indeed, harnessing

and foregrounding – our own analytical edge on this social situation of relative weakness is key to carving a critical space of engagement.

In short, we need more *strategic* thinking about how we may harness that space of relative autonomy, along with some workaday insights into shorter-term *tactics*. Eriksen (2013) provides one important starting point here by suggesting that anthropologists may contribute to ‘liberating’ forms of knowledge by adopting the position of the trickster. To this end he deploys Anansi the spider, a figure of West African folklore ‘famous for getting the upper hand against larger and stronger adversaries through creativity, humour and imagination’, and so turning relative weakness into a virtue (Eriksen 2013:15). Such a trickster role comes with its own limitations – among them, as Haugerud (2013) notes, its moral ambiguity. It could also be argued that it simply resurrects the role of anthropologist as academic ‘court jester’ (di Leonardo cited by Gusterson 2013:13). Yet as a starting point, the trickster figure points to our ease at the margins of social worlds in a productive sense – as translators (Besteman 2013), as go-betweens, as navigators – while allowing us to embrace anthropology’s role as the ‘uncomfortable discipline’ in Firth’s terms (see Wright 1995). But this world-straddling role, for all its value, must be combined with more hard-headed strategising in order to harness our public role. The potential is substantial, as evidenced by Haugerud’s (2016) recent review of public anthropological efforts, as well as by many inspiring migration scholars today. Yet so are the pitfalls.

The ‘impact agenda’ and its publics

In my LSE common room hung a telling mandala of today’s neoliberal academia – a wheel of ‘impact’, replete with colour-coded ‘pathways’ to this holy academic grail, represented as a black bull’s eye. ‘Impact’ is now what UK-based academics are supposed to achieve through our research, and institutional incentives to facilitate such impact have been worked into the periodical Research Excellence Framework. Even if continental European countries have not necessarily adopted the same term, the broader trend is clear: stronger calls from funders and governments for academic usefulness – not least, of course, on migration.

The tectonic plates of my institutional structures were in 2015 shifting owing to the impact agenda. An Institute for Global Affairs had been set up, encouraging policy engagement, and part of its brief was the cross-departmental migration initiative mentioned above. Academic incentive structures were shifting towards outreach, and some welcomed this shift. Indeed, in fields such as climate change, where policymakers may be receptive to

academic findings, impact schemes may simply serve to highlight the ‘usefulness’ of already-existing research. In social sciences, opportunities exist including in the politicised field of migration: economic studies of labour migration and legal or policy analyses of regulatory frameworks may get a hearing, albeit with severe limitations to implementation.

The UK impact agenda may in other words offer specialists new structures for recognition. Yet the story is inevitably more complicated than that. As critics have highlighted, it risks steering research towards policy-driven topics, and moreover towards areas that seem safely amenable to expert input. Part of the problem resides in the implicit hierarchy of impacts, with a traceable effect on specific policies trumping other kinds, including contributions to public debate.

Irregular migration exemplifies these problems. As sociologist Alejandro Portes (1978:469) once observed, this ‘is one of those issues in which the interests of scholars and of government agencies converge’. Yet despite the close policy alignment, studies of irregular migration rarely influence policy – at least not the critical ones. Instead irregular migration and border security have emerged as an almost ‘evidence-free’ policy area: an example of what is sometimes called ‘policy-based evidence-making’, massaging the facts to fit a political narrative.

I knew this as I stared down the ‘impact wheel’ each week. I had argued in my work that, despite the destructive consequences of fighting migration, it had persisted for short-term reasons, including the political wish to visibly crack down on relatively small migratory flows over the Mediterranean as a substitute for having to grapple with the complexity of international migration in a broader sense (Author 2014). Still, as influential outsiders ‘knocked on the door’ to my little shared office in 2015, I felt the ‘pull of the policy audience’ (Sarat and Silbey 1998) and that of the media, and was partially reeled in, like many other migration scholars. Why? There are complex reasons behind our ambivalent involvement. On one level, an optimism of the will may be at work, as we hope to throw a spanner in the works of a destructive machinery. Sometimes, less ambitiously, we may just hope that someone will listen, for once; sometimes perhaps a bit of funding or a bit of fame is the lure, being in the limelight or having the ear of the powerful.

