

# Learning danger: Cultural difference and the limits of trust in dangerous fieldworks

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## Abstract

Reflecting on personal experiences from conducting fieldwork in Iraqi and Turkish Kurdistan between 2015 and 2017, the article supplements existing literature on how to navigate dangerous fieldwork by considering the limits of trust with regards to estimating safety, and the necessity of learning local definitions of danger. Trust, the article shows, may provide a false sense of security, particularly when working with revolutionary organizations, due to the socio-cultural differences in attitudes toward what qualifies as danger. Similarly, the article argues that dangers connected with uncertainty may also be better understood through analyzing people's cultural responses. To better grasp these emic attitudes, the article advocates for taking "steps of faith," supplemented by an ongoing reflexive process, aimed at assimilating local practices. To conclude, the article argues that an attentiveness to the skills needed to navigate a dangerous terrain, may assist in moving the field away from a scientific "securitization of research."

## Keywords

Dangerous fieldwork, faith, trust, uncertainty, securitization, Kurdistan

## Introduction

In mid-2016, I was headed down from Iraqi-Kurdish mountains after having spent a week with guerillas affiliated to the Kurdish resistance organization, the PKK (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan*). My contact, Serxwebûn,<sup>1</sup> who was a high-ranking officer in the

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organization, had come and picked me up from an agreed point. Initially excited over the access and information I felt I had gotten, I gradually became uneasy as we drove toward Suleimaniye, the closest major city. Knowing that the PKK was not very popular with the Kurdish ruling party in the north, the KDP (*Partîya Demokrat a Kurdistanê*), which had a very different vision of what Kurdish liberation entailed, I was afraid we might be stopped, harassed, detained or otherwise inconvenienced by KDP soldiers at the upcoming checkpoints. I therefore asked Serxwebûn whether it was safe to be driving this road.

He responded: “Yes, yes, of course it’s safe. Sometimes, they [the KDP] stop me, but normally its fine, no problem.” After a brief pause, he continued: “Once, however, I had come from the mountains, and this KDP guard at a checkpoint knew I was PKK.” The KDP soldier asked Serxwebûn to come out of the car, and asked to see his license and ID-card. Serxwebûn said he then responded: “Who are you?”, “Who do you think you are to check my registration?”. The KDP guard got angry. “He touched his weapon, and said come out of the car right now so we can talk,” Serxwebûn said. Serxwebun then told me he had reached into the glove compartment, pulled out a grenade, and declared: “Ok, but if I am getting out so are you.”<sup>2</sup> Seeing the grenade, the soldier recoiled, and said “*Kaka*,<sup>3</sup> there is no problem! Just keep driving,” waving him on. Laughing, Serxwebûn said this would not happen too often, but it used to happen to him a lot when he was in Syria. Laughing along, I could not help glancing at the glove compartment intermittently throughout our drive, and wondering if this might be a possibility even now that I was accompanying him. What did safe really mean for him?

While the return to Suleimaniye went fine, the trip nonetheless left an impression. It left an impression not only because of Serxwebûn’s self-professed causal recourse to violence, but also because I felt uneasy about how I was to assess the dangers of my continued fieldwork. Despite trusting Serxwebûn, and that he did not want to put me in harm’s way, how could I know what safety meant for him? For while it is a maxim among anthropologists that one should ‘trust one’s informants’ when it comes to assessing risk/reward and cost/benefit in dangerous places (Kovats-Bernat, 2002; Robben and Nordstrom, 1995; Sluka, 1995, 2015), this axiom offered little comfort in my work with ideologically partisan people and revolutionary fighters. How could I know that my assessments of (reasonable) danger matched what they would think of as (reasonable) danger? And if danger and safety meant something radically different to my interlocutors than it did to me, how could my trust in my interlocutors actually help me assess risk, if we had radically different understandings of what safety meant?

These are the central questions of this article, and questions I do not think have been explored deeply enough in literature on fieldwork in dangerous locations. While this article is in no way a rebuke of previous scholarship, which has provided invaluable practical and pragmatic guidance, it is intended as a supplement for those fieldworkers who do not find themselves only in a (potentially) violent situation, but for those fieldworkers who work with people who are deliberately embedded in violent contestations. This is a crucial contextual subset of dangerous fieldworks (see Baird, 2019). Many fieldworkers have worked with people who are *exposed* to violence (see, for instance, Green, 1999), but this article is intended primarily for researchers who work

people who *seek out* (potential) exposure to violence. In these contexts, it is of upmost importance to consider how one negotiates a pragmatic fieldwork strategy, since attitudes toward and valuations of violence may differ radically from one's own.

To explore this gap, the article will critically assess the mantra of 'trusting one's informants' when working in dangerous places. Drawing on personal fieldwork experiences from Turkish and Iraqi Kurdistan between 2015 and 2017, the article will show that thinking more deeply through the limits of trust with respect to danger is crucial for estimating safe courses of action. As a methodological tool, the article argues that it is equally important to maintain a sensitivity to and *learn* local definitions of danger, reactions to uncertainty, and local skills for navigating danger, as it is to abide by laundry lists of security precautions. Moreover, the article contends that by engaging reflexively with local definitions of danger and uncertainty, researchers may also glean important insights into the violent contexts in which they are working. To conclude, the article suggests that these context-sensitive strategies may encourage a turn away from the scientific (Peter and Strazzari, 2017) and instead open pathways for reflecting upon and learning the situated skills needed to navigate dangerous terrains.

