ABSTRACT
In this article, I analyze three episodes of daydreaming and reverie by young Syrian men that were occasioned, in part, by the presence of the anthropologist in ethnographic encounters. Such daydreaming calls forth an “intersubjective third,” which privileges the experience of the interlocutor but is powerfully defined by the relationship of the roles of anthropologist and interlocutor. This construction opens a space in which both unconscious and conscious aspects of experience can be recontextualized, leading to a better understanding of interlocutors’ wishes and anxieties—in this article, for transgression of genealogical and gender orders, the excitement of Internet pornography, and seductions of the modern. I conclude by theorizing the specificity of the ethnographic encounter’s relation to knowledge and the different commitments for the anthropologist in the encounter and for the psychoanalyst in a therapeutic session. [Syria, reverie, psychoanalysis, masculinity, ethnographic encounter, countertransference, pornography, Internet]

Whereas anthropology has fruitfully made dreams a subject of analysis (e.g., Devereux 1951; Eggan 1949; Gregor 1985; Röheim 1952; Stewart 1997; Tedlock 1987b), it has given no systematic attention to the activity of daydreaming and the state of reverie. These two activities—night dreaming and daydreaming—are, of course, related and share, as Freud had it, the goal of “making the obtaining of pleasure free once more from the assent of reality” (1966:463). But major differences between the two persist across cultures: Dreams occur during sleep and have a hallucinatory quality, whereas daydreams are fantasies in which one consciously imagines something while fully awake. Because dreams involve an internal censor and repression, their motives must be decoded from distorted messages; in daydreams, however, “the content of these phantasies,” as Freud observed, “is dominated by a very transparent motive. They are scenes and events in which the subject’s egoistic needs of ambition and power or his erotic wishes find satisfaction” (1966:120). In a movement that has bypassed anthropology, psychoanalysts have increasingly paid attention to daydreamlike activity in the state of reverie, to moments of unconscious association and inattention, both in human development and in clinical settings. In particular, a focus on reverie has led to insights about the “unconscious state of receptivity” in communication between mother and child (Bion 1962); the psychic translation of the other’s enigmatic messages in seduction, theorized as the genesis of the unconscious in general and of repression as a partial failure to translate these messages (Laplanche 1989); and the receptivity to states of reverie of both analyst and analyst in the joint construction of an “unconscious third subject” in the psychoanalytic session (Ogden 1997b:117). For social theorists as well as ethnographers, anthropology’s inattention to daydreaming and states of reverie is particularly unfortunate, as such moments are ubiquitous in fieldwork encounters and key windows into unconscious communication.

In this article, I focus on three episodes of daydreams and reverie that were occasioned, in part, by my presence, as an anthropologist,
in ethnographic encounters in Aleppo, Syria. Such daydreaming calls forth what Thomas Ogden (1997b:9–11, 116–119) terms the “intersubjective analytic third”—a joint though decidedly unequal construction generated in the context of the encounter, which privileges the experience of the interlocutor but is powerfully defined by the relationship of the roles of anthropologist and interlocutor. This third opens a space in which both unconscious and conscious aspects of experience can be recontextualized, leading to a better understanding of the interlocutor’s wishes and anxieties, which, in this article, include transgression of genealogical and gender orders, excitement of Internet pornography, and seductions of the modern. I proceed by bringing to bear on the ethnographic encounter some fundamental theoretical concepts of contemporary clinical psychoanalysis—reverie, transference and countertransference, the intersubjective third, and containment. In the final section, I use the explications of the three episodes to theorize the specificity of the ethnographic encounter’s relation to knowledge and to highlight the different commitments to knowledge for the anthropologist in the encounter and for the psychoanalyst in the therapeutic session.

The different and mutually informing articulations of anthropology and psychoanalysis point to new theoretical frontiers in both disciplines. Much as anthropological theorizing has moved away from an understanding of fieldwork as motivated by a desire to map out an objective set of cultural traits, differences, or relationships independent of the encounter, so too, psychoanalytic theorizing has moved away from the goal of knowing the underlying structure of a patient’s mind. Rather than focus on systems of thought, their symbolic content and relation to power, more attention is paid to how people think and the way such thinking can transform occasions and institutions that reproduce the social. Therefore, many of the more recent epistemological advances in both fields have come out of an appreciation of the dynamics of transference and countertransference and the significance of storytelling in communication, that is, of a reflexive interpretation of the experience of a relationship.

Anthropologists who engage in what I call “interlocution-based fieldwork,” a mode of research no longer limited to ethnographers, experience highly charged countertransference in encounters with the people they study, in which they are often asked to serve as “containers” for the projections, anxieties, and phantasies disclosed by their interlocutors (Bion 1959). The encounter takes place, to use the words of Donald Winnicott, “in the overlap of two areas of playing” (1971:381). The overlap is stimulated by conscious and unconscious communication in particularly open-ended, playful interactions, which include the activity of daydreaming. Encounters that focus on daydreaming are to be distinguished from other anthropological glosses on the fieldwork experience as dialogic, collaborative, a joint narrative, or instrumental, in that they are not to be equated with the exchange between two egos or distinct subjectivities but involve a third subjectivity (the analytic third) created through unconscious exchange (cf. Groark 2009).

Put another way, an analysis of daydreaming and reverie in the ethnographic encounter does not reveal the point of difference between two already constituted cultures or two public selves but, instead, discloses knowledge of unconscious intersubjective exchange that points to future communicative possibilities. The creation of the intersubjective third subject in the interlocution-based encounter can form the basis for an autonomous (with respect to the ego) “inner other” that reveals an alternative sense of reality in which the anthropologist, at least momentarily, also takes part. Moreover, if the experience and the storytelling of this understanding are of sufficient depth and texture—crafted to include the conditions of articulation but allowed to meander across domains, they can (and, one hopes, will) also stimulate readers to reverie, to associations that will increase their unconscious receptivity to what is being communicated.

**Episode one: Dream collector**

This first episode occurred in the fall of 2004 during my encounter with a merchant in the Souk al-Atarin (Borneman 2007:115–116). Majid calls me a dream collector because I make a point of asking people about their dreams. Freud famously defined dreams as the “fulfillment of a wish,” and I see them as windows into complex motivations, how people envision their world, and what they generally want from it. Dreams are especially important for recording wishes that people are most reluctant to express openly to themselves or to others. Most people I ask say they cannot remember their dreams. Majid’s nephew, Mohammed, who assists him in the shop, says he remembers only the dreams that repeat. In one, he says, he is licking a woman, sometimes even her feet. His uncle overhears him and says, “He asked for dreams, not nightmares!”

The next day, when I ask Mohammed again, he says, “I dreamt of having a knife and using it on my uncle Majid.” Mohammed also thinks that, by “dream,” I mean simply what he wants and whom he desires—who among the customers that walk by he consciously desires. From his shop he yells after them: “Miss!” “Señora!” “Fräulein!” “Mademoiselle!” “Señorita!” “Madame!” Invariably the women he singles out are the older ones in the group, the grandmothers, who cannot believe this hunky, broad-shouldered 20-year-old has his bright eyes on them. And then, as they walk away, he closes his eyes tightly and says wistfully, “My cup of tea.”
I try to explain to Mohammed that I want not daydreams but dreams from his sleeping hours and that he must remember or write down these down as soon as he wakes. Majid dismisses my wish, “Mohammed only dreams during the day.”