Whatever the reason, since the latest border crisis, researchers such as myself have time and again risked being dragged into an unseemly search for short-term fixes. This search is itself part of the ‘problem’, or as migration scholar Bridget Anderson (2015) put it in the midst of 2015, fighting an inbox overflowing with events invitations and journalistic demands for soundbites on a ‘solution’ in 50 words:

The flood of requests [...] encapsulates what I find to be a real dilemma working in the field of 'migration studies'. On the one hand we are fortunate. It is far easier for us to demonstrate 'impact', to engage in policy debates and contribute to informing public opinion, than it is for many scholars [...] But on the other, we risk different forms of vacuity, shrilly opinionated or tediously technocratic. It is hard to engage with public opinion by starting a sentence with 'It's very complicated...'

'Responding as a migration expert can reinforce unhelpful framings,' Anderson (2015) continued by reference to the media-saturated chaos at Calais. By implicitly treating this situation as a 'migration problem', she writes, public scholars fail to highlight how it is above all a 'symptom' of how western states intervene in foreign countries and how the world economy is (dis)organised. Indeed, the specious problematisation of migration as a thing-in-itself rather than as a feature of broader socio-political developments is itself perhaps the largest problem, as migration scholars have long argued (e.g. Castles 2014). Yet as politicians and journalists keep asking for silver bullets, we face tough choices. Either we have to skirt their questions and come up with better ones, and risk not being listened to; or we play along with the game, providing 'solutions' and soundbites; or else ignore them altogether.

Yet my own view was that the third option was increasingly untenable. If we had the chance to speak, we should. The challenge, as I saw it, was rather to push a particular message – indeed, not pushing it would itself be a political choice.

Through this reasoning, I embarked on an engagement drive during 2015, navigating the borders of politics, media and academia, often swerving off course or ending up stranded in dead ends. This process was often more reactive than proactive, as I was simply carried along by the rising tide. As disastrous drownings unfolded off Lampedusa in spring 2015, LSE's press office had asked me for a soundbite for sharing with the media, and my critical note on why deterrence leads to predictable disaster made it into the press, in my first media foray that year.

Such critique is within our anthropological comfort zone, yet soon questions on the 'fix' kept coming. At one point, BBC radio asked me to give a solution to the refugee crisis in a minute's recording: I duly did so, saying that the quest for a quick solution was part of the problem, as more quick-fix and counterproductive border security is always used to fill

the gap of a long-term strategy. Alas, my attempt to subvert solutionism failed: the set of soundbites by myself and others was spiked at the last minute.

Like others, I persevered. Through media interviews, comment pieces and reports I tried to drive home a simple argument: that punitive border security displaces routes to more dangerous areas, allows smugglers to make more money and foments repeated crises, which in turn spurs further growth in border security, in a vicious cycle. Often, I found, policymakers, journalists and other such audiences listened. They asked good questions. They might even agree, yet often settled back into old normative patterns of thought. One event organiser thanked me for delineating the problems, yet concluded by saying that the UK was ‘full’ already and we could not possibly handle more migrant ‘health tourists’. As in my opening vignette above, the differences in the understandings of the situation – and the different political priorities applied to it – remained deep even as the social borderlines separating critical academia from policy and well-informed publics were being breached from both sides amid the fervour of the ‘border crisis’.

To be clear: anthropologists are not above this fray, truth-tellers adrift in a sea of ignorance. Our position is inherently political and partial. Moreover, the borders between different understandings of the ‘crisis’ were also present in academic seminars, where I faced barbed questions from some senior professors on why we should let anyone in, or on why we should not simply consider irregular migration a crime like any other. One such senior academic told me after a talk that, unless you have a clear alternative solution that keeps people out as effectively as fences and punitive patrols, there’s no point in studying irregular migration. Portes (1978) rears his head again – the normative gravitational pull of this particular field is so strong that ‘basic research’ is unwanted or ignored.

