

## Filming family and negotiating return in making *Haraka Baraka: Movement is a blessing* | Lana Askari<sup>♣</sup>

### Abstract

This article focuses on how Kurdish returnees experience the process of returning “home”, how they imagine and (re) negotiate their future, through the discussion of my documentary film, *Haraka Baraka: Movement is a Blessing*, which tells the story of my parents’ return to Iraqi Kurdistan after living in the Netherlands for more than 20 years. While over the past decade, the Kurdistan Region has developed into a safe-haven situated within a conflict-laden area, the recent tension around the Islamic State’s (IS) expansion has changed the social and political landscape significantly in the Middle East, leading to new considerations for potential returnees. Based on the fieldwork I conducted through filming my own family during their return journey, I argue that using visual anthropological tools can open a window onto diasporic movements and illuminate social life in times of crisis by challenging the representation of Kurdish migrants and addressing the impact of uncertainty in their lives.

**Keywords:** Kurdish diaspora; social navigation; visual Anthropology.

### Filmandina malbatê û behsa vegeerê di çêkirina *Haraka Baraka: Movement is a Blessing* de

Babeta vê nivîsarê Kurdên vegeerayî û serhatiya wan di pêvajoya vegera bo ‘malê’ da ye. Nivîsar bala xwe dide wê yekê ka vegeerayî bi çi rengî paşeroja xwe xeyal û ji nû ve guftûgo dikin. Ev mijar bi rêka filma min a belgeyî ya bi navê *Haraka Baraka: Movement is a Blessing* tê nîqaş kirin, ku çîroka vegera dê û bavên min bo Kurdistanê Iraqê ya piştî pitir ji 20 salên jîna li Holendayê vedibêje. Di demekê de ku Herêma Kurdistanê di nav deh salên borî de bûye stargeheke ewle li deverêke pir bi şer û pevçûn, kêşe û nerihetiyên ve dawiyê yên ji ber mezinbûna DAEŞê, dîmenê civakî û siyasetî yê li Rojhilata Navîn gelek guhartiye, ku bi vê yekê re hîzr û fikarên nû xistine ber wan Kurdên ku niyeta wan a vegeerê heye. Li ser bîngehê xebata meydani, ya ku min di qonaxa filmandina rêvingiya malbata xwe ya vegeerê da encam da, ez îdia dikim ku bikaranîna amûrên antropolojîk ên dîtîni (vîzuel) dikare pencereyeke nû veke bi ser hereketên diyasporayê de û ronahiyê bixe ser jiyana civakî di demên qeyranê de, ku ji bo çespendina vê yekê ez li dijî temsîlên serdest ên koçberên kurd radibim û her wiha karîgeriya guman û nediyariyê ya li ser jiyana wan nîqaş dikim.

<sup>♣</sup> Lana Askari, PhD candidate in Social Anthropology at the University of Manchester, UK. E-mail: [lane.askari@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk](mailto:lane.askari@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk).



## فیلم گرتن له بنه ماله و پاس کردن له گه رانهوه له کاتی ده رهینانی "حمره که بهر ده که: جوولانهوه خیر و بهر ده که ته"

(Haraka Baraka: Movement is a Blessing)

نهم وتاره تیشک ده خاته سهر نهر کوردانهی دهگهرینهوه بۆ وولات، چۆن گهرانهوهکه بۆ مالهوه نهمون دهکهن، چۆنیتی داهاتوی خۆیان دههیننه بهر چار و دهیخنه بهر پیداجوونوه، به یارمندی باسکردن له قلیمه دیکۆمنتارییهکم "حرکه بهرکه: جوولانه وه خیر و بهر ده که ته"  
که چیرۆکی گهرانهوهی دایک و باوکم بۆ کوردستانی عیراق پاشی بیست سال ژیان له وولاتی هولندا دهگهرینهوه.  
له ماوهی ده سالێ رابوردودا، ههریمی کوردستان گهشهی کردوه و بووه به نارامگهی که له ناوهرستی نارچهیهکی بهر له ناشویه و مملانیذا، به لایم نهر شلمانهی نهم دواییه له ناکامی بهر سهختنی دولهتی نیسلایمی (داعش)، به شیویهکی گرینگ دیمهنی کۆمه لایمیتی ورامباری رۆژ ههلاتی ناوهرستی گۆریوه.  
ههر له بهر نهم هۆیه، نهوانه که تهامی گهرانهوه یان ههیه دهستیان کردوه به لێوردیوونویهکی نوێ، له سهر بنهامی نهم کاره پرمالیهی خۆم به گرتنی قلیمی سفهری گهرانهوهی خیزانهکی خۆم بۆ وولات، وهامی بۆ دهچم که به کارهینانی نامرازگهلی (visual anthropological tools) مرۆفاسانهی دیتنی  
دهتوانیت له پرێگهی بهر وروبوونوه له گهیل شیویه نواندنی کۆچهیرانی کورد و ناماژه پێدان به بێتهکلینی و سهرگهردانی له ژپانیان دا، پهنجهریهک بهرهوروی جوولانهوهی تاراوگه نشینی بکاتهوه و ژپانی کۆمه لایمیتی له کاتی قهیرانهکاندا پرووناک بکاتهوه.

