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### The Video Camera Spoiled My Ethnography: A Critical Approach

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# The Video Camera Spoiled My Ethnography: A Critical Approach

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## Abstract

As videography and other media technologies are normalized in the field of qualitative methods for the purpose of data collection, there is a growing need to discuss the benefits and limitations of these data collection tools. This article chronicles an ethnographic video study focused on the experiences of Muslim adults living in the Netherlands, and why the author opted to end the project. Issues focus on reckoning with the imperial gaze of the camera, performative behavior of participants before the camera and interdisciplinary tensions the researcher faced from conflicting trainings as a qualitative methodologist and media practitioner.

## Keywords

video ethnography, imperial camera gaze, Muslim adults, failed research, participant agency, interdisciplinary tensions, visual data, media technology, critical qualitative methods, Dutch multiculturalism, cultural assimilation

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There are several reasons to abandon a research project. Whether a project is wrought with obstacles or abandoned entirely during the research design (Gregory, 2019), data collection (Naim et al., 2005; Watson, 2006), or coding and analysis phase (Roulston, 2011), insights can be gained from reflecting on one's research challenges and failures (Sousa & Clark, 2019). When utilizing digital media technology—in the form of audio recording, video capture, editing software, or data scraping—as part of a qualitative research technique for data collection, the media tools define what constitutes as data. As with any technological apparatus used for research purposes, the use of digital recording devices for knowledge production has the potential to generate challenges.

This article chronicles concerns that arose when I conducted an ethnographic video project to better understand the experiences of Muslim adults, in their late teens and early twenties, living in the Netherlands, from 2003 to 2006. The development of this project coincided with my residency in the Netherlands at the precipice of the United States invasion of Iraq and at the height of Islamophobia in many parts of the European Union and the United States. The focal point of my video engagement with participants centered on how these adults negotiated their citizenship as first-generation Dutch nationals while practicing Muslim traditions. Funding from the Mama Cash Foundation made it possible for me to purchase high-end video equipment;

and 3 years into the project, I had dozens of hours of digital video “data” that teetered somewhere between ethnographic video and documentary. From conference presentations to curriculum for an undergraduate course that focused on Hip-Hop and structural racism, I would assemble and disassemble video sequences. Over time, however, I grew skeptical of the visual method for data collection and set aside the project.

The project has prompted me to reevaluate how researchers use digital media technology as a data gathering instrument and raised three issues that ultimately led to the abandonment of the project: 1) the imperial gaze of the camera fosters a triangulation with participants and reproduces a longstanding anthropological, albeit colonial, imperative (Schäuble, 2018); 2) participant communication in front of a visual apparatus translates as performative engagement and therefore challenges what constitutes as an “authentic” moment; 3) there are ethical considerations that are produced when interdisciplinary

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scholarship does not uphold the same methodological standards across disciplines. Each point resulted in the need for constant self-reflexive assessment of the qualitative data gathering methods used to conduct this research and how they might conflict with the principles of documentary filmmaking. For this reason, I have never completed the editing of the video for viewership and put aside any writing based on my findings.

## Video Ethnography

Since the advent of photographic recording technology, the tool has emerged as a visual method and has played a role in how anthropologists document cultural practices, language, customs and rituals of the populations they study (Schäuble, 2018). Integration of the photographic apparatus has been largely driven by a need to “authenticate” the observations of Western anthropologists for the purpose of “classification and ultimately preservation” of mostly non-Western societies (Schäuble, 2018). This signals a methodological requirement to find an “objective” account of information through media technology, rather than other methods of human observation (De Groof, 2013, p. 110), and to develop an increasing reliance on the utilization of visual data gathering and analysis across the social sciences.

Fast forward to the current role digital technology occupies in our daily existence, and it is fair to consider the encroachment digital recording devices have played as a research instrument. In turn, this has changed normative practices for data collection as well as coding and analysis, making the deployment of these techniques somewhat routine. Use can vary from straightforward recording of interviews (Watson, 2006) to unobtrusively tracking subject’s everyday movements using video recording (Due & Lange, 2018) and the exploration of public spaces not accessible to the general public with the use of a POV camera strapped to the ethnographer’s head (Bennett, 2011).