One late afternoon, as I prepare to leave his shop, Mohammed says, “I will dream for you tonight, perhaps not of women but of boys.” I reply, “Let yourself go in your dream, Mohammed, perhaps ‘dream of goats or sheep. I don’t care.”

“But I want to have a dream for you,” he says.

“Don’t,” I reply.

The next day, Mohammed greets me with a dream, “I was swimming naked. There were lots of people: boys, girls, women, men. And the water tasted like blood. What do you think?”

“I don’t really know, Mohammed,” I say, “but perhaps you fear nudity, or the mixing of naked men and women, that it will result in violence.”

**Interpretation of episode one**

In retrospect, what was Mohammed trying to tell me? Here I focus less on the symbolism and symbolic world indexed by dreams and reverie than on the associations evoked by my request for dreams and the temporal–political context in which symbols are expressed. Mohammed’s uncle, Majid, initially dismissed what Mohammed described to me as “nightmares,” and later as “daydreams,” the implication being that they had nothing to do with dreams in the night, in which the unconscious expresses itself. At the time, I agreed with Majid and asked Mohammed for a night dream. He did, indeed, eventually come back with such a dream, one in which he was in water, swimming—one might say that he was contained, not free or floating, yet in a flow—but this water was dangerous, for it “tasted like blood.”

What is the significance of making water into blood? Water itself poses no danger to Mohammed. He is an excellent swimmer who takes pride in being the fastest in his family. He himself is not injured, and in the dream he does not see himself as injuring anyone. These liquids, water and blood, also have nothing to do with the father, or with the father’s liquids—specifically, semen—and, in this sense, the substances he dreams of are not in the register of the Oedipal. They are not evoked because of the presence of the father in mediating his relationship with his mother. The father is, in fact, absent from the dream as is any symbolization of his authority.

The most likely source of danger in the dream lies elsewhere and is twofold. On the one hand, in real time there is risk of blood in the latent tension between the Sunnite majority (to which Mohammed belongs) and the ruling Alewite clan, an anxiety I address below. On the other hand, there is the risk of blood in the erotic mixing of male and female. The people in the dream, then, were transgressing the classic social boundaries that regulate the mixing of groups, generations, and sexes. These boundaries appear especially rigid for young men like Mohammed but, for adults, are essential structures of the everyday in Syria.

So, in the dream, Mohammed is saying there is danger—symbolized by the water that tastes like blood—in the transgression of boundaries, especially those between women and men but also between young and old. These, however, are precisely the boundaries that Mohammed wishes to transgress. I, the unmarried, unattached adult stranger in some sense represented for him, in a countertransferral investment, the trangressability of generational and group boundaries. That I represent this transgression in my own person and unusual omnipresence as anthropologist leads him to unconsciously symbolize these wishes in a dream he then remembers.

Mohammed’s wish for transgression is also the subject of his daydreams, of his moments of reverie, which I had not initially acknowledged as significant. He imagines consciously killing his uncle with a knife or “licking a woman, sometimes even her feet.” These daytime imaginings are phantasmatic and exceptionally pleasurable, and Mohammed can safely entertain such thoughts because it is highly unlikely he would carry them out. And he can safely share them with me, the anthropologist who seeks an empathic understanding of his motivations.

But Mohammed’s night dream, by contrast, is a dream of the type his uncle characterizes as nightmare. The dream expresses something Mohammed does not want to admit to himself, and he therefore feels compelled to repress and to distort its message; it both expresses a wish and situates him in a horror scenario of conflict latent in daily life—between the Sunnite majority to which he belongs and the ruling Alewite clan. The night dream offers Mohammed an opportunity to think through the conflicts he encounters in the souk of which he is aware but not supposed to speak.

In real time, the women whom Mohammed pursues are often as old as his grandmother. When he flirts with them in the souk, most often in front of their husbands, their embarrased scolding does not deter him. Although brazen with older women, he is usually quite meek with girls his own age. Once, two young French girls seemed very interested in Mohammed and one of his cousins. They spent many hours over several days visiting the young men in the souk, and on their last evening in Aleppo invited them to a cafe. Mohammed and his cousin asked me and a couple of other friends. They came along. In the cafe, Mohammed was incredibly shy, totally unlike his aggressive salesman persona in the souk. He could hardly bring himself to talk to the girls who had so boldly flirted with him for several days.

So one might assume that the water surrounding him, which he tastes, appeals to an oral or even pre-oral register; it recalls that “oceanic feeling” identified by Freud as the register of enclosure and the feminine. The water that tastes
like blood is itself dangerous, for, as much as Mohammed desires women, at base he may fear being enclosed by them. Or it may even be that women symbolize his fears of social enclosure, perhaps because of his own personal phobias about female menstruation and castration. But the symbolism of blood may also be linked to the violence that might result should he act out his imagined transgressions. These tensions, between everyday violence and his own desires, fears, and phobias, are informed by the current sociopolitical context, by a formal calm undercut by an omnipresent anxiety about instability and change that shadows life in an authoritarian police state.

**Episode two: Internet pornography**

This second episode is taken from an encounter in January 2006 (Borneman 2007:209).

In the early evening, I join Majid in his shop in the souk. We gather his nephews together and walk to a new restaurant in an old villa that has been renovated on the edge of the souk. Actually, I very much enjoy the nephews, but more so one-on-one than as a group, when their behavior is ritualized and inevitably directed toward each other. All of them got new cell phones in the last year, and one shares with me the video clips he has downloaded onto his. His latest find is of a woman wearing high heels stomping on the genitals of a naked man lying on his stomach. “Aaaayyy,” I say, “please keep it for yourself. It pains me just to watch.” He chuckles and pushes another, similar clip in my face. I ask him if he identifies with the man or the woman in the video. He simply laughs.

**Interpretation of episode two**

Here my focus is on the relation of reverie to the peculiar kind of gendered excitement experienced through the sharing of sexually explicit Internet images. The protagonist in this scene is again Mohammed, who, since episode one, has been serving his compulsory army duty, but during my visit was in Aleppo on furlough. Much is changing in Syria, given the new ubiquity of cell phones and sexual imagery as well as personal access to the Internet. When I first came to Aleppo, in 1999, there was one Internet café, and nobody I knew had Internet in their homes. In 2004, there were about five Internet cafés, and a few people had Internet connections at home. In 2006, all the middle-class families I knew had home Internet connections, leading to the closing of one of the best-known Internet cafés downtown. The growth and expansion of the Internet worldwide has expanded and quickened the circulation of sexual imagery. Today, in many places, the Internet also serves as a medium for setting up sexual liaisons, dates, or even marriages; that is, it facilitates already occurring social activity and exchange.