The article is divided into four parts. Initially, a summary of previous recommendations and fieldwork strategies is presented. This is followed by a discussion of the limits of trust with regards to estimating safety, the limits of trust with regards to understanding reactions to uncertainty, and how an excessive attention to safety may in some cases undercut trust. I then discuss my positionality as a researcher, before situating the article's arguments and recommendations in relation to the increasing amount of literature cautioning against the securitization of research.

## Trust, trust, and more trust

Having worked extensively in violent contexts, Jeffrey Sluka is perhaps the anthropologist who has single-handedly drawn the most attention to issues relating to dangerous fieldworks. Reflecting on his experience, Sluka provided a veritable laundry list of factors to be considered prior to and during dangerous fieldwork in his 2015 article (119). He concludes:

(...) all those who have written on this topic have agreed that the dangers faced in most fieldwork, including primary research on political violence and even with perpetrators of state terror, can be successfully and safely negotiated, mediated, and managed through foresight, prior planning, sensible precautions, skillful maneuvering, and acute awareness of political sensitivities. (Sluka, 2015: 120).

Sluka warns however, that "One [particular] difficulty is that (...) anthropology is based on a *relationship of trust and empathetic understanding*," which may, in some cases, "too strongly humanize the ethnographic 'other'" (Sluka, 2015: 119 [my emphasis]). And while Sluka here speaks to his and Antonious Robben's (1995) experiences working with state sanctioned terrorists, his emphasis on trust as a foundation for safe and successful work reflects a much wider methodological truism.

In Christopher Kovats-Bernat's (2002) influential work, for instance, trust plays an equally clear, if unacknowledged, role in shaping the "localized ethic" he advocates for as a research strategy in dangerous contexts. Kovats-Bernat writes:

(...) I applied a localized ethic – I took stock of the good advice and recommendations of the local population in deciding what conversations (and silences) were important, what information was too costly to life and limb to get, the amount of exposure to violence considered acceptable, the questions that were dangerous to ask, and the patterns of behavior that were important to follow for the safety of myself and those around me. (Kovats-Bernat, 2002: 214).

Underpinning his localized ethic was (an assumed) confidence, that is, that his informants assisting him in navigating the dangerous field were not lying, that they knew what they were doing, had good intentions, and wanted what was best for him. A localized ethic, considerate of the mutual responsibilities of the researcher and the interlocutors, relies profoundly on the (often unspoken) bonds and parameters of trust. Such an attitude is by no means unusual. Indeed, underpinning many Sluka's initial recommendations, trust plays a crucial role (how can one have an "emergency exit strategy" [Sluka 2015: 119] without trust, for instance). Similar (non-explicit) dependence upon mutual trust abounds in the literature on research in dangerous contexts (see Nash, 2007; Rodgers, 2007; Wiegink, 2019).

Trust in dangerous locations has also been about explicitly. The issue of trust in dangerous fieldwork has recently been taken up by Mateja Celestina (2018), who argues that trust and mistrust cannot and should not be dichotomized into strict categories, nor be considered as mutually exclusive relations. Trust and mistrust, Celestina argues, may go hand in hand depending on the situation in which they become relevant, as well as evolving relationships with socio-political contexts and one's informants. Similarly, Anne-Linda Augustin (Augustin, 2018) shows how rumors in Yemen, paradoxically untangled the Yemeni social fabric, making her fieldwork more unsafe, but simultaneously provided her with crucial information about who to trust, and in which cases. Reflecting upon her experiences, Augustin (2018: 448) claims that: "In dangerous fieldwork, a researcher (...) depends even more than normal on people they trust and the rumors they spread." This sentiment is forcefully iterated in Kees Koonings, Dirk Kruijt, and Dennis Rodgers' introduction to their edited volume *Ethnography as Risky Business* (2019: 15), where they write that "risky ethnography," in particular, "complicates the access to and movement in the field and poses considerable challenges for establishing trust and rapport with research participants." For a number of authors working in dangerous places, in other words, trust and how to create it, is considered as either explicitly or implicitly paramount. But despite several laundry lists of precautionary suggestions (Howell, 1988; Jamieson, 2005; Sluka, 2015), and many context-sensitive recommendations for establishing it (see Feldman, 2008; Goldstein, 2014; Kovats-Bernat, 2002), an inquiry into the *limits* of trust with regards to estimating safety is relatively absent.

This is highly problematic, because it may leave researchers with the assumption that if they have a trusting relationship with their informants, they will share understandings of danger and safety. And while this may be a perfectly reasonable assumption in many places and circumstances, it is an epistemological assumption which must be contextually qualified. As multiple authors have pointed out, differences in values may be deeper and more severe than commonly thought (see [Cherstich et al., 2020](#); [Holbraad, 2014](#)). This is arguably particularly so for revolutionary (and/or violent) groups which not only incarnate a difference in values, but also directly strive toward deepening them. In such contexts, researchers have also have severely “limited power and unavoidable partiality” ([Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay, 2016](#): 1012). As has been well documented in the cases of Palestinian resistance fighters ([Allen, 2009](#)), Indian Maoist guerillas ([Shah, 2014](#)), and the Kurdish resistance movement ([Rudi, 2018](#)), life as unpoliticized value often takes a backseat—both socially and individually—to the values of (a good) death. Indeed, there have been revolutionary attempts at building polities that have fidelity toward the value of death as the foundational building block for civic life ([Devji, 2012](#)). Assuming commensurability on the basis of trust in these cases may have grave consequences. A trusted guerilla fighter might outwardly espouse a cautious attitude toward dangers, for instance, but this attitude may have been intimately informed by a tacit acceptance of (if not explicit desire for) a ‘correct’ death.

