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# Children's TV and Digital Media in the Arab World

Childhood, Screen Culture and  
Education

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**(Mis)trust, Access and the Poetics of Self-Reflexivity:  
Arab Diasporic Children in London and Media  
Consumption**

*Nisrine Mansour and Tarik Sabry*

This chapter reflects on ethnographic research conducted in London over a period of 28 days in February, September and December of 2013, involving family observations and four workshops with young children of Arab origin between the ages of seven and 12. The ethnographic research was part of a larger, interdependent three-year research project funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which examined pan-Arab programming for children through a holistic and relational approach to three strands: audiences, texts and the political economy of screen production and distribution for children. The audience strand of the research project entailed ethnographic research in the UK, Morocco and Lebanon. In all these localities our prime objective was to steer away from the well-rehearsed media audiences models and experiment with new methods that would allow us to make sense of the ways in which children live and communicate their media and culture worlds. In the case of the London children, we were especially interested in the ways in which British children of Arab origin intentionally perform being in the world by navigating through multiple forms of subjectification and cultural tastes. This, we argue below, drawing on Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'<sup>1</sup> together with studies of the 'mnemonic imagination' whereby remembering is understood as creative practice,<sup>2</sup> results in a mnemonic diasporic habitus.

In this chapter we reflect not so much on material emerging from the participant observations and children's creative workshops, but on the methodological issues that emerged from fieldwork in the UK. The range of issues and challenges we faced in the field as two Arab diasporic ethnographers, researching Arab diasporic children living in London, triggered so much reflexive debate and discussion among the two researchers and the rest of the research team that we consider the methodological issues we faced important enough to form this chapter's main object of enquiry. These concerns resonate with methodological and ethical questions arising from research with London children from other ethnic backgrounds.<sup>3</sup> The methodological process of framing, planning and conducting ethnography became a site for re-negotiating the subjectivities of researcher and research subject. In our case, the 'field' of research moved from anthropology's conventional positioning as 'being "out there" practiced by "other" people' and was discursively relocated within the researchers' and research subjects' 'home'.<sup>4</sup> Thus it contested the delineations of what is meant by Arab diaspora, how the diasporic researcher constructs herself or himself in relation to the diasporic subject, and the ways in which research subjects negotiate their participation in the research process.

The chapter is organized around five key themes, which we believe encapsulate our experience in and out of the field. In the first theme we reflect briefly on a pilot study we conducted in February 2013 in preparation for the longer fieldwork in London. In the second we discuss difficulties encountered by the ethnographers in recruiting participants for the research. We contextualize the politics of access and (mis)trust within larger debates around otherness, racism and Islamophobia in the UK. This theme also engages, reflexively, with the politics of implicated-ness on the part of Arab diasporic ethnographers researching Arab diasporic children. In the third theme, which we call 'doing being self-reflexive as poetics', we further discuss the politics of (mis)trust by showing how performing a mnemonic diasporic habitus (negotiation of memory and self in a diasporic context) is different from the habitus that is being performed, and how it is through the affective performing of habitus that a *third* mnemonic language of identification is created. Similar research on transnational childhoods

notes that, even when ethnography actually takes place in what is physically a single site, it still relates to what are effectively transnational constructions of childhood, constructed through everyday experiences of home and exile. Throughout the ethnographic conversation, research subjects express their transnational selves by 'evok[ing] multiple sites through an explicit reference to other sites which are "off-stage" [...resulting in] strategically situated (single-site) ethnography'.<sup>5</sup> This performance, we argue, is negotiated through and across parent cultures, the cultures of researchers as mediators and the London cultures.

The fourth theme looks at the technologies and types of affective performances and narrativity that children use while navigating and seeking to know the parents' and mediators' cultures. We approached this theme while aware that '[i]deas about children directly impinge upon the experience of childhood which children themselves have'.<sup>6</sup> Hence, we sought to conduct reflexive research that involves deconstructing the dominant notions of childhood and explicating the power relations inherent in the relationship between researchers, parents, and children. In the final theme we discuss what our methodological experiences in the field have taught us and what implications this might have for interpreting diasporic cultures. We also outline how our concept of the 'mnemonic diasporic habitus' may be a useful tool for unpacking the politics of diasporic identities.