### Introduction

"They come here and turn *ghamor*".<sup>1</sup> Dilshad, my parents' neighbour in Iraqi Kurdistan and distant relative of my father, was standing behind his fence. It was a very warm spring day and he was there alone, clearing excess branches from his garden. A former *peshmerga*, he decided to move back with his family to Sulaimaniya in 2006, having lived in Vienna since the 1990s. I was filming my parents during a mountain hike that morning and was in need of a break from carrying my equipment in the afternoon heat. "They're all like this", Gulzar, my mother, replied. "From Iran, Syria and Turkey, they come here and become *ghamor*. It's something in the water." "Write this down nicely in your paper, Lana", Kak Dilshad tells me. I tried to laugh it off but I felt uncomfortable, as though they were making fun of the refugees seeking safety in Iraqi Kurdistan, or seasonal migrants in the hope of getting their bit of cash that seemed to be flowing infinitely in this region. "This is important for your project Lana. What we're saying now, pay attention", Shwan, my father said, reminding me of my role as a researcher. "Listen," Kak Dilshad added. "From whichever part a Kurd comes from, or any other foreigner for that matter, he will drink the water of (Iraqi) Kurdistan and become *ghamor*, meaning lazy and whiney, just like the rest of us here". As I was readjusting my camera, I began to understand their jokes as an ironic self-commentary. Compared to their previous lives outside of Iraqi Kurdistan, or to Kurds from the other parts of Kurdistan, upon their return, Kak Dilshad and my parents had felt themselves becoming *ghamor*, lazy and whiney.

Following the formation of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq in 2003, many diasporic Kurds have attempted a return to their homeland (Emanuelsson, 2008). The formation of this de facto state had introduced new political and economic possibilities for the Kurdish diaspora; thereby creating new concerns regarding the implications of return and circular mobility in terms of social, political and economic development in the

<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own, unless stated otherwise.

diaspora and the homeland. More importantly, the recent clashes between the Islamic State (IS) and Kurdish forces from Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey have destabilised the safety in the region while, simultaneously, intensifying perceptions of Kurdish unification and independence. After having lived in the Netherlands for over 20 years my parents, Shwan and Gulzar, decided to move back to Iraqi Kurdistan. While at first apprehensive of their decision but eager to understand more about my parents' motives for returning, I decided to ask them to become the subjects of my documentary project *Haraka Baraka: Movement is a Blessing*. Exploring diaspora and migration dynamics in the film, I aimed at showing the reshaping of normative frameworks upon return and my parents' relationship, which I approached in a self-reflexive manner. In the documentary I attempt to explore the intricate ways of resettling in Kurdish society and how transnational space is lived, as well as creating a relatable film for viewers that goes past the conventional stance of standing "behind the camera".

As a visual method within anthropology, I relied on the use of filming as a form of engagement within participant observation and eliciting information. MacDougall describes observational cinema within ethnographic film as giving an intimate character of experience by showing the reality of selected individuals instead of presenting general cultural patterns (MacDougall, 1998: 75-76). Moreover, observational cinema has been argued to hold participant observation at its core because of its careful attention to observation (Henley, 2004: 114). Informed by the observational method, the use of filming allowed me to engage differently with my subjects as the camera worked as a catalyst for provocation and performance (MacDougall, 1998; Ruby, 2000; Henley, 2004, 2010); eliciting and provoking different types of self-perceptions and negotiations than without the use of the camera. In this article, I engage with wider issues of transnationalism, mobility, social navigation and visual methods in anthropology by discussing the provocations, performances and negotiations that occurred through the process of filming my own family. Rather than understanding "return" as a permanent decision, this essay attempts to show how Kurdish returnees maintain hope in uncertain situations through striking a balance between enduring unstable political and social structures, and planning towards prospective (imaginary) future horizons located in both the host- and homeland.

### Migration and return dynamics

While immigration laws have tightened in recent years and the current refugee crisis in Europe is so pressing, the Netherlands accepted large numbers of Iraqi refugees in the 1980s and 1990s after the Iraq-Iran-, Gulf war and Kurdish civil war.<sup>2</sup> After fleeing Iraq in the early 90s, my parents and I arrived in the Netherlands in 1993 after a myriad of legal and illegal

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<sup>2</sup> In 2014 around 54,000 people of Iraqi origin lived in the Netherlands. Together with people from Afghanistan and Somalia, Iraqi's make up the largest immigration group of asylum seekers in the Netherlands (Vluchtelingenwerk Nederland, 2015).

crossings to Europe via Russia. Based on the premise of their refugee status, our family was granted residency and placed in the integration system for asylum seekers. Subsequently, I grew up in a small town in the south of the Netherlands, learning about Kurdish language and culture mainly from my parents. At their time of arrival, my parents were in their late 20s and retook their degrees at Dutch institutions in order to continue their previous careers. Notably, after relocating house once within the same neighbourhood, they continued to live in the same town for the next 20 years.