Equally if not more important, however, the Internet facilitates privacy and individualized consumption patterns; it encourages reverie, specifically in the domain of sex. It frees sexual activity from many of its social contexts and controls, transferring these controls to individuals, at the same time also changing the nature of sex itself by promoting autosexuality and fetishes. Such sexual activity lends itself uniquely to reverie because, as Ruth Stein writes, sex offers a “distinct feeling . . . of stepping out of so-called ‘everyday mentality’ and habitual modes of functioning” (1998:594–595). Sex, then, although both banal and repetitive, nonetheless creates, in its phenomenal qualities of excess, enigma, abandonment and intensification of self, and immersion in the other, the possibility for a respite from the everyday. Internet sex differs from actual sex not in its substitution of a phantasmatic object for other forms of sexual connection but because it presents this object merely as an image, allowing for a greater disconnect between materiality—the real—and the imagined. Mohammed’s interest in a situation of heightened heterosexual excitement, in which the woman’s sexuality is represented only by her high heels and the man’s sexuality by his testicles, is an attempt to create an experience of aliveness that will disguise and partially substitute for the absence of such a sense in his everyday routines (Khan 1979). Mohammed, in other words, is showing me—the enigmatic stranger who represents excess and Otherness—this sexual image in an effort to feel vital and alive by finding a comparable and substitute experience and relation to the intimacy he deeply desires but feels is unobtainable socially.

Pornographic images on the Internet are influencing the desires of young men and women in Syria as elsewhere in the world. The question is how to understand this—what kinds of transformation of self and its relation to others are taking place? In 1955, the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer argued that only in literate societies does pornography appear, and, by pornography, he means “the description of tabooed activities to produce hallucination or delusion” (1965:193). Obscenity, Gorer maintained, can be found in many nonliterate societies, but it is social, it has to do with the sharing of sexually indecent or offensive depictions. It is, as Robert Stoller writes, “a planned assault on an audience” (1985:90). Pornographic literature, by contrast, is to be read in private and is therefore a pleasure that needs no audience.

The distinction between the obscene and the pornographic helps make some sense of Mohammed’s experience of the sex video. Mohammed uses obscenity in front of everybody in the souk, but he does not share his pornographic experience widely, and therefore it tends to isolate him in his reverie. This relative isolation from the social makes his experience of pornography subversive. M. Masud Khan makes this case for pornography generally: It “neither draws upon nor extends the reader’s imagination and sensibility;
it offers him/her a limited world of omnipotent verbiage, instinated and fabricated as somatic events, with their built-in faked climaxes and orgasms, at which the accomplice can feel both complacent and excited” (1979:221). The wish to feel both complacent and excited is a very modern one.

Khan argues that its one perhaps positive effect is to “transmute rage into erotic somatic events” (1979:223).

Over 30 years have passed since Khan wrote this, and today on the Internet it is not merely or mostly words but, above all, images, montages from scenes with unusual and often perverse relations to written folklore or mythology, that circulate for private consumption, that simulate erotic somatic events. Syrians generally, outside of the politically dominant Alewite sect, are deeply religious people, if not as pious as most people in other parts of the Arab world (though it remains a question whether the dominance of “Muslim piety” in other Arab countries is largely an image propagated by political and religious leaders in those countries). In any case, one effect of the secularism nourished by the Ba’thist regime of Hafez el-Assad has been to challenge religious dominance at the local level, including in the domains of gender and sex. The regime also directly limited, forcefully, expressions of religiosity in public and private, often creating the resistance it was attempting to eliminate. It was not Mohammed’s generation, however, but those of his father and grandfather that experienced the brunt of this force, including the government’s response to the Islamist uprising of the late 1970s organized by the Muslim Brotherhood: the 1982 massacre in the city of Hama. At that time, the Aleppian souk where Mohammed’s family works was also surrounded by tanks and attacked. This massacre remains a strong collective memory for Mohammed, though he is discouraged from bringing it into speech (Borneman 2009b). Under the leadership of Hafez’s son, Bashar al-Assad, who took over after his father’s death, on June 10, 2000, there is talk of a rapprochement between secular and religious forces. But the Internet revolution being experienced by Mohammed largely bypasses this rapprochement and the influences of secular and religious forces altogether.

Mohammed is a Sunni Muslim, born into a family of merchants. Since childhood, his immersion in the rationalizing practices of economic activity, his adaptation to the modular relation of customer to seller and the commodity form, has perhaps been his dominant mode of relating to the object world in the everyday. This mode of relating has nothing to do with Allah or Islam or religious experience. In interactions with me, Mohammed would frequently switch into a mercantile mode if I showed any interest in objects in his shop, and the next day he would express regret or embarrassment about having put pressure on me to buy things.

The mercantilism of the everyday and Mohammed’s daily involvement in commodity exchange with customers embeds him in social networks that make the experience of viewing pornography in the souk less isolating than Gorer or Khan might assume about the reading of pornographic literature at home. He is less a private reader than a viewer in a network of erotic image exchange. If he is isolated, it is only from some of his immediate kin as he yields to his autoerotic sexual phantasies. At the level of fantasy, he is fully “wired”—he does, indeed, obtain images electronically from anonymous others and he shares these images with me, and likely with select other boys and men.

He discovered how to download pornography in his free time with his army buddies, with whom he relates in what he describes as a very relaxed atmosphere. Once he completed basic training, he explained to me, in the barracks he had little to do but sit around, smoke the narghile, and play cards. The food is cheap and bad, however, so out of sympathy, Mohammed explained, his commanding officer lets him and others take frequent, relatively long, unscheduled leaves. Smoking the narghile—an activity that used to be largely restricted to adult males but is now practiced by both women and men across generations—is for Mohammed a habit. In the souk, he gathers the coals and lights the water pipe ritually around three in the afternoon. It disposes him to what Bion (1962) calls an “unconscious state of receptivity,” that is, he frequently gives himself over to reverie, and smoking the narghile helps sustain this state. This reverie does not take him in the direction of contemplating God, piety, and the sacred, however, but to imaginings of sex, domination, and humiliation. The downloading of pornographic images, then, is an activity that feeds Mohammed’s various dream states freed from a strong reality principle, allowing him to remain complacent about his reality and to be excited simultaneously.

That Mohammed did not respond when I asked him with whom he identified on the video, the female sadist or her male victim, suggests an emotional ambivalence. Mohammed probably identified with the entire situation and its ambiguity. On the one hand, he probably empathized strongly with the male victim. His father and grandfather are very successful businessmen, but they are gentle men, not tyrannical fathers; over nine months in their nearly daily presence, I never once heard them raise their voices to their sons. Among his more than 20 first cousins, Mohammed is known as the one with the biggest heart, always helpful and giving to others; yet imagining a life permanently confined to his family and the shop in the souk frustrates him. From this basically passive (complacent) position, Mohammed probably empathized with the man getting his balls stepped on by a sexy lady.

On the other hand, knowing that his language is filled with obscene foreign words and that his humor tends toward the lewd and risqué, I suspect he found the aggression of the castrating woman funny and titillating. The world in which he works—his 12-hour, six-day workweeks in the souk—is totally male, except for many of the customers.
Female members of Mohammed's large family, like those of the other proprietor families in the souk, are not allowed to work in or even visit the shop during business hours. Most of his female kin, including his mother, stay at home; those who work do so for other employers in other parts of the city, and certainly not in any of the many traditional Aleppo souks.

These women—grandmothers, mothers, sisters, sisters-in-law, aunts—cook for the men at night and take care of them all day on Fridays, in a kind of competition for the attentions of the men and boys. In Mohammed’s family, they have much power in the domestic sphere, and Mohammed’s emotional dependence on them likely generates some aggression against them. But they do not control the money that comes in, nor do they, as I mentioned above, accompany their male relatives in the public sphere. Power over their sons or brothers is available solely through seduction and emotion and is usually sustained through the cultivation of an oral tie: the love of cooked food. All of the young men I knew, in fact, claimed this seduction was successful. In particular, they all expressed a total love for the mother, making it likely that their ambivalence in that relationship would be displaced onto women outside the family. Some men I know in Aleppo continued eating their mother’s food many years into their marriages. Their wives, who cannot compete with the loyalty to the mother in this sphere, tend to place their hopes for attachment on the production of sons, the earlier in a marriage, the better.