Similarly, not being cognizant of difference in values with regards to safety may also profoundly rock the assumed mutual foundations for trust. Several authors have pointed out that trust may be only partially given in researcher–interlocutor relationships ([Chakravarty, 2012](#)), be frightening and undesirable ([Shesterinina, 2019](#)), or in fact be unachievable ([Fujii 2018](#)). For groups who are deliberately embedded in violent contestations however, (assumed) ideological consubstantiality is often considered the foundation for trust ([Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay, 2016](#))—and disregard of personal danger its ultimate insignia. Hence, by being too attentive to definitions of safety, researchers may signal to their interlocutors that they do not subscribe to the convictions which found their mutually trusting relationship, paradoxically endangering themselves further (being accused of spying, informing, etc).

Accordingly, interrogating alter valuations is crucial for understanding how trusting relations may be constructed, and, in turn, understanding what limits these relations have in terms of providing the researcher with estimations of safety. When working in dangerous fields, what counts as danger has to be ethnographically *learned*. In the following section, three of these moments of learning are explored, drawing on personal fieldwork experiences. Given that such trust–safety relations are contextual, they are not intended as a checklist for future researchers, but rather as reflexive tools to be appropriated in other contexts. The section will show that through engaging in the reflexive process of *arriving* at a local understanding of danger, one may also better understand the context in which one’s informants’ live and labor. Exploring how and why interlocutors’ understandings of danger are different from one’s own, may not only provide a better foundation for estimating one’s own safety in other words but also provide a better picture of interlocutors’ lifeworld. The argument forwarded is therefore not to be taken as blanket support for researchers to conduct dangerous fieldworks, with or without prior training. It is intended

as a cautionary reflection upon the aspects that may be missing from prior plans and security schemes, and highlights that being unaware of these aspects may in fact exacerbate traumatic or dangerous situations.

## Faith and the limits of trust

Figuring out who to trust, and in which circumstances, is essential to ethnographic work. But while one may have trusted informants in innocuous situations previously, relying on an interlocutor to make deliberations affecting one's own safety is a different step entirely. To take this step, 'trusting the trust' one has with one's informants may seem paramount. However, uncritically 'trusting the trust' of one's interlocutors when it comes to avoiding danger may have adverse consequences, and lead to uncomfortable or traumatizing situations by no fault of anyone.

This became palpably clear to me during my first months of fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2016. I had previously worked in Turkish Kurdistan in 2015, on issues related to Kurdish movement's political program, but was deported as a threat to national security when the civil war became more intense. Drawing on my Turkish-Kurdish informants' connections, I got in touch with movement affiliated interlocutors in Iraqi Kurdistan. I was put in touch with representatives of a political refugee camp called *Wargeha Sehîd Rustem Cudi*, close to Makhmour, where the PKK's utopian order had been purportedly manifested in practice. This camp bordered ISIS by only a few kilometers, but as I had been told that it was safe, and it was relevant to my research, I decided to go. Welcomed at the camp by what seemed to be nonchalant residents, our conversations were often disrupted by American bombs thundering in the horizon, where the black flags that could be seen from rooftops, were being pushed further and further away. Although I had terrifying nightmares the first night, after staying on-and-off for 2 months, I gradually became accustomed to the sounds and started believing my interlocutors when they told me that it was not dangerous—they were, after all, bombing "all the way over there" (pointing to the horizon). I too started to accept and believe that the camp was safe. A short time after my last visit at the camp in late summer in 2016 however, two ISIS suicide vehicles broke through the front line, and headed toward the camp. The guards shot one of the drivers before he impacted, but the other vehicle made it to the camp's barricades and detonated the bomb (see ANF, 2016). Distressed, I called one of my friends there and asked if he was ok. Unfazed, he said, "Yes, this is life here. But our safety is still good you know; we killed both drivers before they could get into the camp, and no civilians were killed." This response caught me by surprise.

'Trusting the trust' I had with my interlocutors when they said the camp was safe, would not have prepared me for that incident. Although completely unscathed and unharmed myself, the attack was a rude awakening to the fact that we did not share ideas about what 'safe' meant. Judging by their seemingly dispassionate attitudes, I was under the false impression that the ISIS attacks were a thing of the past (although their prevalence and history was public information). However, their relative nonchalance after such an attack *did* occur, alerted me to the fact that it was not the likelihood of something like this occurring that made them feel at ease, but rather their perception *of* such events

that were profoundly different. While my disregard of preceding events would certainly have been at fault had I been injured or worse, the incident also highlighted a more general precautionary point for fieldworkers. The incident highlighted that for researchers working in dangerous places, taking informants at their word when they claim something is safe demands a leap of faith, regardless of whether one has a trusting relationship or not, because what is counted as danger is profoundly culturally inflected, and may often only be understood post-factum.<sup>4</sup> Faith is here meant as an unqualified belief in something or someone.