The study of migration, diasporas and transnationalism have long been part of anthropological discussion (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004; Vertovec, 1999, 2004) and scholars have highlighted the emotional, aspirational, idealised and sometimes mythical attachments to place and of diasporic return (Al-Rasheed, 1994; Zetter, 1999). The emotional and practical difficulties, alongside often unrealisable and unrealistic expectations, often render it impossible to go back to the social reality of the past that was left behind or the “imaginary homelands” (Rushdie, 1991) that have been constructed in exile (Said, 2000). Moreover, the social process of homecoming is often counteractive to dominant postmodern paradigms of globalisation and the delocalised transnation (Appadurai, 1996). Research on returned diaspora has contested the idea of return as a definite point of homecoming, in addition to the intersectional theory required to study these new “diaspora spaces” (Brah, 2005). Notions of identity and diaspora as political categories have been long questioned in Anthropology, considering a more “fluid” nature of their understanding (Ibid) as people in diaspora continue to live between different places, occupying both physical and imaginative space.

For example, in emphasising the transnational dynamics and circulation of people and families as they continue to live “in between” spaces, theory has moved away from the constricting binaries of emigration and immigration (Markowitz and Stefansson, 2004). More importantly, here, homecomings have been discussed as providing rich examples of people’s cultural creativity and inventiveness during return processes; projects geared towards creating more promising future lives. Jansen and Löfving’s edited volume discusses the relationships between home, migration and violence in connection to people’s hopes, aspiration and renegotiation practices in the struggle for home (2009: 10-11). Through a political anthropology of home and mobility practices, they discuss how people attach, or detach, from particular places through social relations, projections of hope and the sense of possibility. My parents’ upward mobility during the last decade resulted in less dependence on the Kurdish diaspora in the Netherlands, which led to tighter social relations with a few Kurdish families in the local area and more interaction with the wider transnational family members in Europe. The Kurdish diaspora is spread widely across the Middle East, Europe and North America, with a large population living in Scandinavia and many of our family holidays were spent in Germany, Austria, Sweden and the UK, visiting relatives in the diaspora.

Contemporary diasporas are involved in diverse forms of international and transnational interconnectedness that provide modes for new types of global engagements; for example, financial investments and development projects, often linked to diaspora members becoming actors of peace-building in post-conflict regions (Faist, 2007) but also the dynamics of return and continuation of conflict (Stefansson, 2004). Studies of Kurdish diasporas have focused on issues of transnational movements and networks, political mobilisation, imagination and belonging within the Kurdish diaspora (Wahlbeck, 2000; van Bruinessen, 2000; Østergaard-Nielsen, 2001; Alinia, 2004; Emanuelsson, 2008; Eliassi, 2013; Galip, 2015). While Kurdish non-state actors have a long history of collective lobbying in the West, the de facto state of Iraqi Kurdistan has introduced new possibilities for Kurdish diaspora and returnees to engage politically and economically in their homeland due to the new political infrastructure. The political focus of Kurdish diasporas in Western countries has challenged the lack of legal governance, gender and class inequalities, corruption and undemocratic political arrangements in the Kurdistan Region, as well as defended the regime for creating economic opportunities and serving the wider Kurdish interest beyond the ruling elites (Eliassi, 2013).

As their own experiences are limited to short visits (van Hear et.al., 2004; Naqshbandi, 2006), returnees' expectations and practices, developed while in exile, often clash with real-life experience when confronted by systems of corruption and nepotism during the process of re-learning one's own culture. In the Kurdish case, returnees have expressed the importance of re-integration and adaptation to the changed local culture. Moreover, upon return, Kurdish returnees have expressed their decision of return not only in terms of social importance, but also in terms of economic and professional benefit (Emanuelsson, 2008; Alinia, 2004). During visits to Iraqi Kurdistan after 2003, my parents became more motivated about the idea that a permanent return was possible with the developing economic and political landscape. Witnessing many of their Kurdish family and friends in Europe moving back in the past few years, and with their daughter moving away from the family home, they felt more socially isolated in the Netherlands. In 2012, my father was able to open a new office in Iraq for the international company by whom he is employed. Subsequently, the construction of a new house in the village of Mergapan, a half hour drive from the city of Sulaimaniya, commenced and, once completed, my parents decided to return permanently at the end of December 2013.