### **Pilot Study: London Borough of Hackney, February 2013**

The pilot study, conducted in February 2013, included visits to Arabic-speaking children of North African origins in their homes. In total we visited five families. It involved children keeping viewing diaries in sketchpad form, as well as a three-hour workshop. The study was conducted in preparation for the first phase of the main fieldwork, which took place in London in August-December 2013. The pilot examined how and whether Arabic and non-Arabic programming (consumed media texts) open different spaces of subjectification. It explored how the children's media uses informed their positioning vis-à-vis domesticity (diasporic space/local space/worldly space) and cultural temporality. The pilot was

specifically concerned with investigating how Arabic-speaking children living in London respond to Arabic-language and other programming aimed at them, how they choose it, how they make sense of it and what they think about it.

The pilot deployed a three-stage methodology. In the first stage we conducted a three-hour workshop with seven school children between the ages of seven and ten years at the Childhood Museum in Bethnal Green, exploring their use of pan-Arab television, using drawings, group interviews (where children interviewed each other as journalists) and other interactive activities based around play. The three-hour workshop was a useful way to get to know the children, to establish trust and to recruit participants for the family viewing observations. In the second stage, we developed a 14-day media-viewing diary, which we used as a prompt for the selected participants taking part in the third stage of the research: family observations. Regardless of its small sample, the pilot's findings provided us with good insight into young children's everyday lives and media uses. It extended our enquiry beyond pan-Arab satellite channels to include new media, mobile phones and music. One of the pilot's key findings was that most of the participants preferred programming broadcast by British public service broadcasters and not Arabic programming broadcast from the countries of origin of the children's families. We also learnt that the children actively and selectively consumed different media, the Internet being a preferred platform. This made us rethink and modify our methodological strategies to suit new and complex audience realities on the ground.

In the rest of this chapter, we reflect on methodological issues emerging from the main fieldwork we conducted in London, which included four workshops with children of Maghrebi and Mashreqi heritage and four family observations lasting a period of 25 days.

### **Framing Problems of Access and Trust within a Socio-Political Context**

Having access to and establishing a relationship of trust with children and their families are, as ethnographic processes, rarely contextualized within the socio-cultural environments and the material realities by which they are determined. In preparation for our ethnographic

research in London we had to locate four families of Arab origin, for the purpose of conducting home ethnography, and 24 children of Arab origin for the purpose of conducting four separate workshops.

As researchers residing in London for over a decade, we have been part of the changing public discourses on the UK's Arab diaspora. We both came to London individually without any links to the Arab diaspora. The compound and fluid settling process gradually blended the migrant narrative with increasing daily involvement with the UK as a final destination country. Over time, we both have joined the many Londoners who juggle with a native cultural repertoire and a British lived experience. Thus, questions like 'where are you from?' have become harder to answer. Our social networks did not rely on our respective diasporic groups and we both were at the margins of the intra-diasporic subjectification dynamics within the Arab diaspora in London. Engaging in this research necessitated an active performative process to connect with the Arab diaspora and to reposition ourselves as insiders to the Arab community. This process required engaging with the stratifying techniques of belonging and otherness vis-à-vis our native communities that are culturally familiar to us but which we effectively knew little about.

With no prior connection to the Arab diaspora in London, it was not possible to rely on personal contacts to recruit children between seven and 12 years old – the target age of the research project. The prominent physicality of diasporic communities within the geography of London made London an obvious choice to initiate access. Our aim was to find entry points linking us to the varied loci of Arab communities rather than going through elitist and structured channels of Arab cultural production or education in London. While these channels are conventionally used in children's research because of their potential for easy access, they remain laden with power dynamics that could hinder children's ability to opt out and their willingness to express themselves freely.<sup>7</sup> We planned instead to gain entry by hitting the streets of the local Arab neighbourhoods, contacting commercial outlets and religious community centres.

Our strategy was to head for enclaves in London, including schools, known to have a predominant or at least a significant Arab diasporic population. We targeted places like Ladbroke Grove and Shepherds Bush with a sizeable Moroccan population, and Marble Arch, Kilburn and Edgware Road, known to attract a largely Middle Eastern population (including Iraqi, Lebanese and Egyptian). We had designed a leaflet written both in Arabic and in English explaining the purpose of the research and the source of funding. We then approached a number of schools, mainly heads of Year 7, asking for help in recruiting children of Arab origin to take part in the research. In total we contacted eight schools, all of which, after a fair exchange of emails, said that lack of staff and time rendered them unable to help. To focus our energies, we then opted to target our native Arab diasporic communities, with whom we as researchers share a common culture and structure of feeling. We each concentrated on localities in London that had a significant Lebanese or Moroccan population and leafleted in the street, cafés, supermarkets and grocery shops. After six weeks of trying, it was the religious communities of these two groups — a mosque in Ladbroke Grove and a church in Swiss Cottage — that allowed us access to workshop participants. However, the agreement to give us access was followed by another eight-week period during which we, as researchers, were coaxingly and politely interrogated again and again about the nature and objectives of the research. We were only let in after literally dozens of email exchanges and a number of one-to-one meetings with community leaders in these religious establishments.