Sarah Pink (2008, 2014, 2015) has been a strong proponent of utilizing video ethnographic methods for gathering visual data, analysis and expanding visual representation of sites of study. She suggests it would be a challenge to engage in any ethnographic research without some use of visual or audio capture and frames visual methodologies as a way to establish “place-making” (Pink, 2008). Under optimum conditions she argues for a collaborative process between researcher and participant, and recommends that researchers remain open to reflexive engagement (Pink, 2008). In a more recent piece, Pink, Sumartojo, et al. (2017) frame video use in the ethnographic process as a tool to elicit empathy. This extends to eliciting an “empathetic encounter” between research and participant (p. 372). Not unlike Pink’s approach to visual ethnography, the use of video during the research process can be perceived as taking a “holistic” approach to capturing spatial, interactional, and cultural practices during the data gathering stage (Lynch & Stanley, 2018; Pink, Postill, et al., 2017). However strong the argument, there are limitations with use of any research instrument regarding how well they can engage

some of the “invisible” sensory aspects of life (Pink & Leder Mackley, 2012, p. 2).

## The Impetus for Conducting an Ethnographic Video About Muslim Adults

The impetus for conducting an ethnographic study about immigrant adults and their experiences living in the Netherlands resulted from a confluence of events. It began around the time of the assassination of Pim Fortuyn, the right-wing journalist, turned presidential candidate (*The Guardian*, 2002), less than a week before I arrived in the Netherlands to write my dissertation and to live as a resident. The anti-immigration stance on which Fortuyn built his campaign influenced all political party platforms that year, including that of the left of center candidate’s political campaign (Akkerman, 2005). This anti-immigration rhetoric trickled down into everyday conversations I had with Dutch and American residents. American expats openly complained to me about hearsay accounts of violence committed by Moroccan and Turkish male youths against Dutch citizens or visiting tourists. Dutch nationals railed at me about the “failures” of integration policy in the Netherlands. Underlying these grievances was an exposed bigotry just below the surface of what I perceived as pluralistic Dutch society (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Hamilton, 2018). This propelled my need to know why Muslim adults had been singled out as a social problem; and why, if at all, were they resisting integration into Dutch society (Hamilton, 2018). With this backdrop, the Netherlands was changing from a welcoming state for immigrants to one mainstreaming national-populism within the course of a short time (Hamilton, 2018). Any attempt to confront that racism or broach the topic only made Dutch nationals defensive or in sharp denial (Essed & Hoving, 2014; Hamilton, 2018). Video documentation of the experiences of Muslim adults from their perspective seemed like an effective tool for capturing what was happening in real time around me.

The project was originally conceptualized as a storyline that included four young adults who represented various cultural identities on the spectrum of Dutch integration. When I pitched the project to Dutch television and cinematic production companies, executives expressed some interest in the plot. They stipulated, however, if I could secure external funding, they would want creative control over the project. I opted to pursue this project as a lone researcher-director, with the anticipation that I would have to negotiate my way into the field. Marked as an “outsider,” I held some hope that the video project might afford me access to certain types of spaces that might otherwise be inaccessible to Dutch nationals.

Recruitment for this project was naturalistic. I lived in a section of Amsterdam populated with families from different parts of the Middle East or who identified as Muslim. Through my daily engagement in the neighborhood, I entered a pastry shop owned by the Egyptian mother of one of my future participants. The pastry shop owner asked me in English and Dutch if I were Israeli. I identified myself as first-generation

Albanian-American and explained my project to her in English with some German words that sound similar in Dutch. Layla<sup>1</sup> then told me how her adult daughter spoke multiple languages, studied communications at a local university and that she would be interested in my project. I returned the following day to meet her daughter and to explain the project that was about to unfold. Zahra<sup>2</sup> was highly fluent in English and verbally consented<sup>3</sup> to participate in the project via video consent. Through Zahra's contacts, I was introduced to her former high school classmate, Hasan,<sup>4</sup> a first-generation Pakistani-Dutch adult citizen, who spoke fluent English and lived at home with his mother and siblings. Through these two participants, I met their friends and relatives who also identified as Muslim and first-generation Dutch. And although these secondary participants talked to me about their experiences living in the Netherlands, the focal point of the larger project rested with the daily life experiences of Zahra and Hasan.