For me, this was a crucial point for conducting my fieldwork. Recognizing that what danger itself *is* needs to be (ethnographically) learned, rather than presupposed, greatly assisted me in navigating the terrain of my fieldwork. Acknowledging that my informants' valuations of danger differed grossly from my own, I tried to surrender my valuations to theirs, and progressively learn about how they constructed them in the first place. This, in turn, led me to better gauge, on my own terms, what I considered to be acceptably safe courses of action. In my mind, accepting that I did not know what safety meant provided me with a better point of departure for estimating safety than thinking I knew what safety meant, and then being caught off guard.

Learning about danger also gave me more than personal reassurance. Shifting my attention away from trust as a measure for safety to learning about what safety meant, dovetailed with a key methodological approach in anthropology: If anthropological research is underpinned by the assimilation and understanding of values and structures present in a region or place where the researcher is not initially familiar (Pelto & Pelto, 1978), then one must in some sense become a different person. In contexts where violence permeates everyday life, this will entail abandoning one's pre-defined understanding of danger, and rather seek to adopt the assessment of danger that one's informants possess. For me, gradually becoming accustomed to my interlocutors' contexts for understanding danger was part and parcel of learning about the lives of the people who were partisans for the PKK. Paying attention to the emic definitions of trust was, in other words, not only a tool for securing myself, but also a tool for better understanding the people I worked with. The Maxmur residents' understanding of safety gradually made more sense once I understood that in addition to ISIS, Turkey would also bomb the camp with irregular intervals, often killing as many civilians as guerillas (France24, 2021), that there was a lack of access to clean drinking water, employment, and medical supplies, and that the camp had a strong valorization of martyrs—of which they had 'given' approximately 350 over the last decade. Understanding these conditions not only helped me gauge how best to care for my safety, but also further sensitized me to what it meant to live there. For it is quite striking, that under these conditions, the camp has existed since the mid-90's and has still kept its devotion to the PKK.

## **Certainty in uncertainty**

Equally important to understanding the limits of trust with respect to estimating safety, is understanding the limits of trust with regards to tackling uncertainty. Understanding how one's informants deal with uncertainty is also a crucial factor to consider when conducting



fieldwork in dangerous locations. But just as with danger, trust does not provide a solid foundation for understanding reactions to uncertainty.

In recent literature, uncertainty has often been treated as something of a permeating condition, spreading across the world. Spurred on by the changing conditions of capital (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995), migration flows (Bendixen and Eriksen 2020), the increasing precarization of labor (Van Kooy and Bowman, 2019; Walsh, 2019), and the onset of eruptive violent conflict (Olwig, 2021), uncertainty has, in some authors' perspective, become a pervasive factor in the lives of many different people on the margins. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2005) has shown that for Cameroonian women, for instance, beyond a phenomenon to be coped with, uncertainty is a means of seizing upon possible opportunities whose potentials have not yet revealed. Similarly, if a bit more grim, Henrik Vigh (2006) relates that uncertainty springing from war may be one of the only ways of achieving some form of social mobility for Guinean youth, who are otherwise confined to a form of social death. Synnøve Bendixen and Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2020) contend that uncertainty may serve as something like a double bind, where uncertainty may rob immigrants waiting for residency permission of a clear vision of the future, but at the same time instill an attitude where the time spent in waiting is "productive and momentarily meaningful" (Bendixen and Eriksen, 2020: 107). Uncertainty has, in other words, treated a condition that may work as a way of maintaining subjective hope, creativity, possibility, and even partial social mobility.

However, despite their very real portrayals of different effects of uncertainty, these examinations are not well attuned to the particular difficulties of conducting research in dangerous contexts. For while it may be the case that uncertainty has become a generalized condition of doubt, apprehension, and insecurity, generating variable pathways for navigating within, through, and out of it (Cooper and Pratten, 2015), this does not mean that people's *reactions* to uncertainty are uncertain. This is a fundamental distinction with regards to dangerous fieldwork. Confronted by a horizon that seems both obscure and threatening, it is not a given that this will give rise to doubt, apprehension, hope—or a glimpse of new potentials (Whyte, 1997). In fact, the opposite might be true. When confronted with uncertainty, it is fully possible that one may—paradoxically—react with "dead certainty," as Arjun Appadurai (1998: 905) called it. This section will therefore explore different *reactions* to uncertain situations, departing from perspectives treating uncertainty as a permeating condition, since this has a particular bearing on dangerous fieldworks. In dangerous fieldworks, the difference between these two may be crucial, as my friend John's experience testifies to.