Negotiating access threw us into the contextual dynamics of our respective communities, because it involved tapping into networks linked to local retailers, such as grocers and butchers. Nisrine's interaction with Lebanese shopkeepers in Kilburn is an example of the complex politics of diasporic relations, the insider-outsider positionality of researcher and migrant, and the continuous crossing over, rearticulating and blurring lines between 'us' and 'them'.<sup>8</sup> With every visit, shopkeepers tested the insider-outsider positionality in relation to the many facets of the intra-Lebanese habitus that revolve around the religion of birth. Through Lebanon's recent history of civil war (1975-1990) and until



today, religion of birth remains a marker of difference, since it is a compulsory legal political category enshrined in the civic records of every Lebanese citizen regardless of their personal beliefs. Queries around this matter occurred smoothly, reflecting, in indirect ways, the importance of context in negotiating access. A seemingly basic question like 'where are you from?' unfolds a powerful categorising subtext that locates one's religious affiliation within a geographic location, since the Lebanese civil war resulted in a geographic segregation of population on the basis of religion of birth. When birthplace, and hence religion of birth, matched those of the shopkeeper in question, it was a first step into establishing an initial insider rapport tracing connections back in Lebanon and in the Lebanese diaspora in London. However, religion of birth is only a partial marker of the intra-Lebanese diasporic habitus. Further queries aimed to discern the researcher's links with social and religious institutions and practices within the Shi`a community in London. When the researcher could not show prior involvement with members of the community, the shopkeeper restricted access.

In contrast, the researcher's lack of identification with a specific Shi`a diasporic habitus guaranteed access to the Christian community through the Lebanese Maronite church in London. The priest, who was the main person in the church, went through the same geographic categorising exercise to probe the researcher's birthplace, noting the researcher's religious 'otherness'. However, more probing revealed the researcher's individual migration trajectory, lack of religious involvement with the Shi`a community in London, and professional occupation. For the priest, these attributes were markers of a 'civilised other' reflected in his comments such as 'Wow you are well educated. Nowadays the Shi`a community in Lebanon has evolved'. Hence, an invitation to become an insider was extended to visit the church and engage with the religious rituals, as 'the church is open for all Lebanese regardless of their religious affiliation'. Effectively, performing the friendly Other through attending the Sunday Mass turned out to be the main channel for recruiting Lebanese respondents.

We have no doubt the difficulties we experienced in recruiting participants were largely due to the ethical sensitivities implicit in researching children and concern for the protection and well-being of minors as research participants. However, we also attribute them to socio-cultural and political variables. These include interpretations of domesticity as a private space, Arabophobia/Islamophobia and gender roles. Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in New York and 7/7 in London, there has been a conspicuous and ceaseless coverage of Islam and Muslims in British mainstream media. Such coverage tends, on the whole, to discursively link Islam, Muslims, Islamism and terrorism together as though these were inseparable categories. Over time, this has created a great sense of suspicion (and hatred in the case of fascist groups and many of their members who come largely from disgruntled poor working classes) towards Muslim and Arab communities in the UK.<sup>9</sup> Islamophobia is the result of an intersection between the encoding and the decoding of racist representations of Muslims and Arabs as Others, two aspects of which are seldom studied. The first is how a systematic consumption of negative coverage about Islam and Muslims affects British Muslim identities and their conceptions of otherness. The second is what implications it has for access to ethnographic research with Muslim and Arab communities in the UK.<sup>10</sup> We believe the challenge we faced as researchers in getting access to Arab families' homes is largely due to suspicion, which Arab communities have themselves developed towards British media and the establishment they represent. We were denied access (mistrusted) because we were seen, regardless of our apparent traces of Arab-ness, as part of a racist system. Our research focus on London children of Arab origin and their media worlds may well have been misread by the parents as a sneaky attempt on our part (since we represent the system) to spy on Muslim/Arab children (to catch them early on). One of the parents with whom we conducted periodic home observations over eight weeks and who trusted us enough to sing for us and his children, jokingly remarked in the last family visit that we 'could be spies after all'.