### The Imperial Gaze of the Camera

Each time I adopt a media technology as a research instrument for data gathering, I am forced to confront the collusive legacy between academic knowledge production and colonial history. The very origins of scientific observation, not unlike the visually mediated representations early anthropologists classified, have long been tethered to Western methods for categorizing human beings into ranked racial, ethnic and gendered categories (von Hammerstein, 2010). This approach, not unlike the cinematic male gaze, can be used to categorize and subjugate others (Kaplan, 1997). Vestiges of this gaze continue to operate as a mechanism for asserting supremacy and dominion over bodies and occupied spaces (Solomon, 2007). Through the camera shutter, this position objectifies human subjects with a unilateral direction of observation and functions as a potentially unremittent form of power. Hence, this framing highlights how visual media technology has played a significant role symbolically reinforcing both Western imperial interests and male patriarchy (Kaplan, 1997).

For many indigenous populations, without control over biased anthropological representations, there has been little to no equivalent recourse for the desecration of their cultural identities. This was deliberately the case of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) that used early cinematic technology for capturing Inuit cultural practices. Flaherty's visual artifacts were to a large extent manipulated visual representations to fit preconceived Western stereotypical misperceptions about Inuit culture (De Groof, 2013). The works of Margaret Mead (1928), while some of the first anthropological texts and visual findings made accessible to a general public (Lutkehaus, 2009), have been reevaluated for their interpretation of indigenous societies and contribution to a colonial agenda, too (Shankman, 2009).

Often this camera gaze is predisposed to the privileged position of the Western spectator. A largely singular perspective was produced over the course of the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty" in the United States. During this

period there was an onslaught of documentary productions that focused on economically marginalized people living in Appalachia. Many of those documentaries communicated a uniform interpretation about what was the Appalachian experience and resulted in a "rhetoric of images" produced by outsiders (Butchart, 2014, p. 84). In the field of semiotics, this process occurs through visually-mediated interpretations of "human expression, perception, and lived-through experience" selected, in large part, by the filmmaker (Butchart, 2014, p. 84). There was, however, a local backlash to counter these representations (McCarroll, 2018, p. 87). Local communities responded by producing their own participatory non-commercial media content (McCarroll, 2018, p. 88). By capturing folk traditions as told by the community itself, the content reflected a critical mirror to the mainstream media products that had originally focused solely on inequitable conditions of Appalachia.

The above mentioned tension in documentary film making is not unlike many of the methodological debates in the social sciences regarding the positionality of the researcher and who can tell another group's narrative (Gregory, 2019). Implicit in this tension is an assumption that only insiders can tell the authentic Appalachian experience. In recent years expectations have shifted around who has the authority to tell a community's story; however, a researcher's identity cannot be treated as a neutral presence in any field setting. While I may not have shared a direct Muslim identity with participants, my Albanian ethnic ancestry was recognized favorably due to the history of Albanian marshal presence in Egypt during the Ottoman Empire. In hindsight, I surmise my relationship with participants and their families, my political positionality abroad and how I navigated the space remained critical to my community access (McCarroll, 2018, p. 90).

I readily moved through immigrant spaces as a visibly Mediterranean, cisgender woman, but I could not escape negotiating my national identity as an American. Being an American would reverberate in those built immigrant environments, even as I disassociated with American geopolitics or faced personal economic hardship and tenuous residency in the Netherlands. This status required ongoing self-reflexive practices that vigilantly confronted any visual representation that I could have inadvertently perpetuated by objectifying participants as the imagined "other" (Cole, 2019). Until now, I am not sure if my concerns to capture a myriad of different scenarios, or "B" roll, of my participants' everyday life were any different from those visual images that reinforced Western Europeans' preoccupation with cataloging every aspect of colonized communities (Cole, 2019). Basically, some of the contemporary practices, whether techniques of documentary production or video ethnography, encourage a kind of "data collection" that leaves nothing hidden from the surveillance of the research instrument (Cole, 2019). The end result has the potential to provide few opportunities for subjects to control how they are represented.