My borders metaphor may seem to imply discrete positions, yet something more complex was at work here. Rather than sharp borderlines, I experienced a shifting *borderland* in which dominant actors sought to selectively appropriate critical views. At the policy-academic interface, I saw at close quarters how a critical perspective could be readily understood by senior managers, only for their focus to immediately shift towards familiar policy terrain. In a particularly telling example, one such manager responded to a highly critical draft report of mine by saying that as a next step ‘we’ needed to shift focus to ‘incentivising implementation’ and ‘engaging stakeholders’ in ‘politically palatable solutions’. This kind of vacuous managerial discourse *makes sense* to insiders seeking to depoliticise ‘international migration narratives’, as Pécoud (2015) has shown, yet presents

formidable risks to academics if our work is included as a bit of ‘added value’ – if that! – tacked onto a ready-made piece of policy jargon.

Like Anderson (2015), I wince. How can we engage on these terms, doing an 180-degree turn away from a grounded and critical view? What can anthropologists’ ‘impact’ be in this landscape defined by top-down policy prerogatives?

It is comfortable to pull up the drawbridge and ignore any emails, phonecalls or meeting requests that may (or may not) come our way. At times, I tried to do just that. Sometimes withdrawing is a good idea, for instance when a migrant-bashing newspaper gets in touch. I gradually came to realise I had to be tactical in how I reached out, and to whom – that is, how we navigate the borderlands of our own politics and of the public sphere.

When BBC Radio was holding a debate on the Calais crisis and ‘what to do about it’, I declined to participate alongside the draconian UK migration minister: after his sober English ministerial voice, I gathered the voice of a junior anthropologist with a Swedish accent would not quite sway the audience. When I got an invite to speak at the European Day for Border Guards, organised by the EU border agency Frontex, I politely said no. We need to be very careful about what role we may unwittingly come to serve as our words are not listened to, while our academic affiliation or persona adds to the marketing campaigns of ulterior agendas or reinforces stereotypes about disconnected ‘experts’.

The problem, though, is that we cannot pull up the drawbridge. The ivory tower lies shattered, if indeed it ever existed; our defences are down. In the world of ‘impact’ mantras and mandalas, we are inexorably pulled into the borderlands of outreach, policy-making and ‘engagement’ whether we like it or not. As I reflect on this mixing, it is worth revisiting my fieldwork moment of a few years earlier that had ended up (re)defining my research focus – revealing how we, as anthropologists, are as stuck in the mud as everyone else.

Navigating borders, evading capture

As I began my PhD research on maritime migration in 2010, I initially sought out migrants deported from the Spanish Canary Islands back to Senegal, yet as I eventually met these men in their seaside communities outside Dakar, I was in for a surprise. ‘What can you offer us?’ one leader of a deportees’ association, Mohammadou, asked me. ‘And what do you want?’ The order of his questions seemed the wrong way around, but it was so for a reason: Mohammadou had seen too many visitors already – NGOs, journalists, researchers, politicians and undercover police, all in his words wanting to ‘eat’ from migration.

Mohammadou's resistance crystallised a growing realisation that came to frame my subsequent fieldwork. At Europe's southern fringes, migrants find themselves at the crosshairs of a powerful border apparatus – or as I came to call it, an 'illegality industry' – and they know it. The sectors 'eating' from migration included not just aid organisations, defense companies, state ministries and border agencies: as Mohammadou made clear, they also included academia.

Academics' 'enrolment' in the industry of controls follows similar pathways to what I observed in my research among NGOs, humanitarian organisations and critical journalists. For them, individual and institutional incentives often came to dovetail with border security: humanitarians received funds and plaudits for plastering the wounds of the border and providing legitimacy for punitive controls, while journalists provided (willingly or unwittingly) the dramatic imagery underpinning the officially sanctioned 'emergency' (Author 2014). On top of this alignment (which could sometimes be subverted), border security and political actors proactively fomented 'stakeholderisation' and buy-in: economic, social and career incentives to participate in a shared agenda, including for academics as seen in my Frontex invitation.