Return is often based on "lifestyle migration", emphasising non-economic reasons for return in search of a better quality of life, or as a new "creative cosmopolitanism"; whereby returnees become part of a global moral for social and environmental justice (King and Christou, 2010; Darieva, 2011). The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has expressed interest in the Kurdish diaspora considering temporary or permanent return to Iraqi Kurdistan and promotes career possibilities online, via social media and

through job fairs (Keles, 2015).<sup>3</sup> However, reintegration into the Kurdish workspace and equal career opportunities remain questionable. In particular, Paasche's research on Iraqi Kurdistan focuses on returnees' perception of corruption and the negotiation of these practices upon return (2015). Leading from interviews conducted with returnees, he argues that they experience the unequal job opportunities, limited diversity of career opportunities, political party nepotism, slow bureaucratic system and lack of the rule of law as detrimental to their life (career) plans within the Kurdistan Region. In my parents' case, they both opted to find jobs in the private sector as re-registration for public employment proved impossible to secure without falling into the necessary corruptive *wasta* (nepotism) practices and because changes in municipality borders sent certain responsibilities endlessly back and forth between Kurdish bureaucratic offices and those in Baghdad.

### Visual exploration in making *Haraka Baraka*

My fieldwork began in the Netherlands, where I filmed my parents' packing up and leaving their home. Using observational cinema as "a point of departure into anthropological inquiry" rather than an end (Grimshaw and Ravetz, 2009: 138), my film technique is informed by the observational method. I used a hand-held camera in most situations, following my parents' actions and entering into discussion without setting up a formal environment to collect oral testimonies. Initially, I expected to elicit some of the micro and macro issues of re-immigration, revealing the unfolding of my parents' relationship during this time and how they would cope with their new environment and with each other. I followed my parents to Iraqi Kurdistan on three trips in 2014 as they moved into their new house and readjusted to the environment. In short, the documentary follows this time period chronologically with a flashback of family video footage being one of the opening scenes.

Grimshaw and Ravetz argue that film opens an active space for reflection (2009: 121). Through film we obtain an insight into the subject's world, where we can begin to relate to aspects of their experience and imagine further implications (Henley, 2004: 114). Visual research and filmic ethnographies inform us about drawing relations between themes and narratives, rather than generalisation. This makes it possible for the researcher, through film, to open an active space by allowing viewers to draw their own connections, albeit most ethnographic films are not very accessible nor sought after by the general public. As a visual exploration of social phenomenon, it can inform us of particular ways of social knowledge perhaps not easily communicated through written word (MacDougall, 2005). By visually exploring the experiences of diaspora returnees, my aim was to open this "space" for reflection on transnational engagements and how movement and immobility inform self-perception. Subsequently, I travelled back to Iraqi Kurdistan in

<sup>3</sup> See also <http://kw.krg.org/en/diaspora> (last accessed November 5, 2015).

April for a short stay where I worked on other film projects, during which time I had the chance to screen some of my material for my parents. While I filmed my parents watching a rough cut of my film, their feedback proved useful in understanding how they viewed themselves. They expressed that the story would not be interesting to others; they had “boring lives”. However, generally they were pleased with how they were portrayed in the footage and did not express any further concerns about their representation. This left me frustrated about how to create a more intimate story out of the footage that they regarded as “boring”, I had hoped that more would be revealed in the film about the development of their self-perception.

### **Representation in film**

While my methods and editorial decisions are informed by observational cinema, which represents reality as close as possible, I have used material from family footage, voice-over and, in one scene, underlayed the footage with sound from another scene, thus going beyond the observational method. I believe that none of these choices detract from the serious character of the film. Rather, they help contextualise its complexity without breaking the intimate connection to the main characters. In the following paragraphs, I will discuss some of the larger themes within the film and the analysis of the processes behind certain scenes.

Ethnographic film offers researchers the opportunity for incorporating a reflexive approach as the camera is able to break the barrier between the observer and the observed by showing the filmmakers voice and presence within the film context (Picton, 2011: 434). By doing “anthropology at home” the researcher/informant dichotomy becomes further blurred. However, Picton argues that the “ethnographicness” of film belongs to a continuum of representing reality and “anthropology at home films” are exemplary in not only furthering one truth, but also addressing the multi layered and multi-sided aspects of society and culture. Using ethnographic film as an output for dialogue with a textual form and reflection is, thus, a means to create a more interactive ethnographic portrait. The relational and sensorial aspect yields an interactive network between the observer, the observed and the viewers, in particular within the context of filming family where the anthropology is inherently “at home”. It is here where I aim to place my film, as an intersection between myself as an observer, researcher, filmmaker and subject, in order to show the intergenerational engagements within my family and to break the observer-observed dichotomy.