Principle contributors, family members and friends who consented to be interviewed for my video ethnography were by no means passive participants. There were multiple

opportunities for any number of participants to affirm their sense of agency during the production process and to leverage the medium to convey ideas that might have been censored elsewhere. Although I was driven to construct a cinematic narrative to better understand the experiences of Muslim adults living in the Netherlands, I was aware of how participants could utilize the medium to address social justice issues underreported in American mainstream media. For example, as Hasan's mother, Mrs. R., prepared a buffet after a group prayer gathering, called a *Malat*, she invited me to enter her confined pantry.

Mrs. R. faced her back to me, but as I asked her questions, she would turn and speak directly into the camera. In some respect, she was directing her gaze to an imaginary American audience whom she anticipated would watch this video. The kitchen could have been any Dutch kitchen. There was no other context but a sink, stove, and refrigerator. I shot from a low angle, trying to make direct eye contact as I held the camera steady. The conversation shifted from an explanation about the *Malat* ritual to what President George W. Bush had done to Islamic culture in Iraq. Mrs. R. reminded American viewers that they did not get the same content CNN broadcasted to Europeans. Her viewpoint shifted the focus of my many Hip-Hop themed discussions with her son to the stories of the stolen Bush election and how US soldiers had desecrated Iraqi culture. From the low camera angles to her decision to look directly into the camera lens, each production element gave Mrs. R. the moral authority and exemplified how she controlled the content of which she spoke as I followed her movement from the refrigerator to the stove.

This was an exceptional cinematic moment. Yet when a video montage of this sequence and other related moments were presented at a conference, cultural theory graduate students challenged my right to tell this story claiming the content represented the colonial gaze from which the object was framed within the frame of the project. Their feedback questioned whether as a U.S. citizen, I could tell this story. At the time, I declared that I was not representing any corporate media interests and that the families represented had invited me into their home; however, perhaps they were right.

## Participants as Performative Agents

Discovering Fakhri Haghani's (2015) research on the political participation of Egyptian women during recent and past revolutionary movements has enabled me to reframe Zahra's growing politicization over the course of our 3 years of filming. Haghani (2015) focuses on the significance of women's "visibility and performance" in the public sphere adding meaning to the spectacle of female political participation and activism in public space (p. 164). Through the lens of visibility theory, it is possible to understand how women occupy space in designated spheres while they simultaneously contest normative cultural practices about where and when they can be seen (Haghani, 2015). By asserting their presence in culturally unprescribed physical and virtual spaces the social interaction of female

activists becomes a performative act about political praxis as much it was about culture, social class and gender (Haghani, 2015, p. 164). Egyptian activists do this by leveraging their prescribed media roles under the pretense of focusing on art or fashion; and in a subversive twist, they emerge as a radicalized voice providing commentary about national politics (2015). This framework highlights Egyptian women's political participation and accentuates the relevance of my project when I reflect on a political march that Zahra and I attended together.

Not unlike some of the Egyptian artists and celebrities of the 1920s who mixed art, fashion and politics (Haghani, 2015), Zahra did not identify herself as overtly political. Yet, Zahra's presence at a rally imbued her with an on-screen persona synonymous with a politicized performative act. While Zahra and I attended an anti-Iraq war protest in Amsterdam, she may have gotten swept up by the environment or her ability to "fill the space" with her presence. This culminated when Zahra draped a found Palestinian national flag around her shoulders like a cape. The footage involving the flag conveyed a visual and cultural symbolism as well as a political position given her knowledge of how the imagery would be interpreted to an imaginary American audience. During the course of the march, however, Zahra and I lost contact with each other; and I missed her moment on the rally's main stage before the audience marched. This was a center stage moment that I entirely missed because I was trapped in another section of the crowd. Whether or not this was a substantive moment in Zahra's life might be contestable; either way, it was not captured on video. Instead, Zahra may have performed for the camera that she presumed was capturing her performative acts. It's possible Zahra got swept up in the political fervor, or she simply channeled a political conviction. Regardless, the very idea of a camera following her elicited a social desirability bias prompting Zahra to escalate her engagement with the march. Whether it was her knowledge of the camera, an audience of thousands around her in the moment or the presumption of a future audience of viewers, each element fueled our mutual needs.