By 2015, such complementarities between academic research and border politics were boosted both not just by political calls for insights into the crisis, but also, in the UK, by the academic impact agenda. Amid new incentives for impact, any refusal to participate lessens our potential for recognition and career advancement. At one academic impact-oriented event in 2015 I spoke together with Navy officers, and was later asked by the organisers whether they could share an article of mine on the migratory journey, as the Navy was set to participate in the EU naval operation aimed at pre-emptively destroying boats used by migrants fleeing Libya. I refused – yet how long will we be able to hold out, and who among us will persist?

None of these problems are new to anthropologists who have followed the ins and outs of public anthropology, including as regards the controversies stirred by the US military's Human Terrain System (e.g. Gonzalez 2009). Taking stock of these fraught 'terrains' of unequal engagement, Mathijs Pelkmans (2013:399) has rightly asked:

[W]hat kind of impact are we looking for: good impact or bad impact? This might seem a silly question, but it would be terribly naïve to answer that good impact is the kind of impact that contributes to the common good. Because who decides what the common good is? If the common good is defined as reducing the

number of immigrants, then anthropologists may contribute by facilitating the deportation of undocumented migrants (and I know anthropology graduates who do just that). [...] From my own perspective some kinds of impact are better than others. And sometimes I think it is best for anthropologists not to have any impact at all.

Indeed, if we measure the common good as keeping migrants out, then sharing my findings with the UK Navy or Frontex (who also asked for insights) would have added to my 'impact' score. There will always be takers for that opportunity, and more so as other funding avenues are shrinking. To return to Bourdieu, the academic 'field' may always have been in hock to dominant forces and funding structures, yet the UK impact agenda facilitates the emergence of new 'structuring structures' that make refusal an ever-harder line to take. On migration, this was seen starkly when a UK research council announced in mid-2015 it was establishing 'urgency grants' with the brief to produce high-impact and very short-term research along irregular migratory routes.

I come back to the term navigation: we have to chart a path past the (fluid) borders between our own politics, our critical capabilities, our disciplinary ethics, our institutions and our funders. We may always choose to climb one particular fence, and skirt another one (and some researchers who got the urgency grants managed to twist the topic to something more critical). Yet in this environment, besides the still-existing capabilities for subversion and the ever-present risk of co-optation, we increasingly risk being captured by policy agendas and dragged across the borderlines into political territory in ways we cannot control. Indeed, even if we refuse to participate, our work is an open book of open-source intelligence for border agencies and militaries (cf Price 2011).

Usually the process of co-optation and appropriation is subtler than 'dragging' or data-mining, however, involving a constant give-and-take in which our independence may be compromised in a more insidious manner, as I will go on to explain.

Drifting towards impact

As I kept pushing my message, the initial feeling of satisfaction was accompanied by a growing unease. I was becoming a one-trick pony, for a start, repeating time and again that 'the fight against migration is counterproductive' to anyone who wanted to listen (or didn't). Yet I knew this was only part of the story – I had distilled my message so much that the

complexity, ambiguity, ambivalence and (inter)subjective dimensions I hoped I had captured in my ethnography were being replaced by the black-and-white argument that editors and policymakers presumably wanted: do border controls work, or don't they? If I said something slightly more complex than that, journalists or subeditors would helpfully boil down the message. For instance, when a Swedish journalist asked about how fences worked and I said they may produce certain short-term political rewards, accompanied by grave problems, including route displacements, brutal policing and human rights abuses, this ended up reported as:

But do fences work?

- In the short run they may work, responds [Author], anthropologist and researcher at the LSE.

Fences may also give politicians a boost on the domestic front, according to [Author].