I met John in 2016, during my first stint in Iraqi Kurdistan. A British medical student with some anthropological training, he had come to Iraqi Kurdistan to assist as a doctor in the war against ISIS. He was reluctant to join with the official regional government's (KDP's) health programs due to their purported inactivity, and rather sought out PKK guerillas directly. After some introductions, he was eventually placed in a team of guerilla medical workers, who left for the PKK-controlled areas of Shingal to take care of the remaining residents after the Ezidi genocide. Since the 'hospital' bordered Syria, John told me that on one slow day his fellow medical workers offered to take him on a 'vacation' to Qamislo in Syria, so he could see the wider effects of the revolution. John



happily agreed, and they drove across the border with no complications. John was at this point becoming quite cognizant of how his fellow medical workers/guerillas defined relative danger and safety, and was fully aware of the possibility of a hostile attack. On the way back the same day, they were stopped at the KDP checkpoint, who wanted to see their papers. Enraged, an exchange similar to that which Serxwebûn related took place. The KDP soldiers would not relent, and in response the guerillas turned up the sound system on their truck and blasted PKK music while dancing and drowning out the KDP's admonishments. Eventually, the KDP called for backup, and armored vehicles from Iraqi Kurdistan showed up. The guerillas did the same, and suddenly there was a stand-off between guerilla affiliated forces on one side of the border, and the KDP on the other. After threatening each other for an extended amount of time, an agreement was reached, and the guerillas passed back into Iraqi Kurdistan without showing their papers, blasting PKK music the entire way.

John's experience speaks to a different issue than learning to assess one's informants' estimation of safety. For while he had already grown accustomed to the guerillas' assessments of danger, through working with them for an extended period of time, and knew the limits to what this trust could guarantee, he did not know how they would react if a dangerous situation actually occurred. He had defined his threshold for risk, through a reflexive engagement with the guerillas definition of safety, and was conscious of not letting his trust in them provide him with a false or overextended sense of security. However, it was the *reactions* to uncertainty he was unprepared for; he was prepared for a dangerous incident (as defined by him, through reflection upon the guerillas' attitudes), but not for the way his compatriots would respond. Nonetheless, he did not seem particularly perturbed when telling me this story, but rather fascinated by the lengths to which the PKK would go to dispute the KDP's control of the border.

While John was rather unperturbed by the incident himself, his emphasis on how important it was to understand *reactions* to uncertainty, may be instructive for future researchers efforts to avoid distress. Most explicitly, John's experience highlights the shortcoming of 'laundry lists' safety precautions (see [Sluka, 2015](#)). While having multiple channels of communication, clear plans of travel, and an emergency exit plan would indubitably be smart and responsible, they would not have been able to make this confrontation any more safe. John could, for instance, have had a dialogue with his guerilla compatriots about what could possibly occur, and tried to reach some form of consensus regarding how people would have to react in order for him to join on the 'vacation' to Syria. But this would have quickly have become untenable for two reasons. First, situations that one can (consensually) plan for are easily outnumbered by the various unforeseeable situations that *may* occur; an assault by a jihadi group may have been a considered possibility, as well as a possible air strike, but an impromptu checkpoint might not have been, etc. Second, John's experience shows that even if a particular incident would have been considered, the components and dynamics of the incident could not have been accounted for. A potential checkpoint could have been planned for, but somebody raising a gun, calling the guerillas traitors, or phoning in for tank support, are escalating elements that demand an almost divine foresight to enumerate, not to mention plan for. This is not so say that one should not plan for the dangerous and unexpected, and weigh

risk and reward, as John indeed did, but rather that an analysis of socio-material circumstances and a scientific enumeration of potential threats, should be counterbalanced with learning the cultural patterns of reaction that one's informants have.

John said that his experience of being in a literal stand-off, with heavy weapons pointed at each other, taught him something crucial about the PKK's "mentality," culture, and organization. He learned that the PKK had a penchant for reacting to situations of uncertainty—where something occurred that was not planned for—with unmitigated certainty, even if lives were at stake. He experienced that if (some) PKK members were confronted with a situation that was not planned for and precarious, that their response would not be to react with insecurity, withdrawal and bargaining, but rather by raising the stakes. As Serxwebûn had boasted, John experienced that backing down and/or re-considering was not the organizational ethos of the movement. Crucially, this was something he would think about the next time he was going on 'vacation,' he said.

In my experience, the importance of understanding local reactions became made very clear to me after having experienced a bombing in 2015 at a pro-Kurdish rally, where some five people were killed and 350 injured in a tightly packed intersection (Icer et al., 2016). Besides the unexpected event of the bombing itself, it was the relative calm with which people reacted that stood out in hindsight; although there was crying and desperation, no one was trampled as we pushed out of the roundabout, and children were carefully passed from the center of the rally to its edges. It was only when the police teargassed the still compressed demonstration that chaos broke loose. For me, this event told me something essential about what could happen if a dangerous incident actually occurred, namely that the culturally patterned reaction to (state) violence was not one of complete panic and utter surprise, but rather a relative collectedness, tackled in a collective fashion. Regardless of whether this reaction provided me with safety or its opposite in that situation, it was nonetheless a reaction which greatly informed my following estimations of safety when working with the movement.

Similar to learning local definitions of danger, grasping a cultural pattern of reaction to danger is not something that can merely be gleaned from afar, in a laboratory-like setting. Understanding cultural patterns itself demands an ongoing, reflexive engagement with the people whom one is seeking to work with. For the people embroiled in the PKK's ideology, reactions to threatening circumstances have not come out of thin air. There has been a consolidated effort from various institutions, in interplay with the particular Kurdish history, to shape a subjectivity that is not afraid of prison, torture, or even death (Marcus, 2007; Watts, 2010). The degree to which this is successful is of course a different matter, but as a consolidated effort, this socio-cultural context should certainly be kept in mind when planning courses of action, and not be glossed over by relying on trusting relationships. Understanding local reactions to uncertainty then, puts us in a similar position to that of understanding local definitions of danger. Both understandings hinge upon an initial step of faith and concurrent reflexive analysis, regardless of the degree of trust, where one may only gradually learn how one's own expectations differ from those of one's informants through continuous comparison.