Another example of how visual practices influence participant performance is evident during the course of a visual ethnography exploring urban spaces (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014). The video ethnographers describe how they took multiple takes of key climactic moments by reenacting their trespassing onto the top of a bridge. In some cases, excess footage was captured until the ethnographic videographer/researcher took an image that was aesthetically acceptable (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014). This illustration stresses how the video apparatus disrupts the organic environment and naturalized processes when there is an awareness by both ethnographer and participant of the visual end product and in some respect an audience evaluating the quality of the content (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014, p 152). On numerous occasions, Zahra and I discussed on film her position on whether women should wear a veil in public. It was a highly politicized topic that we discussed over multiple takes. After 3 years of discussions, no one clip represented her changing views. She was presumably trying to appeal through the camera to multiple audiences—her family, her community,

her college-aged friends and an American audience—when addressing the issue. Beyond her belief that once a person commits to wearing a veil as a practice, they should consistently wear it, it is hard to extract what her final position on that religious tradition was.

Ethnographers must take partial responsibility for mitigating the degree to which a participant feels self-consciousness when communicating in front of a camera. Perfunctory practices such as setting up equipment, testing the mic, in many ways reminds both participant and ethnographer of the video process and thereby re-enforcing the apparatus as an additional character in the field setting (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014). Media technology—photography, video, audio software, cell phone apps, even QDAS—functions like an appendage or a prosthetic that pushes the ethnographer toward simulacra (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014; Weidle, 2020). This was the case each time Zahra and I would sit in her bedroom and film while conversing about her highest aspirations and mundane concerns.

This notion of the camera as an appendage has added value for many visual ethnographers (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014). Garrett and Hawkins corroborate that the device affords the researcher a kind of legitimacy in the field. I was not immune to this advantage. In a sense, the media technology can perform double duty surveillance, by putting the participants under the stress of a second observational mechanism. The very presence of the media technology and its ability to produce a knowledge about its subjects unavoidably translates into a form of authority from which to confer when filming contradictory responses. And while power dynamics can diminish when the emotional “distance” between filmmaker and subject narrows (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014, p. 91), this can only occur if the ethnographer becomes a subject within the filmmaking process. Under optimum conditions, video ethnography, like documentary, can become “subject generated,” resulting in the integration of participants in the filmmaking process (Butchart, 2014). Nonetheless, this direct and indirect participant/subject involvement has the potential to foster an “observer effect” that influences a participant’s behavior as a result of being observed by the researcher (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014, p. 150).

This “observer effect” has been well documented for its influence on the performative aspects of human behavior (Brasil, 2013; Garrett & Hawkins, 2014; Shusterman, 2012). The very nature of the technology can elicit an intrusive triangulation with the device as the third character. Visual ethnographers should anticipate unforeseen frustration when a participant becomes self-conscious, emotionally withdrawn or exerts an unfamiliar behavioral change because of an acute awareness of the camera. In the case my visual ethnography, I found that the video camera functioned as an imaginary spectator that participants performed in the presence of (Harper, 2002). Frequenting Amsterdam’s Hip-Hop club scene with Hasan elicited a behavior from him that could be described as “playing up to the camera.” Though no fault of his own, Hasan reacted to the performative aspects of the club environment and to the social significance of having a person with a large camera following him throughout the space. It came as no surprise to me that the

proximity of media technology to Hasan could have resulted in changes in his spatial relations, and by default the behavior of any party who ended up within my camera’s frame. In some instances, a camera can be too close to the participant and therefore be perceived as intrusive; other times, camera angles positioned to hide the device from view can function like a CCTV surveillance system. Either way, as a visual ethnographer I found myself reflecting on my expectations of mediated media technology when such behavioral changes happened and how those outcomes either distorted my qualitative data or proved to be meaningful (Murthy, 2008, p. 843).