It was important for this project to communicate to the audience the emotional journey of my parents, alongside the humour that surfaced during this journey. I have been inspired by films such as Alan Berliner’s *Nobody’s Business* (1996) and Sarah Polley’s recent *Stories We Tell* (2012), which both explore their own family histories through testimony and archival footage, not by merely providing answers to the directors’ questions but through the examination of different perceptions of memory. In my film, I have used

material from a family video shot by my parents in 1997. Interestingly, my parents shot this footage to show their family back in Iraq how daily life in the Netherlands was for them. I used some parts of the footage, including my parents recollecting the first day they entered the street they were assigned to live in by the Dutch government. Placed after the opening scene, I believe it crucial to my project as it introduces my parents and my younger self, contextualising the whole project to the viewer through a self-reflective manner by means of voice-over.

Moreover, the juxtaposition of the old material with the new shows the changes in my parents' self-perceptions about themselves and the host and home country. While in the video material from 1997, my father talks about his bewilderment with the hospitality of Dutch society "We couldn't believe our eyes", in the 2014 opening scenes, Shwan talks of Kurdistan as a place "we have to go back to, to test ourselves". However, at another point, whilst gazing into the space of their empty house in Holland, he suggests to Gulzar to stop everything and "set up a new house here in Holland again". In these moments, notions of the ultimate diaspora cliché become apparent. Migration was already part of my family's life before leaving Iraq; both my parents grew up partly in Baghdad, partly in Sulaimaniya in northern Iraq. In one of the car scenes that is not included in the final cut of the film, my father explains how even though he had only lived in Sulaimaniya for a couple of years during his youth, moving back to the Kurdistan region meant returning to that specific city since it is the place where most of his friends and family are living now. So even though he had little personal memories of that particular place, the social connection drew him in. Interestingly, Baghdad as a city has become a distant place, one that is not only physically inaccessible but also mentally, a place where their Kurdish identity was denied. However, whichever side Shwan or Gulzar currently reside, in their minds they continuously construct the "other place" as better, endlessly comparing Holland and Iraqi Kurdistan.

While I had no strong preference about including myself in the shots, in the end chose to leave out my visual presence as none of the shot material was appropriate to the narrative. I have selected the use of Dutch voice-over throughout the film, as I feel it is my strongest language and clearly denotes my own background. The main languages heard in the film are Dutch and Kurdish, with the occasional use of English and Arabic. While confusing for English subtitling, this also reflects the multilingual aspect of migration. This is also mirrored in the title choice of *Haraka Baraka*, which stems from a scene in which my parents are waiting for the moving van to arrive in front of the house in Holland. While "*al haraka bi baraka*" (movement is a blessing) is an Arabic and not a Kurdish or Dutch saying, I have used it as the title as it connects to the constant movement of the diaspora, as well as my parents' personal take on their journey.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, it also hints at my parents'

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<sup>4</sup> "Al-haraka bi-baraka" or the abbreviated 'haraka baraka', literally translates as 'movement is a blessing' as well as "al-baraka bi-haraka", "blessing is in movement" has the same origin,



diasporic background, as they are Kurds who have lived most of their lives in the Netherlands and before that in Baghdad, a predominantly Arabic speaking environment and culture, highlighting the complex nature of migration. It expresses my parents ambivalent feelings about moving back to Iraqi Kurdistan permanently, their need to be active, to try something new and “test” themselves by living a life in Iraqi Kurdistan that was previously denied to them.

### **Crisis and mobility**

Studies have highlighted the complex relations between returnees and stayers<sup>5</sup> in post-conflict areas, such as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but also the formation of returnees’ groups and behaviours where stayers blame returnees for having left during hard times (Stefansson, 2004). While Kurdish returnees have expressed similar friction in the workplace (Emanuelsson, 2008), recent instability in the region has undoubtedly impacted on those social dynamics, as individuals who hold non-Iraqi passports are “free” to leave whenever they please. In this light, imagined prospective of mobility can be a helpful way of understanding self-perception within mobile or static states, such as experienced between immobile stayers and returnees who often enjoy the luxury of foreign passports and easier international mobility.<sup>6</sup>

However, these “elite” mobilities do not exist solely in the physical sense. Hage has discussed existential mobility in terms of upward class mobility. Having a sense that the self is going somewhere, regardless of whether or not it is practically realised, has converse feelings of entrapment (2009). Jansen applies this feeling of potential personal development or progression in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina. He argues that people take a role of “one in waiting”, rather than taking collective action regarding this predicament of “crisis”. Waiting out the crisis will then lead to what is considered a “normal life” (2014: 75). Furthermore, in their search for a home, displaced Bosnians explored places with potential for future possibilities. Their efforts include more elements of risk avoidance and protecting traces of worth rather than proactive engagements, arguing for the need to analyse home “prospectively as a socially constituted object of longing” (2009: 27). However, considering the present as a static state, Vigh argues how contexts of “chronic crisis”, where the crises becomes the norm, can actually illuminate prospective ways of re-adapting to new possible futures when different forms of risk and agency are at play (2008). Returnees are then placed in a context where imagined future lives are constantly renegotiated vis-à-vis host and home country, where different risks and lives are imagined and taken into consideration.