The last section of the article focuses on what happens if this initial step of faith is not taken. I argue that, paradoxically, not taking a step of faith may be the absolutely safest bet

for fieldworkers in dangerous situations. Deciding *not* to put one's faith in someone, may be a fieldwork strategy central to preserving safety. At the same time, however, the article points out that not putting one's faith in one's informants may occlude the opportunity to conduct the kind of fieldwork one desires, or gain access to the field one desires. Focusing too much on safety may, in other words, in fact undercut creating a trusting relation. Remaining cognizant of this dynamic, I contend, is important not only to navigate a dangerous fieldwork, but also to conducting a *successful* fieldwork.

### **Breaking trust by assessing safety**

Within the PKK—and I expect for different insurrectionary groups across the world—access hinges upon a presupposed degree of sympathy for the movement, or at least for the cause. If one does not at least profess a sympathy with the goals of the movement, then the question of why one should be permitted access as a researcher looms large. Revolutionary groups strive toward a different kind of future, after all, and would prefer if this political project is taken seriously, in a lens that is recognizable to the fighters and activists themselves. Consequently, if the (expounded) ethos of such a movement is bravery in the face of death, a sacrificial duty in the face of annihilation, and an unwavering support for the 'local population,' then attitudes which explicitly differ from these principles can be expected to be met with skepticism, disdain or rejection. An overly cautious attitude is here readily counted. As a researcher, probing questions regarding one's own (selfish, egocentric) safety, may therefore easily be seen as anathema to the movement's goals and practices, greatly inhibiting the researcher's access and opportunity to do research. Trust may, in this sense, be a function of *not* putting safety first.

How to navigate this predicament was a conundrum throughout my fieldwork. But there was perhaps no incident that made the conundrum clearer than when I worked with a fellow anthropologist in Turkish Kurdistan, at the outset of the civil war in 2015. Interested in understanding and documenting the dramatic developments in the region as the Turkish state was preparing to demolish the Kurdish movement's representative apparatus, we were once contacted by a journalist working for a PKK-affiliated news station. Seeing the dramatic developments in the city of Cizre, next to the Syrian border, we were asked by the journalist, if we would accompany him there to write an article. At the time, the city was under siege, preceding the massacre of the 160 or so youths burned to death in basements (Bowen, 2016). His hopes were that we could gather our own information, and then publish an article in English-speaking media on the devastation. As we were cognizant of the dangerous climate there, based on reading newspapers and talking to informants, as well as beginning to become aware of how partisans of the cause might react to dangerous situations, we tried to politely decline. The journalist, it turned out, had not really been asking in a neutral way; for him, it was something that we could contribute to the cause with, since we had been using the movement for our own research quite selfishly. When we expressed our trepidation and inquired about the security situation, we were accused of cowardice, and confronted with an injunction for self-abnegation, as we had (in his view) the opportunity to publicize the massacre which would take place. This did neither sit well with my colleague nor me. Although there was certainly a feeling of

obligation to remunerate the movement for all that its members had done for us, the risks that this trip involved seemed too steep, and also too unforeseeable.

The lesson for me, after this encounter, was that asking about safety could easily become laying bare that one does not share the (radical) foundation at the heart of the trusting relationship, namely support, or at least, measurable sympathy, for the movement. Asking about safety was tantamount to setting one's own concerns first, an individualizing move, which was generally shunned by the movement, and similarly assumed by the movement to be eschewed by people who are (truly) interested in the struggle or the revolution. Asking about safety in other words revealed that we were not like them (i.e., that we did not manifest the same goals, values or priorities), which, for a revolutionary movement, is often central to establishing trust and permitting access. (For obvious reasons, when it comes to revealing sensitive information, ensuring that outsiders are in concert with the group's goals, if not means, is crucial to maintaining the safety and security of the group, as malicious infiltrators do exist, and controlling exposing information is critical for any group operating outside of the law).

Taking this into consideration, in the following months of my fieldwork, I tried to avoid questions regarding safety, whenever I felt it possible and responsible. In other cases where I avoided joining in on proposed ventures, I would normally excuse myself categorically by saying I had other work at the time (which is an acceptable way of turning an offer down), and be sure to not probe the depths of my security concerns. Straight up refusing an opportunity I thought to be dangerous, while precluding access to situations that might have been analytically interesting ensured that I would not break bonds with some informants, by seemingly putting my own security first.

Simultaneously, however, there were times where I thought that I would just have to rely on faith (and my understanding of my informants' definition of danger, and reactions to uncertainty). This was, as I saw it, crucial to actually being able to conduct parts of my fieldwork. For as much as security questions weigh in, in order to not exclude the potential for actually researching revolutionary organizations, bracketing one's own understanding of safety is key. In order to have the opportunity to interview PKK leaders, as, for instance, Michael Knapp, Joost Jongerden (2014), and the journalist Frederike Geerdink (2021) (among others) have done, it demands that one shares and exhibits the 'bravery' that the movement values. There was, in other words, no way of escaping this conundrum; either one would be confined to the outside of the movement (rendering the movement unavailable for ethnographic research) or one needed to put one's (qualified) trust in the movement and their minders. Rather than arriving at easy solution then, I strove to remain cognizant of this dynamic, and make situational decisions in regards to my own knowledge, tolerance of uncertainty, and (partially unfounded) faith.

