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Trickster Hospitality: A Moroccan Escalation Act

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History and Anthropology Special Issue: Ethnographies of Escalation

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Trickster Hospitality: A Moroccan Escalation Act

In the summer of 2010, when I was living in Morocco for my doctoral fieldwork, I found myself involved in a curious escalation act unfolding in the living room of a family home. The escalation act, which I narrate in detail below, has as its main protagonist an uninvited guest, who effectively robs a family of their money by playing expectations of hospitality and sociality to her advantage – though, as we shall see, the story is not as clear-cut as it may sound. In this paper, I revisit the event by focusing on the scalar game at the heart of this “act of fleecing,” and argue that the act, or trick, works by abruptly transposing a social situation from one scale of interaction, based on and about money, to a new scale of interaction, based on and about commensality, or perhaps even humanity. In doing so, the encounter itself is transformed, with powerful consequences for all involved.

By focusing on the scalar game of this particular event, I bring into conversation classic themes of scalar play, risk, and ambiguity in the anthropology of hospitality (e.g., Herzfeld 1987; Pitt-Rivers 1968; Candea and da Col 2012; Derrida 2000; Rabinow 1977; Shryock 2008), with the focus on scalar movement and growth at the heart of this Special Issue’s engagement with the idea of “escalation.” A concept encapsulating a scalar “change of change” (Højer 2020) generative and generated by sudden accelerating growth, the idea of escalation aims to capture how a rapid (social, historical, political) development may “not only imply that a process is speeded up and geographically expanding, but also that the growth – and its conditions – may turn into something entirely different in the process” (Højer et al. 2018:37).

There is very little geographical expansion in the events I describe in this paper (though, as we shall see, there is the underlying threat of expansions of other

kinds). Indeed, the geographical and historical scale of this story has little to do with the paradigmatic escalations addressed in the introduction to this collection: international scandals, political revolutions, financial meltdowns. In this story, events take place in a living room rather than across nations, and they are over in a matter of minutes. Rather than geographical or historical growth, what I focus on in this paper is the scalar “change of change” of escalations, the core potential of escalations to transform situations and events “into something entirely different.” What makes the story of this paper interesting for an ethnographic theorisation of escalation is not (geographical or historical) magnitude, but rather the ways in which it exposes the social micro-mechanics of a sudden change of scale, where what changes is not only quantity (that is, more [or less] of the same is produced), but quality (that is, the very texture of what is changing changes).

An “ethnography of the particular” (Abu-Lughod 1991) of the conditions and consequences of a sudden change of scale where the terms of (welcome or unwelcome) social exchange are abruptly escalated, the paper focuses on the particulars of a particularly contained escalation to ask broader questions about how escalations and hospitality may, or may not, work. As Højer et al. (2018), I am interested here more in the *how* than the *why* of escalation, and this is mainly because the why of this specific escalation act seems to me quite obvious: it is money (though whether it is only money is a different, and far less obvious, matter). By focusing on the social mechanics, the “how,” of escalation, I address the complex management of an escalation from differently positioned and interested parties, and the “re-making of social meaning” (Ssorin-Chaikov 2000:352) generative of and generated by this scalar work. Tracing the complex scalar work of hospitality, I also touch on the possible

escalating nature of ethnographic practice itself, which inescapably depends, and thus inescapably transforms, what hospitality is and does.

Though the above reflections play an important part in the paper, my argument mainly consists of the narration of the “escalation act” itself. This is not only because the most interesting thing I have to say about the event is its telling (a partial and subjective telling of course, and this will be part of my point), but also because the story contains within itself the actual “problem” of this paper, namely the “scalar slipperiness” (Herzfeld 2012:211), or ambiguity, on which the escalation act, and its containment, balancing, and negotiation, relies. Devising a definitive and definitive “explanation” of the story would erase the very slipperiness and ambiguity that defines it. So, as we shall see, escalations of this kind require a certain amount of analytical openness and humbleness, as well as space for participants in and readers of the story to come to their own slippery conclusions.