Our constant insider-outsider repositioning was tested in our role as researchers conducting intra-diasporic research on Arab children and media. The nature of the inquiry

called for home visits over a three-week time span. Through our contacts, a sense of anxiety and suspicion emerged as to the purpose of the research project. Questions such as 'why are you looking at Arab kids?', 'what do you want to know?', 'who is funding this research?' reflected a deep-seated anxiety about a growing Islamophobic climate in the UK. Muslim contacts were the most reluctant to participate in the research, in contrast to Christian contacts who were little concerned with any underlying motives. In this instance, our positioning as intra-diasporic researchers was embedded with a sense of paranoia from some contacts, who suspected that we were potentially acting as double agents, delving into the intimate lives of our 'own' communities and reporting back to the British system, since the funding was granted by the AHRC.

The problem of access and mistrust is the product of a relational structure and has to be understood more widely, in conjunction with factors such as gender and discourses of domesticity. We felt that our genders as researchers were unquestionably implicated not only in problems of access, but also in power relations between the researcher and the researched or the observer and the observed. Being a male ethnographer with an intention to observe children and families in their homes brought two challenges. First, there is a general bias against males working with children due to the recent explosion of highly mediatized legal cases of paedophilia involving famous children's programmes presenters, educators, and other males engaging in direct professional contact with children. Second, some families found it culturally inappropriate to allow a male researcher into their home when the male head of the household was absent. Whether due to a traditional, patriarchal form of domesticity (perhaps with roots in religious discourse) or to the general gender bias discussed above, some mothers of participants felt more at ease conversing with and being observed by a female rather than a male researcher. Being a male researcher meant that Tarik could not attend all the family observations on his own; indeed a mixed gender team proved quite effective in diffusing these gender-related obstacles. Researching children of any origin is usually fraught with ethical implications and the problems of access and trust discussed here are certainly not limited to our targeted group. However, we believe it is

reasonable to argue that, in the case of Arab and Muslim children living in London, problems of access and trust are further complicated by an increasingly privatized media sphere where representations of Arab ethnicity and Islam are still deeply rooted in an orientalist discourse. Similarly, entry into private spaces is problematic regardless of the participants' origin. Researchers remain relative strangers and entry into private spaces, regardless of geography or culture, will always be challenging.

Being a woman facilitated access to children because of the conventional caring roles associated with women. But it also involved a process of negotiating gender performativity in relation to the dominant socio-cultural discourses on gender within the Arab diasporic communities. Various Lebanese contacts within the Lebanese diaspora in London found that being a single Lebanese woman with no family ties in London represents a set of non-conforming social practices. These gendered moralities hold the potential to position the female researcher at the margins of the diaspora's dominant gender norms. For instance, one contact person interpreted it as a sign of sexual availability and licence for sexual harassment. However, the overwhelming majority of contact persons went beyond these moralities. They accepted the researcher's different ways of life as a marker for a 'friendly outsider' and sought to maintain friendship ties after the end of the fieldwork.

### **Mnemonic Diasporic Habitus between Performance and Affect**

Once in the field and in family homes we were extremely conscious of the important task of building a rapport of trust with the children and their parents. While power relations between adult researchers and young respondents are part and parcel of research methodologies,<sup>11</sup> we wanted our encounters with the families to mimic structures of ordinary everyday talk in an attempt to destabilize binaries between researcher and researched and produce textured types of knowledge beyond ageist, ethnic, and socio-cultural biases. We cannot say with certainty to what extent what was said and how the families behaved was totally free or untainted by relations of power or by the simple fact that we were 'strangers', but we

certainly shared intimate moments with the families we observed, which involved dancing, singing and telling jokes.

A three-way relationship between the diasporic researcher, parents, and children developed within the performative site of the home. Initially, parents displayed tacit mistrust as they intently sat around the first few meetings with the children. Gradually, they loosened their involvement, yet they remained omnipresent as a silent and seemingly distracted audience. In most instances, parents were first generation immigrants, attached to the cultural practices of their country of birth. They also avidly engaged with Arabic-speaking global satellite TV channels on daily basis, a finding resonating with existing research on Arab diasporas in Europe.<sup>12</sup> They spoke limited English and mingled primarily and almost exclusively with fellow diaspora members. We related to parents through tracing commonalities in our diasporic trajectories, an issue that children did not closely relate to. We exchanged narratives about our migration history, our legal status, and our perceptions of life in Lebanon/Morocco and the UK. The researchers' diasporic performativity with parents revolved around narratives of nostalgic belonging, manifested in affinity over food, pop culture, childhood experiences, and current anxiety in relation to the political insecurity engulfing the Arab region.