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but the former saying is more commonly used in everyday language in Iraq and emphasises the focus on the word of movement (*baraka*).

<sup>5</sup> Stefansson discusses stayers as those who either did not leave their resident areas, or were internally displaced within former Yugoslavian countries.

<sup>6</sup> See also <http://www.passportindex.org/index.php> (last accessed 5 November, 2015).

Living in circumstances of instability is fertile ground for researching how people find agency in precarious times and deal with the aspect of unforeseen events (Jackson, 2008; Pedersen and Højer, 2008; Vigh, 2008; Whyte, 2008). It points to a heightened awareness of how the social environment and one's position within it are subject to constant change (Vigh, 2008) and the need to compare one's position in relation to the past, different locations and possible lives, often through sarcasm and irony, in order to show the difference between "how things are and how they should be" (Whyte, 2008: 97). More importantly, the previous authors point out the need to ethnographically explore how actors simultaneously balance the particularities of instability whilst maintaining hope in an uncertain situation (Jackson, 2008; Vigh, 2008; Whyte, 2008). This friction becomes particularly apparent in the film's penultimate scene, showing my family preparing and enjoying food together, whilst a heavier tone is cast by current events. At the time of the meal, the news was constantly being followed on the television for the latest developments, as well as discussing potential escape routes should IS fighters enter into Kurdish cities. The conversations during this time in the city yielded recollections of past wars, albeit with the use of black humour. In this scene, while continuing to eat uninterruptedly, my dad remarks "We can flee to Iran, we know the way now already", indicating the cyclical understanding of time when reworking cultural material in light of the present situation (Whyte, 2008: 99). Other comments included; "We are very lucky, every 10 years we are allowed a holiday to Iran" or "Eat up before IS comes and you won't have anything to eat". Undoubtedly, the use of black humour is widespread as a common coping mechanism during times of instability.

Jansen stated the paradox of this predicament, joking about recurrent or cyclical features of war while at the same time expressing critique on this "life on hold" situation where people find their reasoning about their move towards a "normal life" disorienting, yet remembered and projected optimistically (2014: 83). Thus, in these uses of language in daily life, imagined through either the anticipation of a possible future nation-state or a more pessimistic scenario, the use of language and storytelling reveals how actors reflect on their position within an insecure environment.

Grimshaw and Ravetz argue that film editing is not about imposing ideas from outside but discerning resonances within the rushes (2009: 118). While I had previously discarded this family meal scene, interestingly, after watching the rushes, I was able to understand that it had captured both past, present and future imaginations and re-imaginings of life. Furthermore, a reflective layer was added by my voice which comments at the end "You are all eating, but I'm running away", pointing to the experience of time through relations between generations, storytelling and humour (Jackson, 2008; Whyte, 2008). While my grandparents and parents understood the events as a cyclical recurrence of time, I myself reworked the experience as a sense of personal guilt for having to leave in order to secure my film project.

### Elicitation in film

Using elicitation methods with objects, such as photographs and spaces are very effective tools to use in film. On numerous occasions, certain specific locations, in both chosen and naturally occurring spaces, triggered several stories, memories and reflections from my parents, but also conversations between us. For example, the scene where Gulzar is checking emails and photographs from her former neighbours in Holland drew out a spontaneous moment of photo elicitation, triggering reflections on how she viewed herself in Sulaimaniya compared with her life in the Netherlands. While reading through these emails only a couple of weeks after departure, I ask her how she feels about them. “I feel that life there is so far away, as if I am completely detached from it now”. Remarking that she is living in another world now, she admits that this feeling of distance led her to disengage with her former friends and neighbours in the Netherlands by choosing not to reply to those emails too often.

This became more apparent in the scene preceding the meal, where my mother is driving as we discuss her previous experiences of living during a time of war. A short while earlier I had attempted to film some images of Sulaimaniya from a hilltop. However, I was stopped by an army official and subsequently refrained from filming in the area as the Peshmerga were patrolling due to recent tensions. In the car, my mum and I converse about her astonishment over how politely the Kurdish soldier had talked to us. She says: “You couldn’t have imagined that in the 80s when Iraqi officials had their way”. While recollecting memories of the Iraq-Iran war, Gulzar talks about how at the beginning of a war people would refrain from parties, weddings etc. but as life goes on, the situation becomes normalised and people start laughing again. The environment had prompted my mother to also reflect on her thoughts about having lived in the Netherlands for so long. “In Holland you are safe but never completely happy because you know your people are not.” Thus, while at some points she imagined herself happier in her former life in the Netherlands, at other points she was reminded of how the political change in present Iraqi-Kurdistan offered her a sense of (potential) happiness that was never available in Holland.