An escalating guest

The “escalation act,” as I am calling it, of this paper is set in the living room of the Allouche family, a family with whom I often stayed during my doctoral fieldwork in Morocco in 2009-2010, and with whom I maintain up to this day very close ties.¹ The Allouche family lives on the outskirts of a rural emigrant town of Central Morocco, and their multigenerational household is similar to many others in their popular (*sha'bi*) neighbourhood. Four people regularly live in the house: the grandmother, Nejma, her unmarried son, Khaled, her daughter-in-law Rokiya, and her granddaughter, Aziza. Nejma’s son Mourad, Rokiya’s husband and Aziza’s father, has lived in Spain for more than a decade. The household economy depends – and this

¹ All names and some identifiable features have been changed.

is important for the story to come – mainly on Mourad’s remittances from Spain – remittances that were already drastically dwindling when I first met the family in 2009, because of the financial crisis in Europe. When I first met the Allouche, this four-people household was dependant on whatever Mourad was able to send over of the scanty unemployment allowance he received from the Spanish state, as well as the odd money made through Khaled’s occasional construction work in town – a total income that, compared to the price of basic goods in the area, is best described using the words of Khaled himself: *walu*, nothing. In sum, the financial situation of the family is relatively dire, and money is always short.

The escalation act happens on a Friday lunchtime. When I arrive at the Allouche’s home, a woman I have never met before is sitting in the living room, and all the Allouche family members are sitting around her. I am told nothing about her or who she is, but when I whisper to the young Aziza “who is she?” the woman introduces herself as a journalist. She shows me a ripped newspaper page with mugshots of men of various ages, and tells me she works for a Casablanca newspaper and is investigating “knife crime.” She tells me that she’d heard that someone had been recently stabbed in the neighbourhood, and a neighbour had pointed her to the Allouche family. Informed me of this, the woman returns to her conversation with the Allouche – this is the only time she speaks to me throughout her stay. I notice a specific tone in her voice, a specific style in her comportment, that comes with literacy, with formal education, and with the immediate social status it accords in Morocco. I recognise it not only in the ways in which the woman speaks and acts, but also in the ways in which the Allouche family speak and act in her presence, starting from the fact that they refer to the woman as “*ustada*” – literally meaning teacher or professor, but also an appellation made in rural Morocco to denote distanced respect,

and recognition of superior social status. I say distanced respect because the other way of connoting respect in this area would be to use, for example, *khalty* – maternal auntie – or even *ummy* – mother. So, *ustada*, while connoting respect, also signals distance and non-familiarity.

Ignored by the professor, the *ustada*, I return to whispers with Aziza, my 10-year-old bona fide cultural translator. It is through Aziza that I learn that her grandfather, Nejma's husband and head of the Allouche family, was killed less than a year ago on his way home from work. Stunned by this news, I return to listen to the family conversation with the journalist/*ustada*.

The grandmother, Nejma, is finishing telling the story of her husband's death, describing how the man who killed him was sentenced to 10 years in prison, which immediately translated into 5 years once his uncle paid the judge *l-reshwa*, the bribe. The *ustada* is nodding and scribbling a few notes. When the storytelling ends, Rokiya, the daughter-in-law, leaves the living room to bring in the Friday couscous waiting in the kitchen, Aziza is sent to the corner shop to buy a bottle of coke, and Nejma sits back on the sofa, a deep sadness on her face. I notice that the *ustada* is now speaking with Khaled in a lowered voice, Khaled shaking his head slowly, head cast to the ground. Rokiya comes back in the room with a jug of warm water and a bowl – she is heading for the *ustada*, offering to wash her hands as a formal guest. Here something happens, something that I have never seen before. The *ustada* refuses to wash her hands. I sense the room freezing, and everyone pausing. The *ustada* keeps her hands well away from the stream of warm water Rokiya is pouring for her, and instead voices to the whole family what she was discussing with Khaled: the *ustada* wants money. She cannot, she says, wash her hands if money isn't given to her.