So, for Mohammed, the woman in the video expressed his aggressive feelings in much the same way that the taste of blood did in his dream in episode one. She made, in the words of Stoller, “excitement out of boredom [by] introducing hostility into fantasy” (1985:90). The desire to humiliate is an essential theme of erotic play, but what is significant in this case is that Mohammed was humiliating himself, not the woman. The high-heeled video-woman was admittedly going to extremes to get attention, inverting the usual male–female romantic hierarchy by playing the active role. The point is, however, that she was punishing the man in the video. Although Mohammed thinks this punishment plausible if not also pleasurable and deserved, it also expresses his ambivalence toward women. In this way, Mohammed’s phantasies become social transgressions that construed women’s sadistic power over him as pleasurable.

Basil said he came because he had run out of cigarettes. He was interested only in buying cigarettes and smoking, not in going into the baths themselves, and he refused to go further than the waiting room. He insisted that I go in, however, and said he would wait for me in the area where one cools off. The events below follow conversations and interactions I had in the bathhouse while Basil waited (Bornerman 2007:79–80).

Basil is whiling away his time, drinking tea, watching television, bored, I am sure, but not much bothered by that, and he still has not smoked though he now has cigarettes. He reiterates his dislike for Syrian tradition. The television is tuned to one of the ubiquitous Arab MTV-like stations, which is playing an Arab rock video that Basil says is the first import from the new Iraq. The lead dancer is a tall, leggy blonde (dyed hair, of course), and the camera darts back and forth from her legs to her long, golden hair. When it pauses in the middle, she shimmies her ample breasts. The scenes of the video are cut to a quick tempo, and they become most frenzied in the whirl of her hair, which she aggressively and wildly flings around like the spin cycle of a washing machine. Nearly all such videos focus on the romantic encounter of man and woman. In this one, the leggy blonde is there to be seduced by the lead singer, a man, of course, who is older than she and fat, and who remains fully clothed except for the few top buttons of his shirt, open to reveal a hairy chest. The dancer—this modern, fully made-over figure—is the point of identification for the audience; she is the audience to be seduced by the singer and his love ballad. In other words, Tradition is to seduce the Modern.

“This is the new Iraq,” declares Basil, with an ironic chuckle. “The religious people see this and hate it, but they cannot turn it off. They like to watch it, but it makes them angry. That is our problem. There is no in-between. Either this, or tradition. I hate Syrian tradition, especially the traditions that divide the sexes.”

**Interpretation of episode three**

My focus in this final episode is on how attention to Basil’s inattention helps to reframe his unconscious associations of “the modern” as it articulates with religious and political authorities in contemporary Syria. One of the things that Basil wants but cannot have is also what Mohammed wants and cannot have: freedom to converse with women his own age, which he had seen me do without being negatively sanctioned. What I had relegated to Basil’s whiling away time and boredom was actually a state of preoccupation or reverie—thus, very unusual for him, his forgetting to smoke—as he tried to interpret the Iraqi rock video not through his own cultural frame but through an intersubjective analytic third. This led to Basil’s amazing insight about the inability of traditional cultural frames to help him incorporate the seductions of the modern and about the
ambivalence produced in what he calls “religious people,” who detest these seductions but are unable to say no to them.

Basil’s framing brings to mind a conversation I had in 2006 with a young soldier on furlough from the army. I met him on a bus from Homs to Aleppo (Borneman 2007:204). He was studying to be an imam at the prestigious al-Azhar University in Cairo, and because of this study, he explained to me, and because he is Sunni Muslim, he had just spent two months in the brig. “But what was the actual offense?” I asked. He explained that the authorities discovered foreigners’ e-mail addresses in his address book. Soldiers are forbidden contact with foreigners. He reminded me, jokingly, that our conversation was prohibited. I asked him about al-Azhar University, and he said he liked it very much; the authorities were very relaxed, and he could travel a lot in Egypt. He asked me if I knew who Pamela Anderson was. “From Baywatch!” I asked. “She is,” he said, “our Greatest Temptation.”

Basil wants intimacy with women—public dating, touching, friendship, romance, Great Temptation—but he is not demanding sex, at least not immediately. In this wish, he is not so different from the several generations of his uncles and older brothers-in-law, even though much has changed for youths growing up in Syria in the last 30 years. And much has changed in the last decade. One change is the intensified exchange of images discussed in episode two, which encourages not only fantasies about the ideal human body manipulated to yield maximum sensation but also the transgression of the sexual and generational boundaries that regulate the social. This new circulation of images and the wishes that grow out of their consumption are accompanied by anxieties about thoughts of transgression. These anxieties remain largely unspoken, and there is no institution at present able to allay the accompanying unease. In this context, many young men whom I met in Aleppo thought of my presence as an opportunity to express these fantasies and to contain, if only temporarily, the anxieties accompanying them.

Add to this the desire of the overwhelming majority of young Syrian men to leave the country. They see no economic future for themselves, given the high level of endemic corruption and rigid social hierarchies that block occupational access and mobility. Although, officially, unemployment is estimated at 10–12 percent, it is actually much higher, and this burden is carried largely by the young, who, when employed, rarely find jobs to match their skill levels. The wish to leave one’s country—true for both Mohammed and Basil—is a radical and desolate response to a sense of confinement and lack of alternatives.

This sense of confinement does not usually lead to less loyalty to country and culture. After reading the first few pages of Syrian Episodes on the Internet, in which I describe the experience of dust and clamor in the souk, two young men I got to know well sent me an e-mail that reads in part, “We are shocked. I want to tell you something, Mr. John, which is, you didn’t see anything about our great city, Aleppo. I think that you have to live ten years at least in our city to get an idea about what you were going to write about.” I assured the young men, in an e-mail, that I had learned much from them and had great respect for their city and that I hoped some of this attitude came through in the rest of my monograph.

Civic pride in place and tradition is a general Syrian sentiment, expressed to me even by individuals exceptionally critical of the regime or by former residents who had decided to live abroad. But the traditions that Syrians respect, including religious traditions, as Basil suggests, offer an inadequate and unsatisfying response to some of the siren songs of modernity that they hear and see. These modern seductions—wishes for romantic love, sex, political freedoms, and status consumption—do not emanate from outside Syria, even though some people may associate them with the West. They have already been introduced by Syrians, including the political and religious elites, and they are, in turn, often projected onto me. That is, these seductions have already become integral to Syrian subjects, which means that idolized internal voices are speaking to them about attractions and fantasies that they feel obliged to contain or repress.

The intersubjective third, countertransference, and self-disclosure

Thus far, I have concentrated on an analysis of daydreams and reverie as knowledge of largely unconscious intersubjective moments that help to contextualize other experience and point to future communicative possibilities. That the episodes, selected solely because they involve incidents of daydreaming and reverie, focus on anxieties about gender, generational authority, and sex—all prisms through which Mohammed and Basil also expressed their political, religious, and economic anxieties—became apparent only after analysis. Here I address the relation of the joint construction of an intersubjective third to my own countertransference, my reactions to the projections of my interlocutors, and the influence of these reactions on their unconscious feelings.