- They can argue that they are standing up for the nation.

Long-form or documentary journalists were more nuanced; and in the policy world, the give-and-take was more complex yet. As I prepared policy reports, however, I noticed predictable barriers to having one's voice heard as an ethnographer. Did I have evidence to back up my assertions, asked one legal expert – ethnography not being 'evidence' enough, unlike the case law and policy studies they would recognise as such. One irritated expert reader squeezed my argument about the pragmatics of controls – what can be practically achieved at the borders? – into the standard normative frame. As she asked, 'He's very critical of the border industry but does he mean we shouldn't have any borders at all? To him, does legal pathways mean that everyone should be able to enter anywhere?'

Fair question, we might say – and it is all too easy to be critical of one's critics. We certainly should not expect reporters and policymakers (whose perspectives I cannot dwell on here) to pick up on all the twist of our arguments, and being challenged is a healthy thing. Rather than preaching to the converted, such encounters may force us to refine or temper our wilder arguments. But besides these positives, I was starting to sense larger problems looming. I was not just consciously pushing a simplified message, gradually getting more distilled and 'mainstreamed' the more it was challenged or misunderstood; but in this process, I also felt my own academic horizons and critical capacities were narrowing. Even though I did not realise it at first, I was losing track of my academic audiences, as well as of

my own initial motivations in studying this phenomenon, which had little to do with the quest for quick-fix policy solutions.

In autumn 2015, a London university had organised a ‘policy conference’ on migration – surely to tick that impact box – and to play to the theme I gave my usual shtick. Critical academic responses followed: well, border controls are *useful* for the powerful, too, someone said, and another added with a Foucauldian twist that the interesting thing is what kinds of Others are being produced through this type of border operation. Of course, I agreed – these were among the topics that I had set out to cover in my ethnography! But by autumn 2015, my message had been honed and polished and simplified so much that out of that initial large terrain only a puny and rather uninteresting slice remained: failure or success, bad or good management. The borders of public debate were drawing closer, hemming me in. As I presented to a critical audience of migration scholars in London in early 2016, I got the final wake-up call: where is the politics of controls in what you are saying? Have you turned into one of *them*, someone asked, one of the migration managers?

Without quite realising it, the very industry I had set out to analyse – and on whose ‘borders’ my book itself was uneasily and consciously poised – had come to encompass my efforts at criticising it. I was speaking in the managerial language of what ‘works’, of numbers and figures. The risk of ‘truncated’ adaptations of academic research in policy-making has been raised many times (e.g. Donnan and McFarlane 1997), yet less so the extent to which scholars themselves may come to be complicit in the process. I am reminded here of what Boyer (2008: 40) has termed the ‘contingent jurisdictions’ of expertise, and our awkwardness as we step across the borderlines into another ‘jurisdiction’. Yet, again I did not simply feel that I was the one who actively crossed borders; rather, the policy and media worlds were actively encroaching on ‘my’ academic turf. I was being ‘interpellated’, perhaps – hey there, you, anthropologist! When a well-placed colleague organised for me to meet a high-level UN figure on migration, he got straight to the point: ‘So what can I use you for?’ – recalling, in an ironic twist, the words spoken by Mohammadou on our first encounter.

To remain within Boyer’s terminology, this was ‘epistemophagy’, or one jurisdiction of expertise trying to ‘consume’ or appropriate another. This form of knowledge capture is accompanied, at least at some institutions, by structures and incentives that help reshape academic habitus. Through high-level dinners such as in my opening vignette, or through high-profile panels, fundraising drives and impact case studies, the academic field is shifting in its positions, values and structures of recognition (in a Bourdieusian sense). To return to my territorial metaphors, rather than living within our traditional boundaries between

disciplines, and between academia and the wider world – if indeed such boundaries ever properly existed – we are increasingly inhabiting a borderland of shifting configurations, research appropriations and precarious funding, forever having to ‘engage’ yet increasingly losing control over the process.