The *ustada* says she will publish the story of Nejma's dead husband for free. She will even include, for free, a colour picture of the man in the article. All she is asking for, the *ustada* specifies, is a contribution to her expenses, that could even just be the price of her coach ticket back to the newspaper headquarters in Casablanca, a 5-hour drive from the Allouche's neighbourhood.

Nejma, the grandmother, quickly starts speaking to the *ustada* in an apologetic tone – “we have no money, we have nothing [*walu*].” Nejma's eyes fill up with tears while she enunciates the dire family situation “my husband was killed and there was no pension. My son *brra* [outside, i.e., living in Europe] is out of work, and there is no work for my son here. Life is difficult and we have nothing. We have debts with the bank and debts with the shops. We don't have any money to give you, we have nothing.” Tears are now streaming down Nejma's cheeks while she speaks in a dignified but also pleading tone. Unperturbed, the *ustada*, calmly repeats the same lines over and over again: that everyone has problems, and that something (*shi haja*) needs to be given to her as she has made it all the way down to the countryside (*'rubiya*) from Casablanca to get the family story and publish it.

Throughout this exchange, Rokiya, the daughter-in-law, has not moved from her position, steaming jug held in mid-air above the sitting guest, bowl in the other hand. She murmurs “here *ustada*, please wash your hands...please wash your hands.” The *ustada* refuses, and keeps telling her hosts that she cannot wash her hands if they don't help her get back to Casablanca.

Eventually, Rokiya manages to spill some water on the *ustada*'s hands, who proceeds to wash them with slow care while we all watch her. But as soon as the *ustada* has dried her hands with the towel handed to her by Khaled, the refusal act starts all over again. Rokiya brings to the low table at the centre of the room a big

plate of steaming couscous. We all sit on the floor around the table, ready to eat, when the *ustada* declares, once again, that she will not eat before she is given some money to get back to her Casablanca newspaper office. The whole act is repeated – Nejma recites again the dire economic situation of the family, her eyes welling up with tears again, while her son and daughter-in-law plea the *ustada* to eat the food in front of her, pushing the big plate of couscous in her direction (a communal plate which generally sits in the middle of the table), and rolling the pieces of meat scattered on top of the couscous to her side of the plate. No-one touches the food while the act unfolds – we are all suspended. Finally, Khaled swiftly folds some notes in the *ustada*'s hands.

The air immediately clears.

As if nothing has happened, the *ustada* picks up her spoon and digs-in the couscous in front of her. We all follow suit, in silence. The *ustada* unflinchingly serves herself hearty spoonfuls of couscous, and unflinchingly accepts and eats most of the meat in the big communal plate Nejma keeps rolling in her direction. She gulps down the glasses of coke that Rokiya serves her. I look at the *ustada* in wonder, and something close to admiration slowly mixes with my by now near-uncontrollable, if confused, anger toward her. I'm not able to establish exactly what it is going on, but my sense is that this woman is tricking us all, and she is doing a very good job.

Finally, the side of her plate cleaned up, the *ustada*'s phone rings. She speaks briefly, and then announces that her journalist colleague needs her urgently to report on an accident, and she has to head back to Casablanca. She gulps down a glass of mint tea Rokiya has hurriedly prepared her, collects her things, and she is gone.

A strange silence follows her departure. We all return to the couscous, which by now has turned cold. Nejma declares that her appetite has gone, and huddles up on the sofa. Her daughter-in-law sighs a long sigh, and speaks the versatile Moroccan expression “*ya rabbi*” (oh Lord). As for me, I remember sitting in a corner, speechless, wondering whether what I’d just seen was for real – have I just seen, I remember asking myself, an uninvited, unknown guest demanding money from a grieving family in debt as a condition to eat their food? I try to conjure up in my mind what I had dutifully read before my Morocco fieldwork by Andrew Shryock on Jordanian hospitality—or was it Michael Herzfeld on Mediterranean commensality?² but even the anthropology of hospitality fails to quench my confused anger. Little do I know that more surprises are still to come.