George Devereux’s essay on “elicited countertransfer-ence” remains the place to begin a theorization. Devereux (1967:242) relies on the concept of “complementary role” initially elaborated by Helene Deutsch (1953) and finds in the analyst who is maneuvered by the analysand into a complementary role a parallel to the anthropologist who is “assigned a traditional status [in the field], without his being aware of it,” and is then maneuvered into a complementary role. Devereux offers many examples; let me focus on one:
An ethnologist, very much in love with his wife, studied a Polynesian group whose girls eagerly pursue “exotic men.” When he tried to discourage the boldest of them, by stressing that he was married, he was told that being married to a White woman did not count. The ingenious ethnologist thereupon promptly pretended that his wife was a Polynesian girl from another island. Since it was contrary to custom to seduce a Polynesian woman’s husband, the ethnologist was able to remain faithful to his wife, without antagonizing local girls. [1967:242]

The lesson Devereux draws from this account is that, as ethnographers, we should be wary of the temptation to fulfill the expectations of our interlocutors, be wary of stepping into the roles we are assigned. We might be misled into assuming that what others show us expresses their everyday reality, whereas, in fact, that reality is separate from ours; yet our access to their quotidian world is often predicated on the adoption of the complementary role that they assign us. Devereux here was attacking a problem of his time: the illusion of going native, the assumption that the anthropologist could experience the native world as the native did. Although few anthropologists hold this illusion today, the conundrum of elicited countertransference and our often willful ignorance of it has not disappeared. Our modes of dealing with countertransference, however, have changed considerably.

Ethnographers today justifiably tend to disavow the image of themselves as passive seekers of information. For those we study, we also are active subjects, and particular kinds too, most likely the sort that others might want to know something about. The ambiguity of our roles—what are we really up to?—distinguishes us from other researchers and awakens curiosity. If we think that our interlocutors know nothing about us but our questions, we risk basing our representations largely on their responses to our projections and imprisoning us both in each other’s projections. To think that I might access the reality of others by interviewing them, merely asking questions that they then answer, or simply by hanging out and observing them, unaffected by their reactions to me, is extremely naive; I would arrive at a very one-dimensional picture of their life.

For reasons both epistemological and empirical, my research with young Syrians, mostly men, was based primarily on questions asked of me rather than my questions to them, and I paid particular attention to accidental and unplanned encounters. From this reversal of usual roles, one should not conclude, through analogy with the psychoanalytic session, that the initial transference was mine, the countertransference theirs. In fact, the transference worked dynamically and reciprocally, though not symmetrically, as both I and my interlocutors struggled to adjust to the different personae at play. My own identification as an anthropologist had little resonance in Syria, as that role exists there only as archaeologist—someone who explicates the premodern past. But people did know me as a researcher, and I had a great deal of authority as father substitute and teacher, the latter role being the primary reason I was asked so many questions. I was also asked many questions because I am American, a personal representative of a powerful specter that has tremendous influence over Syrian lives but which Syrians rarely get the chance to see and confront. In acknowledging that nationality, I not only yielded power but was positioned as a likely spy, making me attractive for agents of the Mukhabarat (secret service) and a rich source of rumor (Borneman 2009a).

The more precise question for ethnographers is the extent and meaning of self-disclosure in response to the wishes of the interlocutor. To the extent I was aware, I consciously acknowledged and accepted my interlocutors’ complementary roles, and at the same time I unconsciously resisted the restrictions of many of their narrow projections. Young men certainly picked up on this resistance and often made unexpected allowances for me, especially through humor and irony, including, what surprised me, dismissing rumors that I was a spy and, what I think was less conscious on their part, playing with me as a father substitute. They often asked to have photos taken of me with their fathers, or of me with them and their fathers, invariably positioned between them. This father-substitute wish operated at many levels, and it also secured for them a sexual distance from me and my erotic transferences. My argument here is that if anthropologists pay more attention to the ways we arrive at understandings—in this case, empathic rapport in unconscious, prereflective exchanges—we will broaden the kinds of knowledge we access and come to better understand what kinds of communication with others are possible.

The joint creation of an unconscious intersubjective third is something else, however, and not to be conflated with the dynamic of countertransference. Let me clarify with one example.

In episode two, Mohammed insisted on sharing with me a sadomasochistic sex video, trusting that I would not condemn or discipline him but wanting to shock me, and also perhaps thinking I would find it as titillating as he did. Instead, I found it painful to watch and made clear that I did not find fantasies of bodily damage erotically stimulating. That response was a form of self-disclosure that temporarily reduced Mohammed to silence and then a chuckle when I asked him whom he identified with in the video. He might have intuited my response even without my words—through changes in the look in my eyes, the shape of my mouth, the rhythm of my breathing. It was a spontaneous thought produced in dialogue with myself, in which I reacted to the video without reflecting on Mohammed’s wishes. This thought gave Mohammed some access to my own person independent of our specific interactions. In
disclosing something of myself that was not a direct response to his projections, my reaction left Mohammed alone in thinking about his motives and wishes.

I wanted, after all, to remain open to his multiple unconscious identifications. To feign empathy here would have precisely locked us into “the coercive projective power of each other’s vision” (Davies 2003:15–16). Mohammed’s motives would have been defined in a complementary fashion, in opposition to or agreement with mine. Sharing my own discomfort with his video was critical but not unempathic; it led neither to a harmony of perspectives nor to a normative critique but to a question about oscillating identifications within Mohammed, whether, that is, he was caught moving back and forth between submission and domination. In my response, a third dimension was introduced—of dialogue with myself—in which Mohammed was confronted with my own conflicting reactions to the images he presented. He could safely conclude that viewing the video was a subjective experience, indeterminate and open to the imagination, and that my own interpretation was that the video expressed sex as the infliction of pain.

Ogden refers to the potential for reverie to produce knowledge of the “intersubjective third,” the “unconscious third subject,” or the “intersubjective analytic third” (1997b:117) in the “interplay of the unconscious life of the analysand and that of the analyst” (1997a:593). There is some productive slippage in these terms, suggesting different levels of interplay of the conscious and unconscious for the participants and possible functions and forms of a “third” outside the traditional Oedipal father, including a separate, objectified, after-the-fact analytic construct or theory that disturbs the dyad of therapist–analysand (on the different meanings of third, see Ogden 1994:1–19, 2006).

For the ethnographic encounter, then, this third, which can take many forms, is not a static being but an active instance; it is beyond the control of the participants and can change on its own over time; and it functions through unconscious communication in influencing what is exchanged in the encounter. This third, to reiterate, is not a product of the conscious ego, the level at which most social theory conceptualizes “agency.” Its usefulness rests on its ability to resist attempts by the egos of the anthropologist and the interlocutor to appropriate it. That appropriation would enlarge the ego at the cost of unconscious intersubjectivity.

This third perspective also opened a space—intersubjective, unstable, autonomous—for thinking outside the dyad of my relationship with Mohammed. That space, I emphasize, was a co-creation, not to be identified with my perspective, as, for example, would have been the case had I verbalized my own erotic preferences or drawn attention to the sexual transference going on. Such direct North American–style disclosure is an example of ego assertion, in which the ego mistakes as willed sexual feelings that are a product of the exchange. That type of disclosure lends itself to immediate appropriation by the other’s ego, as the request for identification with sameness or difference. The goal in most intersubjective communication, however, is to retain for erotic wishes an autonomy from the conscious ego, so that such wishes remain a form of communication not about agency or will but one that can sustain the independence of the unconscious in reality formation.