With the abovementioned considerations, introduction of a camera into a research relationship requires additional steps to be taken to build trust between researcher and participant (Pink, 2008). Zahra welcomed me into many aspects of her personal life and her family graciously invited me into their home. For most part, Zahra and I treated each other as peers. This position made me privy to shared information and stories that needed in some cases to be censored. This meant that I could not film some of the complexities and layers that made up Zahra’s life and that would have made her story a more engaging narrative. Over the course of a 3½-year period, I accompanied Zahra to her university classes, followed her into a voting booth during a national election, marched with her during anti-war protests, tracked her work shifts at the family bakery, celebrated her birthday with a large group of Egyptian family friends, supported her accomplishments during her driving lessons, and interviewed her for hours on end. As long as the video representation matched my subject’s idea of herself, the camera was on. It should not go unmentioned that I repeatedly reminded Zahra that she controlled this narrative and that her sense of agency would determine what viewers would learn about her life. In response, Zahra crafted her opinions and performance to fit a script that was most pleasing to her, and more importantly how she wanted to be perceived by her family. Consequently, there remained a substantial gap between her representational self on camera and her private identity that could only exist off the record.

## Interdisciplinary Tension

Digitization of the filmmaking process in many ways made my project possible. Access to visual practices have become more economically and physically manageable with the development of new digital media technologies; but, greater interrogation of the “cultural artifacts” produced from these new “authoring applications” is required of these methods (Weidle, 2020, p. 17). Such availability allowed me to arrive at this project with high expectations of what was technically possible in terms of cinematic aesthetic and editing software. The production values were always a meaningful part of the project to me; anything less than a professional deliverable would mean that I was not meeting the expectations of my interdisciplinary training. Researchers who simply capture video, as Garrett and Hawkins argue, would be robbing their project of its potential creativity (p. 190). For video ethnography to be more visually creative

and engaging to viewers, the format would need to uphold and even push toward higher production values (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014, p. 161) beyond “talking heads” and static videography. This means we would need to elevate the discipline but with that would come tensions.

For the duration of this project, the lens through which I captured digital content was never assumed to function as a neutral object. As a researcher and video ethnographer, I had to uphold an awareness of the potential perspective that the lens could project. In some instances, representation was communicated through degrees of distance, whether that of the viewer who would adopt a proximity from the camera’s angle to that of the participant and by proxy, my role as a video ethnographer (Butchart, 2014). This led me to ethically question whose perspective I had represented, and whether as a video ethnographer, I had truly adhered to a self-reflexive process (Filak, 2019).

There was no escaping those tensions each time I internalized the magnitude of this visually-mediating method. Garrett and Hawkins (2014) have identified three interdisciplinary tensions that are prone to develop. First, there can be tensions found within an epistemic production of knowledge (p. 187). This epistemic tension manifested through my choice of medium from which to learn about Muslim adults; but this could also result from the framework through which immigration studies conceptualizes the quality of life for Muslim young adults in The Netherlands. Second, there could be tensions among the “different organizations” that produce a “unified knowledge” on a specific topic (p. 187). For instance, I was pushing against an organizational tension that erupted during an onslaught of highly negative media coverage problematizing the Muslim experience living in the Netherlands. Lastly, Garrett and Hawkins (2014) describe the tensions between researchers who organize around research communities and independent scholars. As I wrestled with my position as a lone-researcher employed at different academic institutions, my scholarly work was somewhat marginalized given the methodology and perspective I was presenting. This said, there was a degree of cultural invisibility when I would discuss the issues affecting the lives of young Muslim Dutch nationals to an American audience across academic institutions. Furthermore, my small sample size and limited potential beyond an academic audience offered just one more obscure delivery of a representation that had been largely shaped by fictionalized media representations. In the case of my project, the epistemic tension that became most problematic for me had to do with my interdisciplinary identity and how my digital media training affected my use of some media technology during the data collection phase.