Walking back into the living room, Khaled sits at the couscous table, and as he lifts a spoon on the cold dish, he says: “I don’t think that woman was a real journalist.” W H A T! (I think, and perhaps say). I make sure I’ve understood correctly – “you don’t think she was a journalist?” I ask, “what about the newspaper? What about the article on your dad? What about that call from her colleague?” “That was all part of it,” Khaled says, sighing. I can’t believe my ears. Khaled has just let me in on the fact that, first, I have witnessed a hoax, and, second, that everyone a part from myself seems to have known all along what was going on.

I run to the kitchen and catch Rokiya washing glasses in the sink. “Rokiya” I say “do you also think the journalist wasn’t a journalist?” Rokiya confirms. “That woman wasn’t a journalist,” she says. “But then why did you give her money” I ask, nearly in despair as I realise my inability to grasp what is going on. Rokiya answers: “she refused to eat if we didn’t give her money.”

² E.g., Shryock 2004, 2008; Herzfeld 1987.

Scale shifting

While many years have passed from this particular “escalation act,” I remain, as may be clear from my narration, stunned by it – more, and more prolongedly, stunned, it must be said, than the Allouche themselves, a realisation I return to below. Before I do this, I want to try to trace what this stunned story may tell us about the complex, delicate, and indeed perilous social mechanics of the “change of change” of an escalation, and its crucial, decisive role in the “ambiguities and explosive moments of hospitality” (Marsden 2012:127). As I mention in the introduction to this piece, what makes the concept of escalation interesting for this particular story is that it brings into sharp focus the conditions and consequences of scalar “change of change:” the core potential of a sudden change to qualitatively transform situations and events, “framing the world in novel ways” (Højer 2020).

At the heart of the “act of fleecing” of this story lies a sudden, and powerful, change of scale. When her request for money is resisted, our *ustada* abruptly shifts both the object and ground of the social interaction – from a negotiation about payment, to a negotiation about the very ability of the Allouche to provide hospitality (*dyafa*) in their own home. By refusing to, first, wash her hands, the opening act of commensality, and then, second, to eat, the *ustada* abruptly changes gear, and shoves the confrontation into a new realm. This abrupt shift of scale – the shift from money to food – accelerates the confrontation itself, not so much in terms of speed, but in terms of intensity. The confrontation grows in heat, tension, emotion – and seriousness. I remember sitting next to Khaled and seeing the muscles of his jaw tense, sweat gathering on his forehead. Through its “accelerated growth” (Højer et al.

2018:37) the confrontation itself transforms – it becomes about something new and different.

By changing the terms of the confrontation, the *ustada* changes, qualitatively, the confrontation itself. The ground on which the interaction is relying shifts, and suddenly we are no longer confronted with the Allouche family denying money to a pushy journalist, but with the Allouche family denying, if indirectly, food to a guest. By refusing to eat, the *ustada* transforms the terms of the discussion from a negotiation about money to one about commensality, raising the prospect of her leaving the house without being properly fed – indeed, with no food at all in her stomach. This is something that the Allouche clearly are not prepared to do – the *ustada* knows this, they know this, and the escalation trick succeeds.

This “scale shifting” reveals something important about the process of escalation itself – namely, that it can be knowingly activated, and perhaps also actively contained. Let me start with activation.