To be sure, a mutual sharing of sexual desires and preferences by the anthropologist and his or her subject can lead to actual sex, and this may be the experience mutually desired. But in the fieldwork setting, making this desire explicit can also blow up in the face of the ethnographer, leading to increased distance and estrangement. This is not a matter of being sexually coy but of being tactful about difference. Such direct self-disclosure (telling Mohammed what I thought he unconsciously wanted from me or I from him) would likely have locked us in an interaction of phallic competition wherein we offered each other competing notions of sex. So, although self-disclosure is integral to sustaining a relationship of mutuality, that decision should resist the pressures of the dyadic relation of ethnographer to interlocutor and be tendered with subtlety so as to sustain the ambivalence of motivation in the unconscious.

The interaction involving the video took place more than 18 months after my first encounter with Mohammed, and it was preceded by a great deal of the erotic play that characterizes exchanges in the souk. These exchanges generally involve little or no self-disclosure, as men are so consciously preoccupied with business and selling that they will do anything to get the attention of customers, or in moments of boredom, to attract one another’s attention. In addition to frequently holding hands, leaning on each other, and kissing, men would often hold their genitals, stroke their cocks to keep them alive in front of each other, or brush their crotches against each other as they passed through narrow spaces. None of this play was ever brought to conscious speech, although sometimes boundaries were obviously transgressed and relations temporarily cooled. If I had made such erotic play with Mohammed explicit, it would most likely have damaged the dynamic flow of unconscious communication and narrowed the expression of the range of his motivations. This does not mean that in all circumstances such play should remain nonverbalized.

Over time, my friendship with Mohammed developed other dimensions of conscious reciprocity—I invited him and his cousins out for dinner a number of times; he offered to help me buy things in the souk or change money for me and, once, to clean my apartment—obviously responses to my own expectations. All of these activities also made him more comprehensible as an anthropological subject.
Access to Mohammed’s world, and specifically to his moments of reverie, however, required that I give him access to mine. My unwitting disclosure exposed him to the psychological content of my own wishes, but such disclosures are inevitable if fieldwork is more than fleeting and trust is to develop. No model for such disclosures is possible, other than to say they be sensitive to timing and to the sociocultural context of the Other. Telling Mohammed things about my relations with tourists who stopped by or individuals at the University of Aleppo or friends in the United States, for example, were timely interventions, important to create a third point of reference outside the conscious dynamics between us, thus opening up psychic space for self-reflection. My responsibility was to acknowledge the dynamic of the transference between us and, then, not to overwhelm Mohammed with emotion or speech—with my own intimate demands—that might lead to a decrease in unconscious intersubjective exchange.

Intimacy and knowledge in the ethnographic encounter and the psychoanalytic session

What is at stake in these encounters and this kind of analysis? For approximately the last four decades, interlocution-based fieldwork (from which these episodes of daydreaming in Syria are taken) has been a dominant, if not the most dominant, paradigm of fieldwork. Today, it is increasingly challenged by other ways of doing fieldwork that are still called “ethnographic” but share only a faint resemblance to that approach as it has been refined since the foundational research of Franz Boas and Bronislaw Malinowski. Perhaps only in the early years of the discipline did anthropologists pursue such a multiplicity of projects with such varied theoretical and epistemological assumptions. Many of today’s projects are no longer committed to an ethnographic encounter of sufficient depth and texture to warrant a reflexive and thick description, and many do not entail an ethical commitment to ongoing and potentially intimate relationships. Paradoxically, at the same time that many anthropologists have abandoned interlocution-based fieldwork, others have become more open to extensive intimacy with their interlocutors. For those who still do hold these commitments, the horizons of intimacy, the valence assigned to transference and countertransference, and the kinds of knowledge desired have also changed considerably in the last half-century. It is worth asking what these changes mean both for those practicing this kind of fieldwork and for those not.

Among the controversies regarding degrees of intimacy within the ethnographic encounter in the nearly hundred years of modern anthropology, perhaps the most publicized involved Malinowski, generally considered the father of modern fieldwork, and the posthumous publication of his diary by his widow (Malinowski 1967). The reactions to the diary, by “right-thinking types who are with us always,” as Geertz (1974:26) noted at the time, were largely condemnatory and full of finger-waving rectitude. The cleft between Malinowski’s intimate reactions in his diary, which revealed the emotional range of his countertransference, and his published field notes, which paid incredible attention to detail and epistemological truthfulness but were largely purged of his unguarded reactions, made explicit what many already knew. They drew attention both to the bad faith of anthropologists who refuse to acknowledge a role for their own desires and emotions in fieldwork and to the untheorized relations between experience and the ends of knowledge production.

During my own career, I have come to know a large number of anthropologists whose reaction to the “elicited countertransference” theorized by Devereux has been to invite their interlocutors into their homes, find places for them in their universities, have sex with them, fall in love with them, marry them, carry on polygamous affairs, or adopt their children. Intimacy between fieldworkers and those they study is no longer unusual. Among my acquaintances alone, I could compose a long list of complex, intimate arrangements that began in field sites abroad and have had dramatic reciprocal effects in the homes of both participants. In the context of ongoing fieldwork, elicited countertransference is now frequently understood less as a problem to avoid than a necessity (or pleasure) for responding to expectations and building trust in overlapping experiences (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009).

Only anthropologists of the “right-thinking” types, as Geertz called them, would insist on denying these ongoing intimate relationships, which, nevertheless, remain largely public secrets about which one might talk but should not write. The dynamics of the transference worked through in them have certainly been integral to the depth and breadth of knowledge produced, though not theorized, by several generations of anthropologists. Such dynamics would still be transgressive if between psychoanalyst and analysand, but today they are normatively (if only implicitly) accepted among anthropologists and their subjects. Even I have a German partner whom I met in Berlin in 1996, in my 15th year of fieldwork in that city; we now live together in the United States. Such relationships take place over time in the overlap of two areas of playing, but the playing has a different structure and goal in the ideal ethnographic encounter and in the psychoanalytic session.

For one thing, the analysand enters the room of the psychoanalyst, a protected and safe space for which he or she pays and that shields him or her from the outside world; the anthropologist enters the world of his or her interlocutors, an uncircumscribed and unstable space of indeterminate reciprocity in which he or she is a stranger, or even an intrusive guest, usually assumed to have more means than the hosts do (Truitt and Senders 2008).
For another thing, the psychoanalytic session takes place in a specified, compressed time and is repeated for an indeterminate period until the analysand reaches an agreement with the therapist that there has been sufficient work accomplished to terminate. After the termination of sessions, the analysand should continue this work without the analyst, and both parties are to pursue their lives independent of each other. By contrast, the ethnographic encounter is indeterminate and open-ended, of variable duration; in theory, it should not terminate but lead to an ongoing relationship, perhaps even to enduring institutional and intergenerational ties between communities that continue after the death of the anthropologist.

Finally, the session and encounter make different demands on intimacy over time: In the session, despite all the pressures of accumulating intimacy, the “as if this is real life” quality should be contained within the transference and countertransference that occurs in the room. By contrast, in the encounter, the “as if” quality constantly spills over to become part of the promise of ongoing life itself, not something set aside from it. With the expectation of an ongoing relationship, the intensity of intimate exchange and demands for containment of anxiety produced in the encounter may, in fact, increase over time, as research and life become entwined.