So far, I have sketched the academic ‘borderlands’ from a top-down perspective; looking at this situation from a more ‘bottom-up’, subjective viewpoint, however, other concepts than territorial ones suggest themselves. As I reflected in 2016, a concept came to mind that had sparked my fascination with anthropology in my very first classes as an undergraduate student – the notion of ‘interpretive drift’, developed by Luhrmann (1989) in *The persuasion of the witch’s craft*. Perhaps I was regressing into a long-lost anthropological innocence, or perhaps I was lured in by the potential to compare border security to magic (all smoke and mirrors), but her concept above all illuminated an important anthropological theme, how action may condition belief. As Luhrmann (1989:7) says: ‘Modern magicians are interesting because they are a flamboyant example of a very common process: that when people get involved in an activity they develop ways of interpreting which make that activity meaningful even though it may seem foolish to the uninvolved.’

This was, in a sense, my predicament as I navigated the migration policy world. For all its futility it held up possibilities of gratification, and it lured me in with its shiny magic: the informal talks and meetings and drinks and dinners through which a phenomenological attachment to a new field or ‘jurisdiction’ started to grow; and the general desire for making oneself understood and listened to, not least by those in positions of power. Then there are the epistemic gains. As I was internalising the ‘managerial view’ of migration, I mentally imposed some rationality on our chaotic and destructive migration politics. Staying within whatever opaque world we choose – that of migration management, witchcraft or indeed academic anthropology – ensures some consistency of interpretation, recognition and clarity.

In sum, it is quite clear there is a direct link between the ‘impact agenda’, wider power and funding shifts in UK universities, and the ‘managerial’ drift of the kind I have exemplified here through my own experience. Amid these shifting grounds, deploying our critical ethnographic tools to our own predicament as publicly engaged or ‘interpellated’ scholars constitutes one way of resisting the pull towards conformity. But we also need to retain a hold of that internal process traced by Luhrmann and also highlighted by Boyer: noting how, as Luhrmann’s trainee witches, we may shift between inconsistent interpretive frames at a moment’s notice. In fact, such shifting – if it is done with some direction and control – may be crucial in navigating our way through the academic-public borderlands.

Anthropology at ‘impact zero’

Anthropologists face both tactical and strategic challenges in engaging ‘non-captive’ audiences. On the tactical front, let me offer two contrasting examples. In 2015, I appeared on a radio talk show where the host, after asking me about the ‘solution’ and getting my standard spiel, suddenly said he would play devil’s advocate: ‘Well, it’s easy for you to say we should open the borders, isn’t it, sitting in your ivory tower in London! Why should anyone listen to you?’ Earlier in 2015, at a humanitarian policy conference, an anthropologist presented her intricate work on a particular refugee group and afterwards noted a government minister in the front row had spent the whole talk texting. How can we convey our particularistic research findings to such powerful people, she asked in frustration.

After my ‘auto-ethnographic’ (or, perhaps, auto-therapeutic!) rant about the perils of outreach, it’s worth adding a positive note based on these dual ‘negatives’ of detached vacuity and intricate irrelevance. While we need to step back and analyse the media and political force field around a given ‘crisis’ and how we get pulled into it as academics, sometimes we can benefit from keeping things simple and tactical. One way of doing so is to take the fight to the opponents’ arena. The authority that stems from ‘having been to the field’ has rightly been torn apart within anthropology, yet in reaching out to larger audiences, we cannot afford to undersell ourselves – a bit of strategic essentialism, of claiming the role of the grassroots fieldworker, can work wonders. In my response to the radio host, I belatedly tried to do so: I had spent 14 months out there accompanying aid workers, border guards and migrants! On the other hand, simply reporting insights from a specific social world is usually not enough, as seen with the frustrated panel participant. In short, a more strategic approach to outreach involves taking risks in how we articulate our arguments, making forceful points that speak to broader political debates while shedding some overt reflexivity and ‘complexity’. It involves embracing the authority that stems from our fieldwork and intellectual traditions, rather than treading fearfully on dominant terrains of expertise. And it involves, as Eriksen (2006) argues, crafting narratives that appeal beyond the academy. Such activities are premised on actively building disciplinary appreciation for them based on their *complementarity* with more nuanced outputs for our peers.