Escalating refusal

Developing Gregory Bateson’s (1935) concept of schismogenesis,³ Højer et al. (2018:35) define escalations as distinctly impersonal processes, or anyway processes that, rather than being led by someone, are self-generating, and where “the driver is also the journey”. In this understanding, part of the point of an escalation is that it exceeds human intentionality, and sometimes even human imagination – its growth accelerates in unexpected and unpredictable ways, even for those very subjects involved in the escalation process (cf. Hannah Arendt [2006] on the relationship

³ In *Naven*, Bateson (1936:175) defines schismogenesis as “a process of differentiation in the norms of individual behaviour resulting from cumulative interaction between individuals.”

between subjectivity and revolution). But the living-room-based escalation of this story offers a different picture of the relationship between escalation and intentionality: here, someone is consciously activating the sudden “accelerated growth.” Our *ustada*, our trickster, our guest is an escalating machine – someone who niftily activates escalation to her own advantage. While some of the unpredictability identified by Højer et al. in the concept of escalation remains – the *ustada* after all does not know for certain how her hosts will react, confirming the classic theme in the anthropology of hospitality about both hosts and guests occupying precarious positionalities – our *ustada* is also working with, and on, an intimately shared realm, that of hospitality.

Hospitality is itself an unpredictable beast of course, and I do return to this constitutive unpredictability below, but one that has a shape and content that is immediately recognisable: the moment the *ustada* refuses to wash her hands, everyone in the room (except myself, that is), knows to which realm they are being transported. In this sense, our *ustada* reveals how the power of escalation can be activated, manipulated, directed. Importantly, it is the *ustada*’s cultural intimacy with her hosts’ (and her own) scripts and scales of hospitality (or of sociality – or indeed of humanity) that allows the escalation to be possible in the first place. As we know well thanks to the popular trope of the trickster in anthropology, to play with script and scale effectively one needs to know these intimately.

Our *ustada* seems to use what Herzfeld (2012:211) has called the “scalar slipperiness of hospitality” majestically. And while much of the anthropological literature traces the hidden powers of the host in hospitality acts – the mutual implication of welcome and domination, for example, or the suspension of rights that

often accompany the guest-status – what is revealed here is, instead, the incredible latent power of the guest herself.

It is the *ustada*'s refusal that reveals most explicitly this latent power – and also what constitutes the catalyst of the escalation, that escalating moment when the “change of change” is activated. The “generative and strategic” (McGranahan 2016:319) work of refusal outlined in recent anthropological engagements with the concept seems to lend itself exceptionally well to the scalar work of hospitality, where refusal in one realm becomes, as Audra Simpson (2014) powerfully shows in her work on the Kahnawà:ke Mohawk refusal of state sovereignty, a “labour-intensive process of assertion” (Simpson 2014:113) at another.

This connection between refusal and assertion is identified explicitly in the workings of hospitality by Marcel Mauss (2002:16) when he writes, subsuming hospitality under the broader logic of the gift, that “to refuse to accept is tantamount to declaring war.” I am hesitant to follow this warring line of analysis, mainly because classic studies such as Paul Rabinow's (1977) of Moroccan hospitality as a power game of dominance and subservience have been critiqued as stilted and simplistic. For example, in her gentle demolition of Rabinow's *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco*, Deborah Kapchan (2013) argues that framing hospitality in Morocco as an agonistic system of power misses “the nuance of social and affective exchange” (172), the fact that *dyafa* (hospitality) is also a “deeply embedded ethos” (173) in Moroccan social, and religious, life, and that careful, and indeed kind, avoidance of conflict is just as important as conflict itself. However, if I am perfectly honest, when the *ustada* refused to wash her hands it did feel a little like, just as Mauss suggests, a declaration of war – a spectacular one, where the stakes were impossibly high. But perhaps this feeling does not contradict Kapchan's observation (nor Rabinow's focus on power for

that matter) – as I have suggested, the escalation act works precisely because of a “deeply embedded ethos,” the kind of shared “ground” I mention above. Indeed, Kapchan’s observation on the relationship between hospitality and the avoidance of conflict may also be part of this escalation story. This brings me to the intentionality and agency of the Allouche themselves.