The mnemonic diasporic habitus was further expanded by our presence. Our performativity relied on making sense of, and navigating through, these overlapping cultural layers when relating to children and parents. Thus we brought our own diasporic cultural repertoire into the dynamics, opening doors to exploration of the selving process. In many instances, we were positioned at the edge of the insider-outsider mnemonic diasporic boundaries. For example, Moroccan children were curious about Nisrine's age and marital status and noted her short haircut as a novelty for an Arab woman. Lebanese children expressed a pronounced notion of sectarian and ethnic differences and considered Tarik different because of his darker complexion. We were able to relate to the children through London-focused cultural practices, an area with which the parents struggled. For instance,

our conversations covered popular audio-visual culture, articulations of London's urban youth culture, and contemplations on beliefs, hopes and worries.

However, in listening to the children talk about their friends, family members, schools and media worlds, often in the presence of their parents, we sensed early on that the telling of life stories/life worlds/the unfolding narratives of self were mnemonically performed for us in a way that produced a discursive language we had to unpack semiotically. This language we later attributed to the workings of a mnemonic diasporic habitus, manifested in a dialectical relationship between different narratives of self and contextual environment (in our case, parents' culture and researchers' culture). We found it useful in our grappling with the children's performed narrativity to distinguish between 'habitus' as the sum of accumulated socio-cultural attributes and as, as will be shown, an affectively performed habitus using mnemonic imagination, allowing navigation and negotiation of self between past and present and between parent cultures, the culture of the researchers as Arabs, and London cultures. It is through the mnemonic imagination and the affective performance of diasporic habitus that a third discursive language about self is created.

What we are describing here as 'a mnemonic diasporic habitus' emerges from our implicated-ness in the research and in the lives of the children whom we were observing. As such, making sense of this type of habitus is for us not merely a matter of cultural interpretation, but also an object of methodological reflection, for the two things are inextricably linked. Our theoretical pursuit in unpacking the structures of a 'mnemonic diasporic habitus' is inspired by Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering's work on the 'mnemonic imagination', in which they steer away from sociologically and psychologically deterministic interpretations of memory and advocate a focus on the relations between personal and popular memory and interplay between situated and mediated experience.<sup>13</sup> The authors argue that the mnemonic imagination is key to these relations and this interplay, because it facilitates 'the transactional movement necessary for their co-existence'.<sup>14</sup> Here, the redrafting of memories of our past experience is not a fixed process. Experience in this case is ceaselessly traversing a temporalized space between the remembering subject and

the changing intervening social forces with which it enters a dialectical relationship. In the case of our research with children from the Arab diaspora in London, the 'traversing of temporalized space' is a perpetual performance of selfhood, oscillating between an 'unlived' spatio-temporality, mnemonically performed by the parents for the children, which enters into dialogue with the children's 'lived' experience, their implicated-ness in being in, and part of, spatio-symbolic London, and their 'futuralness', to use Heidegger's term,<sup>15</sup> where children mnemonically imagine different ways of being in the world. Our role as ethnographers in this dialectical type of diasporic traversing was to facilitate the children's mnemonic imagination, to nurture it and encourage the parents to overcome their gatekeeping instincts and become aware of the imaginative work their children were doing.

Staying clear of modernist and deterministic interpretations of 'experience', Keightley and Pickering define experience as 'never exclusively personal or public, interiorised or outwardly facing, self-directed or the blind product of social forces', but always in flux and crossing between 'these mutually informing categories'.<sup>16</sup> The traversal movement of experience is predicated on a dual temporal structure, 'characterised by its continual unfolding in time while also acting back on the continuing development across time'.<sup>17</sup> This dual structure allows the modern subject to creatively reflect 'narratively' about self across time. It is because of our access to *Erfahrung*<sup>18</sup> (the point where accumulated experience is evaluated) that our knowledge about self is crystallized. For the London children, accumulated experience is crystallized in a mnemonic, third discursive and performative space. In other words, while accumulated experience may shape their identities, it is through their intentional and performative narrative of self, which they negotiate between memory and imagination, that their subject-hood comes to light.