## **Positionality and relationality**

Naturally, the degree to which one is exposed to risk is not only a factor of choices, but also dependent upon positionality. As a tall, white, European man, I was perhaps more visible to hostile government powers than my interlocutors, but at the same time I was treated profoundly different when engaged by state institutions. While many of my

informants had suffered torture at the hands of the state, the few times I was interrogated prior to my deportation from Turkey, I was treated with wary respect. Even when I was deported, I experienced a form of privilege. Coming from the global north, I had a passport and backing institutions who were at the ready to launch a campaign for my release. I was in frequent touch with my home institution, which I made aware of the developments in the burgeoning civil war, and my research decisions. The decisions I took were taken concert with the ethics committee and the head of department there, as well as with my interlocutors. Contrary to my interlocutors, I also had the opportunity to leave if I felt the situation became untenable.

These aspects greatly influenced how I perceived danger and safety. It made me feel like I had ‘backup’ which would intervene if things became too dire. My interlocutors were not equally entitled. Their support system when confronted with legal governmental institutions was much weaker than mine. Given this privilege, I tried to discuss how my participation in various events and interviews might impact their safety, and how they would best like to proceed. This was a continual dialogue, whose outcomes bounded my actions, but due to their ideological convictions, my interlocutors were mostly eager for me to participate so that I might publicize and showcase their struggle. This of course offered ethical considerations of their own (see Ghosh, 2018; Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay, 2016), but they are unfortunately beyond the purview of the article. In general, I was reluctant to promise any specific contributions, but rather tried to use what Elisabeth Wood (2006: 374) called “informed moral judgement” during and after the fieldwork period. As with danger, I tried to assimilate their local understandings of politics and use this as a baseline for making ethical decisions.

This strategy of pursuing emic understandings, particularly with regards to danger and uncertainty, is not only a methodological tool reserved for researchers from the global north, however. It may be equally fruitful for a researcher coming from a conflict zone to reflect upon the local estimations of safety as the converse. As Setha Low (2009) has shown, for instance, understanding definitions of danger are equally central to understanding the social world of the American suburbs, as they are to, say, guerillas in Iraqi Kurdistan. Setha Low (2009) shows that pursuing understandings of danger (that might not seem dangerous to the researcher) may provide essential insights to the functioning of a given community, even in those areas which are not normally counted as dangerous. Estimations of danger, politeness, and niceness in Low’s work, all serve as gatekeeping attitudes, reinforcing whiteness and maintaining privilege (Low 2009). Perpetual reflexivity with regards to danger may in this sense serve as a tool for ethnographic research, regardless of the particular location—but most crucially in places that are widely deemed as dangerous.

## **Acquiring contextual skills and moving away from securitization**

As Lee Ann Fujii (2018) and Adam Baird (2018) have argued, perpetual reflexive negotiation may serve also as a lynchpin for efforts to reorient thinking about fieldwork in dangerous locations. A crucial aspect of such an approach is supplementing scientific laundry lists of security precautions with an attentiveness to the limits of trust in efforts to

estimate safety. For future research, in keeping with Fujii's (2018) recommendations, I propose that striving toward learning *how* locals define danger and uncertainty may be of great value. While this may certainly take place through conversation and observation, the final section will examine how navigating danger can be learned through a close attentiveness to local people's habituated skills (see Baird, 2018). To conclude, the article summarizes its recommendations, and situates them in the wider scholarly literature cautioning against an increased securitization of research.

To exemplify this this last point, I turn to the election of the pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokrasi Partisi*) in the Turkish national elections of 2015. Having participated as an international electoral observer in service of the HDP, a fellow researcher, our Kurdish minder and I enjoyed a brief redoubt on a plaza by Tigris river in Cizre, a border city with Syria. We were all both excited and apprehensive about how the election would go, and whether the pro-Kurdish party would manage to collect enough votes to surpass the threshold of 10% needed to enter parliament. When news of the HDP's success was announced, the city broke into pandemonium. Shouting, ululations, fireworks, and gunshots rang through the streets, echoing onto our café table. Our Kurdish minder, whose task it was to facilitate our observation, said that now it was time to get back to our bus; although most people (by far) supported the Kurdish party, there were Islamic and Turkish nationalist partisans who would not let this celebration pass unassaulted. From where we were sitting, however, it was impossible for me to distinguish between the sounds of fireworks and the sounds of AK-47s, leaving me unsure of which road would be best to take. Totally calm and self-assured, our minder, who was not more than 27, showed us the way and assured us that it was not unsafe at all. As we moved closer to a street where loud bangs were going off left and right, our minder strolled through, not paying any attention to the fireworks he already knew were there. He guided us completely without incident to our bus, and put us on it, which took off with speed. When we met again, a few weeks later, I asked him how he knew the difference between fireworks and gunfire, and he said, smiling, "You get to know these things when you grow up in Sîmax [a city in Kurdistan]." I did not, and still do not, take his smile as signifying any machismo or bravura, but rather a remark on how surreal it would be if he did not know the difference, given where he is from. Sîmax was one of the cities worst afflicted by the state's war against the PKK and its arguable ethnic cleansing, leaving thousands of people dead or disappeared in the 80s and 90s. A month before, a man from Sîmax, Hacı Lokman, had been shot and dragged by the neck behind a police vehicle driving through the city streets (Mackey, 2015). Our minder's bodily understanding of danger would only be available for someone who had grown up in the context where the difference between the two is integral to growing up at all.