As we harness a distinct public role, we should not think our distinctive ethnographic approach, relational and subjectively anchored, inhibits our ability to contribute to broader debates. Rather, our recourse to ‘native’ understandings and inductive reasoning can rupture

stale official discourses while putting flesh on the bare bones of academic abstraction. Yet while our grounded sensibilities remain our ground-zero, on the level of research, we can do more to harness and push into the public sphere grounded anthropological analyses of power, and in particular of *systems* (however loosely defined): how do they work, produce meaning, and enroll different actors into a common endeavour such as ‘managing migration’, and with what human consequences?

In fields as varied as high finance, human rights, debt, the security state and an overheated climate, anthropologists are increasingly studying *across* powerful sectors, rather than exclusively dealing with local worlds – and these research framings have great potential to contribute with a specific kind of ‘impact’ that plays to our strengths as ethnographers in the borderlands between our disciplinary heritage, smaller-scale social worlds and wider political fields. In other words, outreach has to be as much on ‘our’ turf as possible to be effective, yet the turf itself also needs to be expansive enough for others to care about it.

In entitling this article ‘hurtling towards impact’, I wanted to capture the sense of speedy, out-of-control engagement I and other migration scholars experienced in 2015. ‘Impact’ denotes, according to OED, ‘the action of one object coming forcibly into contact with another’, and this is how I have conveyed my experience above – as a postdoc hitting the ground of political reality. It may not have to be that way, yet the UK impact agenda does put a premium on the ‘quick hit’: research proven to shift a specific government policy. Anthropologists are ideally placed to challenge such narrow frames and interrogate their consequences, especially if we apply our analytical strengths to our own embedded experience as ‘interpellated’ academics. As in the emerging ‘slow scholarship’ movement (Seeber and Berg 2016), we can create forms of outreach that do not involve a hurtling clash with the policy world – building on our relational fieldwork skills to forge sustained encounters with practitioners based on an emic understanding of *their* constraints. In challenging the impact agenda (and advocating that other countries do not adopt the narrow UK model), we should also push for ‘engaged anthropology’ in Besteman’s (2013) sense, advocating for the value of addressing other interlocutors than state and media. Again as in slow scholarship, we need to reach beyond our discipline to produce such a field of sustained encounters instead of fast clashes and captures. In this way, we may perhaps have some interdisciplinary ‘research impact’ on the impact agenda itself.

I end on a cautionary note. As 2015 wore on, an email arrived with a proposal from the European Stability Initiative for how to end the ‘refugee crisis’: by settling some refugees directly from Turkey combined with a deportation and border control deal. Soon enough, this

became the blueprint for the EU-Turkey agreement. In 2017, a book by Oxford academics grabbed headlines by proposing to ‘fix’ the ‘broken’ refugee system by employing refugees in free-trade special economic zones in countries neighbouring conflict (that is, far away from Western shores). Such simplistic fix-all ‘solutions’ capture media and policy attention, based on their creative rebranding of old medicine in new bottles, and their alignment with political priorities. In the world of ‘impact’, such solutionism now comes at a premium. Rather than being lured in by this academic game and its quest for simple answers, however, anthropologists can take the lead in interrogating its implications while pushing for *different questions* that reframe ‘the problem’ in systemic light. In so doing, we may indeed come to play a trickster-like role in steering between disciplines, media spotlights and policy discourses – actively navigating the academic borderlands, rather than staying adrift.