Taking their cue from Dilthey's work on *Poetry and Experience*, Kant's distinction between reproductive (*re-collective*) and productive (*inventive*) imagination, and Merleau-Ponty's situating of the 'real' and the 'unreal' within a dialectical relationship, Keightley and Pickering build a strong case against 'the deleterious consequences of analytical separation

of memory and imagination'. Their concept, 'mnemonic imagination', moves beyond this tendency, insisting instead on a 'continuous interpenetration' of memory and imagination.<sup>19</sup>

As we began to understand how habitus was performed for us through different affective strategies, we became conscious that we as ethnographers needed to modify our line of questioning, moving from being mere interviewers to performing being audiences. By 'poetics', we mean the mnemonic performativity that the children used to dialectically navigate through and between individual agents (habitus) and environment (field) to create a third meaning of self that lies at an intersection between the past, the present and the future, but which strategically embodies and champions the present and the future over the past. A 12-year-old female participant, who was talking to us about her favourite music, showed us parts of a music video where a young female US pop singer is almost naked. The participant mimed the lyrics she knew by heart as she gazed at the pop star with admiration, then shyly glanced at her mother and us and complained about the pop star's decadent and debauched behaviour. The child displayed a range of subtle expressions in relation to explicit pop culture that could be picked up by researchers through the process of 'interpretive poetics [...] whereby layers of meaning in narrative texts are interrogated and interpreted in a way that mirrors a sophisticated reading of a poem' of which 'languages of the unsayables and woven and torn signifiers' are key interpretation registers.<sup>20</sup>

However, children evoked their Arab past when intentionally invited by parents. Experiences and practices across temporality and geography were manifested in the diasporic habitus through the parents' media capital. Lebanese children were exposed to Lebanese and Arabic-speaking TV since it was the parents' default viewing choice. Lebanese parents also actively encouraged them to watch specific Lebanese TV shows ranging from comedy to talk shows and sometimes news. Children eagerly followed these shows on a daily basis, several times recounting the content to us. Similarly, they had regular contact with their relatives in Lebanon through online apps like Skype, Viber and WhatsApp. Sometimes these relatives featured as part of their closest daily contacts.



Children located the Arab past within mnemonic recollections of a nostalgic heritage rather than an articulation of the present physicality of Lebanon or Morocco in relation to London. For instance, children of Lebanese origin were not able to place Lebanon on the world map, and were not aware of the precarious security situation there. However, the physicality of London was pronounced in their articulation of their daily lives. Their native language was English, with only little understanding of Arabic. Their friends were primarily Lebanese, in contrast to Moroccan children who socialized regularly with various ethnicities. Their choice of music reflected London's urban and pop culture. Their Arabic music playlists were limited to patriotic songs and pop music, with an avid appetite for celebrity fandom. However, their English speaking playlists were much longer and, regardless of their religiosity, they were up to date with the most explicit music video clips of artists such as Miley Cyrus and Rihanna.

This mnemonic past was projected into the future in varying ways. Lebanese children, who had never been to Lebanon, referred to their parents' country of origin in romantic terms of a homeland and exile that are far removed from their existence in London. Their accounts focused on the beauty of their village, and their hope to go back to the big house, pets, and garden they own there, contrasting it with their tiny one-bedroom flat in Shepherd's Bush. Moroccan children meanwhile evoked images of exoticism reminiscent of an ideal holiday destination. They talked at length of the good times they have in Morocco, especially recounting the food, the music, the sun, the sea, as well as the friendly relatives.

### **Technologies of Self and Children's Media Worlds**

When we initially designed the rationale for our overall research project, with three relational strands including audiences, texts and producers, we devised a clear set of objectives at the heart of which lay a key focus on Arab children's reading and engagement with media texts broadcast by pan-Arab satellite channels. No sooner had we entered the field than we were challenged to rethink, not only our audience research questions (for UK children), but also our assumptions about the 'what' and 'how' of media consumption among children of Arab

origin in the UK. The pilot study, which consisted of family observations and one workshop, had unveiled a key finding: British children of Arab origin spoke little if any Arabic and preferred watching children's programming on the BBC and ITV over the pan-Arab satellite channels that their parents watched. This finding helped us rethink our media focus, line of questioning and the design of media diaries in ways that allowed the children to creatively map out their social and media worlds for us.

As a consequence, our starting point for researching the children's media consumption habits had shifted, from an idea in the ethnographer's head about what media were to how the children thought them and used them. As we embarked on the family observations it became clear to us that the children's media consumption relied on multiple devices (mobiles, tablets) and media (video games, music, social media). In this sense, the practices of Londoner children of Arab origin coincided with findings from an EU-wide research that found children using media in individual and private spaces like their bedrooms and their mobile devices.<sup>21</sup> As we became more involved with family observations and having reworked our participant observation methods to allow for a freer and a more reflexive account of the children's narratives about self and media-cultures, we realised that the children use different media platforms (online and offline) not only strategically and for different purposes, but also as technologies of self through embodiment, where media become 'cultural frames'<sup>22</sup> and act as extensions of habitus. The children wove narratives of subject-hood through identification with and in relation to media characters, sounds and visuals. This type of narrativity was further helped by designing an experimental media diary, through which we attempted to explore not only the children's everyday media consumption habits but also how what they consume was used to operationalize their mnemonic diasporic habitus, giving us an insight into their media and social worlds. The diaries were a creative tool to get around the rigid communication dynamics that might ensue between researchers and children. Increasingly, diaries proved to be a particularly useful and versatile tool complementing ethnographic research.<sup>23</sup> The diaries had the merit of repositioning children as researchers engaged in recording and reflecting upon their own diasporic and media