Cultivating an interdisciplinary identity seemed like a viable plan as I embarked on marrying the social sciences to digital media. While working on my doctorate, I completed a second master’s degree focused on documentary production and interactive instructional media. I produced digital health content based on the abovementioned tenets as I was simultaneously immersed in the principles of qualitative research methods.

During some of these projects I experienced contradictory approaches to gathering data. Based on documentary-style media production techniques, the attitude adheres to “get the shot by any means necessary.” Also, basic documentary production focuses on action driven storytelling and sometimes requires constructing an event or tension in everyday activities to avoid only capturing “talking heads,” in which human subjects just talk without much visual action. In the case of my project, there were macro scale tensions in the form of Islamophobia and anti-immigration happening in real time, but that context could not carry the project with an expected story arch.

This interdisciplinary tension followed the project in the Netherlands, as I weighed whether to capture moments on video, sometimes held back from asking pressing questions, or requested retakes of my subjects—a standard practice among many documentarians. In one instance, while recording a Zahra’s birthday party at her family’s home in Amsterdam, I was asked to delete the audio from a segment that may have recorded a private conversation spoken in Arabic. Shortly around the time the Iraq war escalated, Zahra recommended that I refrain from bringing my video camera to an open market that was frequented and largely run by the diverse Middle Eastern community residing in Amsterdam. A third example of the perceived intrusive nature of the camera occurred while accompanying Hasan to his part-time job as a home-health aid for a man with quadriplegia named Jan. The man consented to being filmed and interviewed but demanded that I refrain from taking images of his living space or of him from certain angles that would objectify his disability. All of these scenarios could have provided an engaging visual demonstration of how ethnography captures “place and place-making” (Pink, 2008), but it also reminded me of how the camera can be exploitative unless there is pushback from participants. Without hesitation I respected Zahra’s and Jan’s requests and complied. This was the appropriate choice given the ethics of qualitative research that recognizes the voluntary nature of participation in a research project and the agency with which participants should assert themselves. However, documentary has some gray areas where the filmmaker stresses, if not manipulates, the human subject who has consented to participate with the objectives of the project.

Sometimes I opted not to video capture key moments that could have enriched the project. Those events were still of value to the overarching narrative and were noted through qualitative observational techniques without the aid of media technology. The absence of a recording device did not make those events any less valid to the project. In some respect, the following example demonstrates the sheer over dependence on video capture to express the narrative and to determine if an event holds as much meaning without recording it for posterity. When Hasan retold on camera an incident from the previous night, the emotional meaning of the firsthand incident seemed to lose some of its gravity. I had been a witness to an exchange between a ticket master on the tram and Hasan, but the intensity of the exchange was mitigated by a reconstruction of events through verbal storytelling. Helping me out at the ticket

counter in the subway, Hasan walked away from the counter without showing his ID pass. This caused the ticket master to shout at him with suspicion that Hasan had been trying to board a subway train without paying a fare. My camera was not running, like body-worn cameras used by law enforcement, but had I captured the exchange it would have been the truth teller “avoiding abstractions” (Harper, 2002) and facilitated some accountability. Even today, I wonder if the event would have happened under the watchful gaze of the camera had it been recording during the conflict (p. 242). Yes, there were “polysemic meanings” that transpired but there was also no cinematic representation to prove it occurred in the manner that we recollected (p. 244).

Another example of meaningful interaction with Hasan without the aid of visual evidence occurred while standing in a supermarket aisle picking out dinner ingredients. We spoke on the topic of the assassination of Theo Van Gogh, a right-wing radio announcer who was murdered not far from where we lived. This event traumatized all ranks of Dutch society and put the Muslim community living in the Netherlands under duress (Traynor, November 13, 2004). Hasan’s mosque, for instance, reported finding the head of a swine on its doorsteps. This was clearly a threatening and accusatory message to the community. Our conversation, however, could never have occurred with the camera rolling for fear of retaliation. And like Harper (2002), I was relying on a video camcorder “to document history, to elicit interviews, and to make arguments about social change”; yet, I was struggling with the reality that I had witnessed without the aid of technology to mediate the social interaction (p. 245). In the end, it was not always obvious whether the presence of a camera could have facilitated the richness of these impromptu exchanges.