On a few occasions I applied the “show us around” method, similar to MacDougall’s asking his informant to show the extent of the Jie’s territory in *To Live with Herds* (1972). Initially, in spring, I walked with my parents around the area where their new house is located and asked them to describe the direct physical environment, which prompted more information about my father’s motivation to return. My father, inherently performing for the camera, proceeded to give a personal account of the history of the mountainous area and his family background in the region; evidently proud to have returned where he once spent his childhood summers. During the summer, when the conflict with IS significantly changed the security of the KRG region, I employed this method once again. This time, I took my parents to a former Iraqi army control post, using this space of absence to elicit the recollection of

memories and their relation to the present and future. This checkpoint scene is the film's final scene. Whenever passing the control post by car during my visits, my parents would point out that my father was once held up there for several hours at the age of 18. This triggered numerous memories; in a way, it had become a repeated joke about the dread passing it once yielded, but how "insignificant" a place it now was. In my rush to leave, I decided to film in that particular place in order to elicit memories but also future plans, especially since it was located near my parents' new house. In this scene, I tried to provoke my parents with regard to their opinions of their return to Iraqi Kurdistan, as I knew they thought differently about the current situation. Here, the conversation turned into a discussion about my parents' thoughts on the possibility of leaving again. My father remains stern about the fact that he will not leave again and would rather fight IS, "We will set up camp here and fight them [IS]. We're not leaving." However, my mother shows a more doubtful opinion and criticises my father "That's what you said last time and still we left".

Mobilities exist not only in the imagined sphere; the sense of "elite" mobility that Shwan and Gulzar enjoy as Kurds with European passports can be seen in direct opposition to stayers who do not have the same privileges, which was the topic of many conversations in my family. Talking to several other returnees in Iraqi Kurdistan revealed similar sentiments, the feeling of being rejected by stayers for having left the country was very apparent. However, in light of the current situation, returnees also expressed a heightened feeling of patriotism rather than running away from potential IS threats, as my father stated in the final scene. This notion was expressed by my parents in the film, perhaps imagining homecoming and future within the current context as a second chance to create a normal life in the Kurdistan region. As important as representing "reality" in ethnographic film is that any event should be left open-ended as "the interests of anthropology are arguably limitless" (Picton, 2011: 424). The film ends with this checkpoint scene, highlighting the unstable landscape that is experienced as cyclical, as well as the limitlessness of any future horizons, as they were looking towards the skyline in valley. As my mother says; "No one knows what is going to happen tomorrow". My parents continued to finish and decorate their house and stayed, perhaps to control some form of meaning through their organised home, away from the potentially deteriorating outside world (Stefansson, 2004). It seemed that their choice to return meant that they would "wait out" the situation, convinced that any normal or safe situation in the Middle East would continue to be unstable, indicating the balance or compromise struck between imagined success and failure (Jackson, 2008: 72). As my mother remarked earlier in the film, "I will never see the day that the Middle East is a stable place", thus it has no meaning for her to wait for it become that way. Nevertheless, the final scene also indicated that my parents saw the present situation as exciting, a real test to their capabilities, "Maybe this is one of the good moments, we don't know".

### Reflecting on filming family

While my parents were immediately enthusiastic about my project, they did not realise that I would use the camera throughout my fieldwork. This caused some frictions. There are times that I laid aside my camera to help them during the move or because the environment seemed too personal to capture on film. Another issue I anticipated was my role towards the audience, addressing my own presence, as an insider-outsider researcher, and my personal involvement in the project. The intimate parent-daughter relationship definitely gave me an incredible personal access and how much time of my parents' time I could take up. Afua Asare-Nyako's film *Changes* (2010) and Chris Christodoulou *One More Kiss* (2012) have shown me the possibility of using observational camera work when filming family members to draw out the small dramas through a personal lens.

While both films have a timid character, my film developed into a more fast-paced documentary, as it feels more appropriate to my parents' characters and the overall narrative. As mentioned previously, while my parents' experience can be very relatable to other returnees, their experiences and perceptions are of an individual and subjective nature. Moreover, I had to be conscious of not drawing too many generalisations by eliciting the complexity of their identities rather than playing out "gendered" stereotypes. I aimed to portray them as a couple including dialogue and jokes between them, as well as a few scenes separately, where they could both give their opinion individually and where my individual relation with my parents was brought forward. For example, I consciously chose to include the scene where my dad is cleaning the empty living room and another scene where my mother is dealing with moving furniture into the new house, in order to depict the reality of my parents' relationship. Often loving and joking, it also includes commentary on each other's actions, for example when my mother complains about my father's overly optimistic outlook on the future and his plans to fight IS.