worlds. It also combined both qualitative and quantitative entries, allowing children to document their media consumption habits at the end of each day, in addition to reflecting on their diasporic and mnemonic habitus.

Using the diaries as a starting point for discussion, our line of questioning during family observations followed a fluid, semi-structured (sometimes unstructured) approach where the children felt comfortable enough to move from one subject to another. In most cases we only interfered or changed the line of questioning to stimulate further talk. In one instance a seven-year-old danced for us, performed a rap song and switched minutes later to telling us about a family member whom we were told was 'possessed'. As the discussion went on, this time including the father and a sister, the talk fluidly drifted to assertions about major pop stars like Madonna and Michael Jackson being Satan worshippers and part of a global conspiracy by the Illuminati secret society against Muslims around the world. Rather than seeing this as an incoherent form of narrativity, we picked on its theme/performance (pop culture, healing practices, and religious persecution) as a stimulus for further insight into the workings of a mnemonic diasporic habitus. What might appear on the surface, as a non-linear, fragmentary and therefore incoherent narrative of self, can under scrutiny be extremely useful in unpacking the constituent elements of a performed mnemonic, diasporic habitus.

We extended the flexible design of the media diary (which was intended to encourage talk about self) to the tasks we devised for the workshops, one of which was asking the children to work in groups as media producers to create a new Arab satellite channel targeting young Arabs living in the Arab region and in the diaspora. The task included designing a one-week running schedule for the new channel. Methodologically our objective from simulating this task was to further explore the children's media uses and preferences. Since consumption is deeply implicated in habitus, we also wanted to investigate the choices, modalities and socio-cultural attitudes/values informing their production choices, negotiative processes and decision-making in a gendered environment. We were keen to understand how and whether the children's choice of programming

informed their mnemonic habitus. For example, even though workshop participants were recruited through religious cultural centres, none of the hypothetical new satellite channels had any programming remotely close to a religious theme. Was this because the parents were not present? Might the children have negotiated a different set of programmes had the parents been present at the workshops? Although our focus in this chapter is purely on method and not on our ethnographic findings as such, we want to emphasize how creative audience research approaches can delineate self-reflexive spaces that allow for a closer and a deeper insight, less into what we the researchers think about the world than into how the researched subjects think and experience the world. What we were keen to learn was how the children, as active audiences, understood, spoke about and mnemonically imagined their habitus in relation to their everyday media consumption.

### **Concluding remarks**

Audience research rarely reflects on the intricacies and challenges posed by the designed research methods. Findings are always privileged as an end, even if they are always inextricably linked to the rationalizing processes that come with method design. In our case it was clearly the methods and how we used them that shaped our conceptual framework, not vice versa. It was the conduct of the pilot and the reworking of the method that expanded the object of our enquiry and altered our interviewing techniques. Our method and conceptual framework entered a dialectical relationship. For example, as we began to grapple with the mnemonic diasporic habitus and its constituent elements (parent culture, London culture and a third performative language) we intentionally varied our line of questioning and approach to participant observation to further probe and test our grappling with a type of habitus where, like Bhabha's 'third space', identities are always in flux, navigating and negotiating meaning through an ambivalent space of enunciation.<sup>24</sup> Once we realized children's identities were intentionally and affectively performed for us through everyday talk,<sup>25</sup> dance and music, we strategically moved towards a more qualitative and a far less structured line of questioning. We became, as Bird would have put it, 'opportunistic ethnographers'.<sup>26</sup>

This gave the third space a performative third language that disrupted cultural time and enunciated, through interactions between parent, researcher and London cultures, a carefully orchestrated form of subject-hood. The conceptualizing/theorizing of the mnemonic diasporic habitus was taking place simultaneously with our grappling with method and the fieldwork's materiality: we transformed the methods as we went along to better understand what the mnemonic diasporic habitus meant. It was our experience in the field that dictated methodological strategies and not an *a priori* objective or theoretical world outside it. As we progressed with the research we learned to relax more as ethnographers. We also learnt that singing along with a child or dancing to the sounds of their music can be more rewarding methodologically than following a rigid, possibly intimidating line of questioning which often denies us access to what people are really like, what they really think and what their desires are really about. Deploying flexible, fluid and experimental methods that are ceaselessly open to change and reflection has, in our experience, been key towards grappling with the relational constituents of a mnemonic, performative habitus.