## Conclusion

Early anthropologists from the mid-nineteenth century needed to support their construct of racial hierarchies, and by proxy Western dominance, through the guise of scientific inquiry and methodical cataloging of visual artifacts used to label the physical attributes of different populations (von Hammerstein, 2010). Even today entering some spaces with a camera mounted on a researcher’s shoulders lends to a degree of credibility (Garrett & Hawkins, 2014, p. 147), but it also represents the legacy of those early practices, and for some populations an inherent association between photography and violence (Cole, 2019). By no means am I suggesting that all researchers should put down their media technology for the sake of breaking the objectionable legacy of previous scholars; however, there needs to be a constant awareness of the intrusive power of media technology; and for this reason, it led me to frequently check in with participants to find out how they felt about the process and whether they felt compromised or misinterpreted during the course of our video sessions.

Through community trust-building and immersive observation, ethnographic methods have the potential to provide meaningful insight about cultural practices and everyday activities of

a study’s focus (Aarsand & Forsberg, 2010; Due & Lange, 2018); and with the advent of affordable digital technologies, scholarship production has expanded both in terms of settings in which ethnographic inquiry can take place and how researchers collect and store data (Aralas, 2007; Gregory, 2018). Under the most auspicious conditions, video ethnography can provide a detailed account of social interactions and allow for discovery of new social phenomena previously undetected or missed by the observer. Audio and video recording can also function as a permanent artifact of data to be combed over for future analysis beyond the time of discovery (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2012). All of this lends to a dynamic process for capturing rich phenomenological content. Yet, the practices of visual ethnographic methods, like all data selection, requires thoughtful consideration of what may be the “researcher’s perception” of the reality under study (Derry et al., 2010). Consequently, once a video camera is introduced as a method for data collection, its presence can dominate narrative selection, casting a veil on selective memory over other events.

I argue that the camera can never be considered a neutral device as everything it captures translates a point of view. Even with self-reflexive practices stressed and rigorously adhered to, digital technology translates a point of view often, but not exclusively, held by the filmmaker (Pink & Mackley, 2012). This requires methods for determining the intention and perspective unfolding in the film/ethnography. Introducing a video camera can make a project challenging and influence how a researcher moves through a field setting as a qualitative methodologist. The camera can sometimes function as a shield which allows the scholar to disengage from their surroundings; but, often the technology can exude a kind of observational authority and impose a public presence that would otherwise have gone unnoticed. Therefore, although the video camera can foster “an intimate dimension of the social” (Harper, 2002, p. 13), the media technology must also be acknowledged as a material object that can be problematic when data gathering for the researcher. Keeping this in mind, it would be interesting to evaluate whether mobile devices, given their small physical footprint, could help mitigate some of these issues.

Finally, there are many context-driven ethical considerations that must rigorously be addressed before conducting a video ethnography (Aralas, 2007). In this article, I have reflected on three key issues that affected my decision to never use video ethnography again as a methodology for gathering data. First, the colonial gaze can be replicated through the intrusiveness of the video camera and what will become the researcher’s focal point. This can have an objectifying effect on participants and reproduce the institutional power of the researcher. Second, participant awareness of media technology has the potential to elicit both a sense of agency and self-consciousness in the wake of their knowing that they are participating in an ethnographic video with a potential audience. Lastly, there are intractable interdisciplinary tensions regarding best practices and tactics used to

proceed with any visual project. As a result, I put away my footage and never completed the project.

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### Notes

1. Name has been changed to protect anonymity.
2. Name has been changed to protect anonymity.
3. Zahra later provided an audio video recording of her consent to participate in the project.
4. Name has been changed to protect anonymity. Hasan also provided an audio video recording of his consent to participate in the project.

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