De-escalating containment

I still have to figure out whether the Allouche came out victorious or defeated from this particular “war declaration,” the *ustada*’s escalating refusal. We must remember that Mauss equals refusing to accept to refusing to give and failing to invite – both refusals mean, for Mauss, rejecting “the bonds of alliance and commonality” (2002:16). By making their guest eventually accept their food, the Allouche may have managed to impose alliance and commonality – and, my sense is, their humanity as hosts – on their unruly guest. Indeed, from this perspective, the Allouche could be seen as having effectively contained, and even quashed, the escalation that was unexpectedly thrust upon them, blocking the escalation from growing further, with even more troubling consequences. After all, the escalation never actually delivered the threat that was at its heart – namely that the Allouche would fail as hosts.

Indeed, the *ustada*’s trick works precisely because of the Allouche’s quick if reluctant *de*-escalation. This is the kind of defusing and containing that Magnus Marsden (2012) identifies in his study of “Afghan hospitality,” where he argues how hospitality requires intimate “knowledge of its mechanics” (117) if its explosive potential is to be contained in the relationship between hosts and guests. Escalation and *de*-escalation take a material quality in the hospitality encounters of the Afghan traders of Marden’s ethnography: hospitality is materialised in the Afghan pressure

cooker, or “pot of steam” (*degh-i bukhar*), which is both at the heart of hospitality practices and contains within it the risks and possibility of these practices – “the *degh-i bukhar*, if not carefully handled, is just waiting to fragment, explode, and even kill” (117). No-one was at risk of being killed in the Allouche living room, nor was war about to explode in the household, but both Mauss and Marsden point to just how high the stakes can be in moments of hospitality, and where the “growth of growth” may lead in hospitality escalations – and thus how careful, and indeed quick, containment becomes crucial.

But if the Allouche were successful in containing this “explosive [moment] of hospitality” (Marsden 2012:127), if they emerged victorious from the *ustada*’s “declaring [of] war” (Mauss 2002:16), this felt like a pretty unsatisfying and costly moral victory. (And I say costly because our *ustada* walked away with 100 dirhams [about \$11], equivalent, at the time, to the salary for 2-days, 9-hour shifts in construction for Khaled). If the Allouche were the winners in this escalating confrontation, they definitely did not look like winners. Leaving the room with money in her bag and food in her stomach, our *ustada*, on the other hand, definitely did.

The dichotomy winner/loser, or defeating/defeated, doesn’t work in any straightforward way in this escalation act – or, better, it works in different ways at different scales of value, which is why the escalation is so interesting, and also so effective. By escalating the negotiation with her guests to the realm of commensality, the *ustada* equates a loss at one scale (the loss of a 100 dirhams from the family budget) to a “win” (or at least a non-loss – “win” feels too upbeat when thinking back at the gloom of the Allouche living room) at another scale, that of hospitality. Separating money and hospitality in this way is of course artificial – not so much because hospitality costs money, but because often the two are co-implicated in ways

that are near impossible to extricate, as is clear in countless anthropological analyses of exchange (see Ssorin-Chaikov [2000] for one exchange that is particularly reminiscent of this escalation story). However, there is a sense here in which the *ustada* is able to make a loss in one realm equal a gain in another (and vice-versa) for her hosts – and for her, symmetrically, a gain in one realm (100 dirhams and, why not, a free lunch) a “loss” in another, if we accept for a moment the classic anthropological trope of the guest as someone who relinquishes some of their rights and freedoms (see, e.g., Pitt-Rivers 1968).

The meaning, outcome, and indeed mechanics, of this escalating encounter depend on, and are determined by, the perspective of the differently positioned subjects. This is not uncommon in moments of hospitality – and indeed of exchange more generally, where, for example, what is ritualised gift exchange for one party may be the trade of commodities for the other (Taussig 1980). But what is significant about the scalar multivocality of this particular escalation act is that it is set up so that the Allouche “lose” whatever perspectival positioning, and scale, they decide to occupy – they lose money if they de-escalate, they lose something much more difficult for me to define but clearly important enough to require immediate protection, if they allow the escalation to grow further, that is, if they continue denying the money once the *ustada* has escalated the meaning and consequences of that refusal.