References

- Anderson, B. 2015. ‘What to do about Calais, in 50 words’, COMPAS blog, 13 August.
Available at: <https://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/2015/what.to.do.about.calais.in.50.words/>
- Apthorpe, R. 1996. ‘Reading development policy and policy analysis: On faming, naming, numbering and coding’, in R. Apthorpe and D. Gasper (eds.), *Arguing development policy: Frames and discourses*. London: Routledge.
- Besteman, C. 2013. ‘Three reflections on public anthropology’, *Anthropology Today* 29(6):3-6.
- Besteman, C. and A. Haugerud. 2013. ‘The desire for relevance’, *Anthropology Today* 29(6):1-2.
- Bourdieu, P. 1988. *Homo academicus*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Boyer, D. 2008. ‘Thinking through the anthropology of experts’, *Anthropology in Action* 15(2):38-46.
- Donnan, H. and G. McFarlane. 1997. ‘Anthropology and policy research: The view from Northern Ireland’, in C. Shore and S. Wright (eds.) *Anthropology of policy: Critical perspectives on governance and power*. New York: Routledge.
- Eriksen, T.H. 2006. *Engaging anthropology: The case for a public presence*. Oxford: Berg.
2013. ‘The Anansi position’, *Anthropology Today* 29(6):14-17.
- Fassin, D. 2011. ‘Policing borders, producing boundaries. The governmentality of immigration in dark times’, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 40:213-226.
2015. ‘The public afterlife of ethnography’, *American Ethnologist* 42(4):592.

- Ferrándiz, F. 2013. 'Rapid response ethnographies in turbulent times: Researching mass grave exhumations in contemporary Spain', *Anthropology Today* 29(6):18-22.
- Forte, M. C. 2011. 'Beyond public anthropology: Approaching zero.' Keynote address to the 8th Annual Public Anthropology Conference, American University, Washington DC. Available at: <http://openanthropology.org/pacfortekeynote2.pdf>
- Gonzalez, R.J. 2009. *American counterinsurgency: Human science and the human terrain*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Golub, A. 2014. 'How much public anthropology is enough public anthropology?' Savage Minds blog, 23 December. Available at: <http://savageminds.org/2014/12/23/how-much-public-anthropology-is-enough-public-anthropology/>
- Grimshaw, A. and K. Hart. 1996. *Anthropology and the crisis of the intellectuals*. Cambridge: Prickly Pear Press.
- Gusterson, H. 2013. 'Anthropology in the news?', *Anthropology Today* 29(6):11-13.
- Haugerud, A. 2013. 'Public anthropology and the financial crisis', *Anthropology Today* 29(6):7-10.
2016. 'Public anthropology in 2015: *Charlie Hebdo*, Black Lives Matter, migrants, and more.' *American Anthropologist* 118(3):585-601.
- Khosravi, S. 2010. *'Illegal' traveller: An auto-ethnography of borders*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Luhrmann, T. M. 1989. *Persuasions of the witch's craft: Ritual magic and witchcraft in present-day England*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Pécoud, Antoine. 2015. *Depoliticising migration: Global governance and international migration narratives*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Pelkmans, M. 2013. 'A wider audience for anthropology? Political dimensions of an important debate', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19:398-404.
- Portes, A. 1978. 'Toward a structural analysis of illegal (undocumented) immigration', *International Migration Review* 12(4):469-484.
- Price, D.H. 2011. *Weaponizing anthropology: Social science in service of the militarized state*. Petrolia: CounterPunch.
- Robben, A. 2010. *Iraq at a distance: What anthropologists can teach us about the war*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Roitman, J.L. 2014. *Anti-crisis*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Sarat, A. and S. Silbey. 1988. 'The pull of the policy audience.' *Law and Policy* 10(2-3):97-166.
- Seeberg, B.K. and M. Berg. 2016. *The slow professor: Challenging the culture of speed in the academy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Vigh, H. 2009. 'Motion squared: A second look at the concept of social navigation.' *Anthropological Theory* 9(4): 419-438.
- Wright, Susan. 1995. 'Anthropology: Still the "uncomfortable" discipline?', in Akbar S. Ahmed and Cris N. Shore, eds. *The future of anthropology: Its relevance to the contemporary world*. ed. London: Athlone Press.