Acquiring the habituated skills my minder had for navigating danger was impossible. However, it was a valuable lesson emulating and watching him, and he showcased skillset I could aspire to learn some of. As per Baird's recommendation's for "ethnographic safety" (Baird, 2018: 347), I strove to walk in his tempo, not stare too much at passerbys, and be aware of sounds and slogans. I listened closely when he told me about how he could see which person could be asked for directions by the trousers he wore and the type of mustache he had. I also paid close attention when he told me to listen to the intervals of



the bangs, since an AK-47 has a particular rhythm when set to machine gun mode. It would have taken me years to navigate this field as well as him, but seeing how maneuvered through the city gave me significant pointers for what to remain cognizant of in the present, and try to learn in the future.

Taken all together, emphasizing the importance of learning how locals define danger, react to uncertainty, and use habituated skills to navigate danger, brings us away from a field which has blossomed in recent years, namely studies on the “securitization of research” (Peter and Strazzari, 2017). As the world has (arguably) become increasingly volatile and dangerous, a new scholarly topic, cutting across disciplinary boundaries, has emerged, based on how best to securitize fieldwork and other qualitative research endeavors in dangerous places (see Farrelly 2016, for a critique). This field comes in part from, but definitely finds resonance in, universities’ regulatory bodies (Halse and Honey, 2007; Sluka, 2018). Currently, being able to couch one’s research in scientific terms is often key to pass through ethics review boards and other institutional hurdles. This stands at odds with the open-ended and exploratory goals of much qualitative work, as several authors have pointed out (Israel and Hay, 2006; Peter and Strazzari, 2017; Andersson, 2016). And while many of the precautions and measures mentioned have merit, the field’s strong scientific inflection may distance the researcher from the people (and the cause) he or she is studying (Peter and Strazzari, 2017)—and may, as in my case, paradoxically overshadow many of the most central conditions for understanding danger in a particular place. Accordingly, researchers have recognized the need for strategies to accommodate, transform or combat this increasing securitization (Boster, 2006; Lewis, 2008; Sluka, 2018). Reemphasizing the importance of learning from the local context may be one tool in this struggle. Returning to the situation in Cizre, it was not a security protocol that us safely to the bus. It was rather my minder’s habituated skills in navigating dangerous fields. Moreover, my decision to follow him was a decision based on faith; faith in his intentions, faith in his local knowledge, and faith in his capacity for navigating terrains of war. At the same time, however, I strove to remain cognizant of the fact that although I trusted him, he might not see danger as I did, and that his reactions to uncertainty might differ grossly from my own. I merely had to accept the unpredictability that came with that decision; put bluntly, no security precautions based on a laundry list of potential threats, or desk knowledge of regional dynamics would have sufficed here. I could of course have decided not to attend the election celebration (as I did with many other events), but not going would not have provided me with an insight into the living conditions, and indeed, lives of people who were struggling in and for the Kurdish movement. Learning from their experiences, seems to me, was the best way of not only understanding how to navigate danger, but also what counted as danger, uncertainty, and the lives lived within it.

Following Sluka’s (2018) and Baird (2019) encouragement to ‘play the game by one’s own rules,’ so to speak, emphasizing these aspects of negotiating dangerous fieldwork may provide a different point for arbitration. Rather than cater to a scientific discourse, emphasizing the reflexive aspects of negotiating dangerous fieldwork underlines the particularity and value of the inimitable knowledge production fieldwork provides. Besides quantifiable variables, there are also dynamic and highly contextual factors which create and designate danger in a given location. Crucially, these factors may only be



understood and navigated through engaging reflexively in situ with one's informants' local circumstances, and culturized attitudes. They must, in essence, be learned, gradually, by people actively engaging with and reflecting upon their circumstances, and not presumed on the basis of trust or prior preparation. Framing estimations and understanding of danger in this way—in other words, thinking the negotiation of dangerous fieldwork more as an art than a science—may let qualitative research better lay claim to its own epistemological contribution, strength and uniqueness. Insisting that some parameters (of what counts as) danger must be arrived at through engaging with the field, emphasizes the *sui generis* knowledge that qualitative research can contribute.

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### Notes

1. All names used in the article have been anonymized.
2. Serxwebûn here used a conjugation of the Kurdish verb “*derketin*,” which means go out of, implying that if he got out of the car, the KDP soldier would “go out” too.
3. Iraqi Kurdish (*Sorani*) vernacular for “buddy” or “friend.”
4. Kovats-Bernat alludes to this point, but does not elaborate, when he argues that “all participants in the research must also willingly accept the possibility that *any* involvement in the study could result in intimidation, arrest, torture, disappearance, assassination, *or a range of other, utterly unforeseeable dangers*” (Kovats-Bernat 2002: 214). Clearly forsaking the laundry list of concerns, Kovats-Bernat advocates in favor of a mutual, faithful commitment to one another's estimations.

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