This intensity of intimate exchange is precisely what might stimulate an occasion of daydreaming or reverie, which has likely always been part of fieldwork encounters, requiring of the ethnographer a refined sense of when to listen, when to speak, when to interpret (Borneman 2002). That intensity may today seem very foreign to those anthropologists who pursue alternative kinds of projects, some of which, such as shorter stays at several sites, the study of textualized discourse alone, or research on science projects in laboratories, differ in more than just degree and therefore should be understood as dissimilar kinds of research. Such alternatives are essentially dyadic and ego invested rather than intersubjective and require a separate theorization of how they arrive at knowledge. They lack the capacity to create what, for the session and the encounter, would be an intersubjective analytic third, the joint though decidedly unequal construction that can facilitate the movement away from complementary relations to one of a reality-based mutual recognition of difference (Benjamin 2004). Devereux was correct in warning that our illusions may mislead us into making false assumptions about what we share in the experience of the Other (including the contemporary fantasy of equality). The more important point, though, may be not what we share but how and with whom we communicate.

Daydreaming in fieldwork is all about entering into the Other’s phantasies, involving a complicated system of unconscious cues and leading to a compromise between what one wants and fulfilling the Other’s expectations. It takes the participants outside their own trusted coordinates, which certainly unsettles and, if not mediated by an analytic third, may even ultimately overwhelm the subject to the point of psychosis. Because we are not always able to be receptive to the reverie and the projective identifications of our interlocutors, many joy-filled friendships in the field leave residues of distrust and feelings of betrayal, many marriages between anthropologists and their subjects end in divorce, and many anthropologists never return to their initial sites of research.

Nevertheless, if the ethnographer is able to playfully endure and contain the anxieties and wishes that are projected onto him or her rather than deny or try to overcome them, he or she can help to sort them out and facilitate a reinterpretation enabling an ongoing relationship that produces communicative knowledge of a certain depth. Many ethnographers may shrink from such an elaborate rendering of emotional exchange in the fieldwork encounter. They may prefer to think of themselves as engaged in more limited, rational interactions of information extraction or (im)material exchange. I am sure, however, that most of the subjects of our research would not agree to this simplistic representation of the research process, which, in any case, is thinkable only when the relationships are fleeting, nonpersonal, premised on distance. One way to sustain this picture of distance is to retreat altogether from the complexities of the interlocution-based encounter and to disavow its phenomenal specificity as well as its specific contributions to knowledge.

This phenomenal specificity—entrance into an open-ended and indeterminate relationship, of variable duration and in an unstable space, that risks spilling over its “as if” quality into ongoing life itself—is the condition for the experience of the intersubjective third brought forth through the daydreaming of Mohammed and Basil. It is also the condition for another special kind of nonrational experience, that of the cultural act of falling in love. In both experiences, the imagined encounters are disconcerting alternatives to some of the structures of the everyday. One might say, more generally, that reverie is a precondition of engaging in interlocution-based fieldwork and of falling in and sustaining love and that its absence invariably means the end of such fieldwork and a falling out of love. What decisively marks the interlocution-based encounter from other kinds of fieldwork, then, is not the explicit demand for rapport, dialogue, turn taking, sharing, or collaboration but a receptivity (or lack thereof) to the phantasies of the Other, with the goal of sustaining his or her presence, so as to bring the communicative possibilities of this presence to the fore (Borneman 2009a).

Recent advances in theory and epistemology in psychoanalysis have not brought about any radical changes in the well-established norms forbidding intimacy between analyst and analysand. The success of the psychoanalytic
session still largely depends on creating a facsimile of intimacy while avoiding the substitution of the relationship in the session for interactions with friends, lovers, family members, or intimate others. My argument here is that this is often no longer the case for the anthropologist engaged in ethnographic fieldwork. Both kinds of relationships open up a space of knowing in which there is a fragile line between developing trust and a very unusual, disquieting intimacy while at the same time containing and reinterpreting emotions so that neither we nor our subjects are overwhelmed by the experience. Whether through the encounter or the session, we are to arrive at an understanding of ourselves and others within horizons of experience that have been broadened and deepened.

Yet much interlocution-based fieldwork today occurs within new and globally mediated kinds of intersubjectivity, with the result that exchanges of intimacy, especially in situations of violence, often make it difficult and not always ethically defensible for the anthropologist to remain outside the lifeworld of those individuals we call “research subjects” (Ghassem-Fachandi 2009). Our encounters today risk upsetting these lifeworlds more than in the past but also offer more occasions for sustained intervention into them. The complementary roles in an ethnographic encounter often become part of new ways of imaging life. My contribution here has been to focus specifically on daydreaming and reverie in the encounter. In the case of the daydreams of the young Syrian men I have described and analyzed, my own presence, and our mutual attempts to act as containers for each other’s unconscious projections, stimulated the production of an intersubjective analytic third, with the revelation of the men’s wishes for futures no longer determined by the rules of gender and genealogy into which they were born.

Notes

1. In psychoanalytic literature, “reverie” is usually reserved for a specific state of unconscious exchange (see N. 3). For ethnographic purposes, it may be useful to consider reverie as referring to a broader range of psychological states, including daydreaming, distraction, self-absorption, contemplation, meditation, and sexual fantasizing. Anthropologists tend to employ a relatively inclusive notion of dreams that fails to distinguish between night dreams, daydreams, and reverie. In an excellent introduction to her 1987 edited volume on the activity of dreaming, Barbara Tedlock argues that anthropologists must not only acknowledge culturally variable ways of ordering and interpreting dreams but also should no longer oppose fantasy to reality. Instead, she says, we should “accord [dreaming] the same status as waking reality” and “integrate dream experience into other memories” (Tedlock 1987b:1).

This approach has since been incorporated into most anthropological work on dream activity, except by researchers with a strong aversion to psychoanalysis. Although the contributors to the 1987 edited volume still largely focused on night dreams, Tedlock does suggest that a fruitful line of analysis for waking dreams is to compare them to “omens.” My own emphasis here on daydreams as future oriented supports her insight, but shifts the focus away from classical concerns with how unconscious dreams can become conscious to how conscious, lived experience is made accessible to the unconscious and reworked in various dream states (cf. Bollas 1987; Ogden 2007).

2. I follow psychoanalytic convention and distinguish fantasy, as accessible to the conscious subject, from phantasy, what the subject makes inaccessible to him or herself and, therefore, largely unconscious (Isaacs 1948:73–97). Nonetheless, to say something is consciously wished in a daydream, and therefore a fantasy, does not preclude the work of deeper unconscious phantasies in the day-dream, as they tend to enter fantasies surreptitiously. See Price-Williams 1987:260 on “the interface of waking and dreaming,” on how imaginative processes relate to a sense of reality, and on the difficulty of classifying various forms of “waking dreams,” including Australian “dream time.”