This scalar game is what distinguishes the *ustada*’s trick from a more “ordinary” scam situation – or anyway what makes it a scam with a specific kind of escalating tempo, quality, and logic to it. In his ethnography of “getting burned” in the sapphire mining town of Ambondromifehy (Madagascar), Andrew Walsh (2009:62) traces stories of “exchange gone wrong or, more precisely, exchange

stopped short” where people fall victim not only of “clever predations of devious others” but also of “their own self-interested giving and misplaced confidence.” In his analysis, Walsh identifies certain characteristics of getting “burned” that speak directly to the escalation act of this paper – the element of surprise, the unreciprocated hospitality of uninvited visitors (in this case outsiders who arrived to the town of Ambondromifehy with the sapphire rush), and, what interests me most here, the shared basis of the relationship, including assumed shared understandings of reciprocity and confidence, that allow, and are required for, “the burning” to happen.

It is for me without doubt that the Allouche emerged “burnt” from the *ustada*’s escalation act. But what distinguishes this event from the kinds of scenarios described by Walsh is that the Allouche are burnt because they know exactly what is going on while it’s going on – rather than, as in Walsh’s ethnography, because they don’t, and thus realise too late when those who have done the “burning” have long gone. Indeed, as I argue above, the living room escalation works because everyone knows to which realm of value they are being transported – the “trap” does not rely on realising too late (or not at all), but rather on the realisation itself, and the compelling powers of this realisation. The Allouche de-escalate the escalation as soon as it materialises, but, by de-escalating it, they also surrender to its logic, and become “englobed” (Herzfeld 1987) by it.

Slippery escalations

What can the social mechanics of a living room escalation reveal about processes of escalation more broadly? As I mention in the introduction to this piece, the story I tell here has little to do with the magnitude, and the magnitude of expansion, of its fellow escalations in this Special Issue. Not only is the story I tell located, and firmly

contained, within a living room, but I have also traced how the whole point (or at least one of the points) of the incident is that its growth, acceleration, expansion – all keywords in the definition of escalation (Hojer 2020) – is quashed as swiftly as possible.

My sense is that what makes the story interesting for theorisations of escalation is precisely its controlled expansion and retraction. The story reveals not only the intimate, relational powers of an escalating “change of change,” where a small but resolute refusal transposes an interaction to a novel scale, qualitatively transforming the interaction itself. The *ustada* also teaches us how an escalation can be knowingly activated, and the Allouche on their side how it can be effectively (if reluctantly) contained. As I argue above, these interconnected actions complicate the idea of escalations as distinctly impersonal processes (see Hojer et al. 2018), instead revealing the space, indeed necessity, for relational intentionality in certain forms of escalating acts. But such controlled expansion and retraction of a “change of change” also reveals a further aspect of escalations, namely their latent presence in the very texture of everyday life. Rather than pertaining solely to exceptionally grand events such as global financial crises or transnational uprisings, the Allouche living room drama testifies to how escalations may need to be imagined as an underlying potentiality of everyday sociality more broadly. This potentiality, my sense is, is linked to the constitutive scalar ambiguity of social life itself – a scalar ambiguity that is particularly powerful, and thus particularly prone to escalation, when it comes to hospitality.

The complexities of establishing exactly who “won” and why in the Allouche living room tap into the constitutive ambiguity, including scalar ambiguity, of hospitality. If the rich body of anthropological work on hospitality is anything to go

by, there is nothing exceptional about the ambiguous aftertaste the event leaves both ethnographically and analytically. The work on hospitality, and indeed exchange more generally, is a powerful warning against the temptation of analysing this escalation act as an intriguing glitch in an “otherwise stable systems of reciprocal exchange” (Walsh 2009:75). Rather, as Walsh shows, moments such as these might provide “impetuses for reflection on just how ambiguous such systems really are for those they involve” (ibid). In other words, the *ustada* may be a pretty exceptional “scale worker,” but the kind of refined escalation she actualises in the Allouche living room should perhaps be seen as a manifestation of, rather than a glitch in, the “scalar slipperiness” (Herzfeld 1987) of hospitality, and life, more generally. As Matei Candea (2012:46) argues in his work on hospitality in Corsica, hospitality should never be treated as a “scale-free abstraction,” an unambiguous cultural norm that “encompasses, frames, or explains people’s, actions,” but rather as an object of “contention, concern, and debate” that requires work (including scalar work) on the ground.