In ethnographic film, the subjective voice of subjects is always mediated through the anthropologist/filmmaker, forming ambiguous intimacy. The taboo on subjectivity in research has been long debated. Moreover, the emotional engagement of using one's own family as research subject blurs this notion even further. As discussed previously, Anthropology uses participant observation and it is the barrier between the observer and the observed that becomes a complex issue to communicate in ethnographic film. In ethnographic film, reciprocal observation matters, as it can address the conflicting views of reality by showing the relationship between the film maker and the filmed (MacDougall, 1998: 130-8). For example, by making themselves an element of the film, Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin became actors in their own film *Chronique d'un été* (1961). By feeling the presence of their voice through questions and seeing them appear in front of the camera, there was a break from the observer and observed.

This break can be brought down even further when filming family by including one's own voice and self-reflection. Schäuble (2015) discussed how, in filming and portraying one's family, the camera works as a catalyst that can provide insight into the process of remembering, acknowledging and understanding the family biography in a manner that does not take away the filmic reality of this unfolding. Can filming one's own family be one way to be more "honest" about the research and film process? Becoming a Rouchain<sup>7</sup> provocateur in conversing with my parents was an easy role to undertake. I found this to be a two-way process. While my parents opened up to me in vulnerable ways, as revealed in the scenes previously discussed, I was also confronted with their opinions and my own reflections about them. In particular, my initial aversion to their return was introduced when I provoke my father in the first scene by asking him "Maybe you're both crazy?", in relation to their return.

While it has been extremely confrontational for me personally to see my parents leave our former home, I would argue that through filming my own family, I became more convinced that I wanted my parents to make a successful return to Iraqi-Kurdistan. Film production has been discussed as a form of therapy, the filmic visibility being able to show the invisible side of one's memory and mind, and therefore offering an alternative tangibility for engagement (Schäuble 2011). Especially when editing the film, I became aware that I wanted to show the optimism that my parents continued to have in their return and emphasise that they regarded it as an exciting time and an experiment that needed to be undertaken, while at the same time incorporating my own reflections about their decision through the use of voice-over.

Filming family adds new perspectives to the relation between the observer and the observed in ethnographic film and (visual) anthropological research, its complexities exceeding the scope of this paper. However, in *Haraka Baraka*, I aimed at combining the strength of ethnographic film, the focus on small and subtle dramas, and the rawness of personal video material, voice-over and interactions, in order to show a film that opens space for reflections about family and migration dynamics.

## Conclusion

Ethnographic film can generate discussion and reflection through the making and viewing of the intimate access to a character's world. MacDougall has argued that in montage and juxtaposition; "It is the viewer who discovers connections within a network of possibilities structured by the author" (1998: 70). It is this opening of space and open-endedness in narrative where these connections can be drawn and reflection on the multiple layers and subtleties in the film occur. The interconnectedness of migration and transnationalism

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<sup>7</sup> Jean Rouch was notable in the development of ethnographic cinema, partly for his use of provocative interview and hand-held camera style, as well as the sheer volume of his work, comprising out of over 130 films (Henley, 2010).

plays out in life on many different levels. By visualising my parents' experiences into a narrative, this research project, focusing on filming as a tool to understand mobility and immobility within transnational space, considers how visual research can further our knowledge of themes of migration, diaspora and transnationalism.

As the presence of the anthropologist and a camera are a catalyst in altering people's self-awareness when filming, film can attempt to show in visual language the continual state of self-becoming (Julia Kristeva, as cited in MacDougall, 1998: 274). In showing Gulzar and Shwan in this process, by juxtaposing old material with new senses of self-perception, *Haraka Baraka* aims to provide an insight into my family life, and the frictions that play out upon my parents' return to Iraqi Kurdistan. I have argued that through the fieldwork I conducted, the representation of Kurdish migrants and the impact of uncertainty on their lives can be addressed and challenged by showing the intricate ways in which imagined futures can be constructed by way of humour and language in everyday situations, and inform the (re) negotiation of social life upon return through social relations between different generations.

Rather than understanding "return" as a permanent decision, I argue that my parents maintained hope by balancing out the unstable political and social structures with social imaginaries that constantly compared past and present, host- and homeland. While they felt susceptible to becoming *ghamor*, my parents considered their return and the changing normative framework of living in Kurdistan as a "test" to their first opportunity to live a genuine "Kurdish" life, despite the unstable situation in the region and the option to go back to Europe again. The challenge for future ethnographic research is to recognise the different patterns of instability and the particular ways people adopt to deal with this uncertainty (Whyte, 2008). With the current precarious condition in the Middle East proving as conflicted as ever, migration out of Iraqi-Kurdistan occurring once more, and the quest for Kurdish autonomy in the wider region under threat, it is yet to be seen whether people can "wait out" the situation once again when their resources to do so seem more limited every day.

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