3. Building on the original work of Melanie Klein (1946) on the projective identification of infants, W. R. Bion (1962) developed the notion of the capacity for maternal reverie: how the infant, still lacking language, projects into its mother unbearable and undigestible emotions, which the mother, if capable, receives and works over and gives back to the infant in modified and more manageable form (for a case study, see High 1992). Jean Laplanche (2001) elaborates reverie as a process of psychic translation in the context of his theory of generalized seduction, concluding that because such unconscious activity is an essential part of the human condition, it is not invariably pathological and not in need of elimination. This line of argument undoes the unnecessary opposition set up in folk wisdom (and early anthropology) between the West (where dreams are considered unreal or superfluous) and parts of the non-West (where dreams or “dream times” are considered an integral part of the everyday; see N. 1) and might more radically alert us to the dreamwork in the unconscious necessary for processing experience too painful to consciously think through. Furthermore, Laplanche advances Bion’s insights on the unconscious in mother–child relations by elaborating the communicative aspects of unconscious seduction in adult–child relationships generally. In this context, he focuses on how the infant “mis/translate[s] the adult other’s messages (or vice versa), creating a model of repression less mechanistic than presented in classical psychoanalytic theory.

4. My own understanding of the unconscious owes much to André Green (2005:227–235), who, for my purposes, stresses three characteristics (which I have slightly modified): that the unconscious is made possible through the natural functions of language, through symbolization and narration, but that its content is also resistant to ordered syntax (contrary to some readings of Jacques Lacan), that which language is unable to structure; that the unconscious aims to stop time and repeat or rework conflicts from the past; and that the unconscious is meaningful in either hindering or reorienting consciousness for each individual in a particular social context.

5. Between 2004 and 2006, I lived and did research in the ancient Souk al-Atarín and taught for a semester as a Fulbright professor at the University of Aleppo. Longer versions of these three episodes can be found in my monograph Syrian Episodes (Borneman 2007).

6. Changes in research objects within anthropology and the popularity of discourse-centered approaches has, in fact, made the encounter-based method of research and concern with difference seem, at best, quaint (cf. Faubion and Marcus 2009; Gupta and Ferguson 1997). Many anthropologists work with “data” they do not themselves generate (e.g., forms of archival research) and downplay the role of face-to-face interactions with the people they write about (e.g., study only representations in various print or visual
media or communicate only through the Internet). Much of this research stems from a fascinination with “new” objects (such as finance or science or health) or with the virtual (often defined as the negative of the empirical). As the self-definitions of “the field” multiply, the older distinction between anthropology (the comparative study of human difference) and ethnography (the systematic study of particular cultures) is, for many scholars, no longer compelling.

7. Unconscious intersubjectivity is one mode of accessing subjectivity and, in this sense, parallels the goal of representing the “local experience” peculiar to members of a distinct culture over time (Geertz 1973). I am not, therefore, arguing against “culture” or inquiry into the “native’s inner life” but that more interesting epistemological and theoretical questions arise with a focus on intersubjectivity. In this article, my focus is on daydreaming that occurs in the presence of the anthropologist and that overlaps with and exceeds the subject’s normative cultural frames. This focus on the intersubjective has much in common with the approach of Gananath Obeyesekere, who elaborates three levels of intersubjective interaction (1990:217–268) and argues for a psychoanalytic hermeneutics that makes a place for “knowledge . . . outside the ‘scientific’ enterprise” (1990:xxxv). It is also in agreement with Melford Spiro (1993; see his criticism of Clifford Geertz’s symbolic approach), who explicitly addresses not only public presentation or self-representation but also unconscious wishes. However, with regard to reflexivity, the approach I take is generally similar to that of R. H. Hook (1994:114–127), John J. Honigman (1976:259), Barbara Myerhoff and Jay Ruby (1992:307–340), and W. R. Bion (1962) and not that different from Geertz’s complex understanding of the relation of fieldwork (thick description) to theory (experience-distant concepts) and of ethnographers to their subjects. Geertz’s explanation of the person in Bali, Java, and Morocco (giving weight to self-conceptions) did not grow out of disinterested observation, as he positioned himself within the lives of those he described. For example, in justifying the goal of thick descriptions, he writes that they make “it possible to think not only realistically and concretely about [people] but, what is more important, also creatively and imaginatively with them” (Geertz 1973:23). Or, in another passage, “The whole point of a semiotic approach to culture is . . . to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them” (Geertz 1973:25).

8. The storyteller is a craftsman, as Walter Benjamin (1968a:83–110) explained, and ethnographers who do not take storytelling seriously, who do not attend to both the tale and its meaning, deprive fieldwork episodes of their epic qualities and therefore of the potential to impart wisdom. In his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Benjamin wrote, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘like it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger” (1968b:257). Seizing hold requires that, first, the listener and, then, the reader actively reflect on what is at stake for them in their relation to the subject at hand.


10. Khan explains the development of pornography in the following historical narrative: “With the industrial revolution and the advent of scientific technology in European cultures, man began to consider himself neither in the image of God nor of man, but in that of a machine which was his own invention; and pornographic écriture and imagery try to make of the human body an ideal machine, which can be manipulated to yield maximum sensation” (1979:226).

11. Devereux (1967:244–245) makes his strongest case for the complementary role with examples of anthropologists who worked in two field sites and were given different roles to which they had to adjust. He cites, for example, Géza Róheim’s complementary roles in Australia and New Guinea. In the former, Róheim resisted the role of boy initiate, which was necessary to legitimate his access to esoteric rites, because of its incongruence with his self-definition; in the latter, he accepted the ascription of wealthy, generous man because it was “congruent with his self-definition as a Hungarian gentleman endowed with an almost Melanesian passion for conspicuous waste in the form of magnificent hospitality” (1952:244). Róheim’s unease with the first role limited his understanding of his status, argues Devereux; and the congruence of his second role facilitated his understanding. Devereux also uses examples from his own work in Indochina and among the Mohave in the United States. In a humorous episode, he describes deciding to help Sedang kinsmen weed their fields one day to discover only that he ended up with a sore back and the Sedang did not, as they were accustomed to this kind of work and he was not (Devereux 1967:249).

12. Spiro (1996:763), in his review of the key theoretical contributions to relationality in anthropology, links the management of countertransference to the overcoming of ethnocentric bias (and makes the insightful claim that Claude Lévi-Strauss’s Tristes Tropiques is a book about countertransference). For innovative ethnographic research on the complementary role, see Tedlock (1987a), who has her own dreams interpreted by her interlocutors and theorizes dream sharing; Vincent Crapanzano’s (1980) model of negotiation within his fieldwork site, in which he simulates the psychoanalytic session with his interlocutor; and the ethnographies of Ira Bashkow (2006), who elaborates how a Papua New Guinea group perceives him as a Whiteman, Stefania Pandolfo, who stresses the intersubjectivity of dreaming and fieldwork (“dreams are never one’s own” [1997:9]), and Holly High (2010), who examines the ambivalence inherent in being and doing “good” in the fieldwork setting.

13. For an explanation of how “homologous experience (in) intersubjective engagements” might alternatively provide or forestall opportunities for “empathic insight,” see Throop 2010:781.

14. One response in the U.S. and British academy to the conundrums of intimacy with Others who are also research subjects has been to withdraw from the ethical controversies and epistemological dilemmas of studying difference and embrace self-study, called “anthropology at home” or “autoethnography.” Such studies are more likely to be d´ej`a vu encounters with reconstructed generational memories than with Others or objects in open-ended experiences.


16. A prominent example of this ongoing relationship is the Vicos project in development, initiated by Cornell University in 1952 in Peru, which continues in radically modified form to this day (see Cornell University n.d.).

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