This proviso rings particularly true if we consider the classic literature of the 1970s and 1980s on Moroccan sociality as a form of continual negotiation, evaluation, and “bargaining” (Geertz 1979; Rosen 1984; see also Rachik [2012] for a powerful overview of such thinking from the perspective of a Moroccan anthropologist). Clifford Geertz’s classic description of the “intimate antagonisms” (1979:225) constituting the Moroccan souk – and, by Geertz-style inference, Moroccan sociality as a whole – does feel somehow relevant to the ways in which the escalation is activated, managed, and contained in the Allouche living room, particularly when it comes to the bargaining of “whom, what, and how much to believe and, believing (or half-believing), what and how much – and to whom – to

confide” (Geertz cited in Walsh 2009:66). This suggests that what makes the *ustada*’s trick work is not so much that she tinkers with an otherwise unambiguous, straightforward, “ground” of sociality but, rather, that she has to ability to escalates such complex, ambiguous, multifaceted and mutlisclar ground to her own advantage.

The ambiguity at the heart of this escalation act – or, perhaps better, its openness to different interpretations and actualisations for differently positioned actors – brings me to the ambiguity of my own position – not only as anthropological narrator in this paper, but also as unwitting participant in the escalation act itself. As naïve as it may sound now, when I was witnessing the event, cold rage and baffled admiration raising inside me toward the *ustada*, I didn’t contemplate the possibility that I may be an active participant in the escalation unfolding before me. Looking back at the event years later, I have a creeping feeling that I may have been englobed just as everyone else in its escalating logic – though, as opposed to everyone else, without realising it. What might have been my role in this escalation act? Was the escalation contained so swiftly by the Allouche because I was there – an unwanted spectator to a potential failure of hospitality, which would have happened, instead of “just” between the family and the *ustada*, in front of an audience? Did my presence up the stakes of the escalation even further, making the threat of further escalations even graver? In other words – did the escalation trick work also thanks to my presence? This was no ordinary presence, of course. A guest myself at a number of scales (of Morocco as a foreign researcher, of the Allouche as a foreign friend of a family friend), I was, and remain, a *gauriya* in Morocco – meaning a white, Western, foreigner from *l-brra*, literally “the outside” in Arabic, and the word used for Europe or “the West” (see Elliot 2021). Did the *ustada* know I was a regular guest of the Allouche’s, and might have her request for money been (also) about the presence of a

gauriya in the household, and the imagined implications, including financial, of this presence?

While it opens important questions (if difficult ones, given the hospitality-dependent discipline that we are – Dresch 2000), a narcissistic reevaluation of the event of the kind I sketch above does not offer a more powerful “explanation” than any other. This is not only because, a few days after the event, I was told that similar “acts of fleecing” had taken place in other households in the area, suggesting that a *gauriya* may be (or not) an interesting addition to the escalation act, but definitely not its necessary ingredient. It is also because the actual mechanics of the act – from which, importantly perhaps, I was explicitly excluded by the *ustada*, who blanked me throughout her visit – worked despite my presence, as they required a shared ground, a shared implicit understanding between the parties involved for the escalation act to work. In other words, whether or not my presence contributed or even further escalated the encounter, does not change the intimate escalation mechanics that made the act work.

Either way, a couple of years after the escalation act, I was visiting the Allouche family and I asked if they remembered the journalist from Casablanca. “Was she for real?” I asked once more, in the hope of a revealing, and settling answer, when we sat down for lunch. Their reply was, as often is to my questions, simply “*kuli:*” eat!

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