Our Arab-ness as ethnographers was deeply implicated in the research because we were by default part of the relational performative circuit through which children had to navigate discourses of selfhood. However, while the parents subtly acted as gatekeepers, we were asking the questions and encouraging the children's mnemonic diasporic performance. We facilitated the third language, which we then had to unpack. So, our relation to the parent culture, regardless of our age (equal to that of the parents) and our Arab-ness (appearance and language) does not occupy the same hierarchical position.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of habitus expresses the way in which individuals develop attitudes and dispositions that make them who they are, and the ways in which they engage in culturally and historically constituted practices. See Jen Webb, Tony Schirato and Geoff Danaher, *Understanding Bourdieu* (London: Sage, 2002), p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering, *The Mnemonic Imagination: Remembering as Creative Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> For example see Samantha Punch, 'Research with children: The same or different from research with adults?', *Childhood*, 9/3 (2002), pp. 321-41; Allison James, 'Ethnography in the study of children and childhood', in P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland and I. Lofland (eds) *Handbook of Ethnography* (London: Sage, 2001), pp. 246-57; Benjamin Zeitlyn and Kanwal Mand, 'Researching transnational childhoods', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38/6 (2012), pp. 987-1006.

<sup>4</sup> Zeitlyn and Mand: 'Researching transnational childhoods', p. 988.

<sup>5</sup> George Marcus, 'Ethnography in/of the world system: the emergence of multi-sited ethnography', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995), pp. 95-117, quoted in Zeitlyn and Mand: 'Researching transnational childhoods', p.989.

<sup>6</sup> Allison James, *Childhood Identities: Self and Social Relationships in the Experience of the Child*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), p. 72.

<sup>7</sup> Karen Fog Olwig and Eva Gulløv, 'Towards an anthropology of children and place', in K. F. Olwig, K.F. and E. Gulløv (eds) *Children's Places, Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-22.

<sup>8</sup> Marcus: 'Ethnography in/of the world system', pp. 95-117.

<sup>9</sup> Dina Matar, 'Diverse diasporas, one meta-narrative: Palestinians in the UK talking about 11 September 2001', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32/6 (2006), pp. 1027-40; Zahera Harb and Ehab Bessaïso, 'British Arab Muslim audiences and television after September 11', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32/6 (2006), pp. 1063-76; Khalil Rinnawi, 'Instant nationalism' and the 'cyber mufti': The Arab diaspora in Europe and the transnational media, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 38/9 (2012), pp. 1451-67.

<sup>10</sup> See Marta Bolognani, 'Islam, ethnography and politics: Methodological issues in researching amongst West Yorkshire Pakistanis', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 10/4 (2007), pp. 279 – 93; Ali Sundas 'Second and third generation Muslims in Britain: A socially excluded group? Identities, integration and community cohesion' (Oxford, 2008)

<http://www.portmir.org.uk/assets/pdfs/second-and-third-generation-muslims-in-britain-a-socially-excluded-group.pdf> ; Jonathan Scourfield, Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Asma Khan Sameh Otri, *Muslim Childhood: Religious Nurture in a European Context*: (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> See Pia Christensen and Allison James (eds) *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices* (London: Falmer Press, 2000).

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<sup>12</sup> See Harb and Bessaiso: 'British Arab Muslim audiences and television after September 11'; Matar: 'Diverse diasporas, one meta-narrative'; Nouredine Miladi, 'Satellite television news and the Arab diaspora in Britain: comparing al-Jazeera, the BBC and CNN', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32/6 (2006), pp. 947-60; Verena Stolcke, 'Talking culture: new boundaries, new rhetoric of exclusion in Europe', *Current Anthropology*, 36/3 (1995), pp. 1-13.

<sup>13</sup> Keightley and Pickering: *The Mnemonic Imagination*.

<sup>14</sup> Keightley and Pickering: *The Mnemonic Imagination*, p.9.

<sup>15</sup> Heidegger's *Zukünftigsein* (futuralness) is the state of readying oneself to 'receive the right impetus from the past in order to open it up'. See Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time: The First Draft of Being and Time* [Trans. Ingo Farin] (London: Bloomsbury Academic 2011), p. 80.

<sup>16</sup> Keightley and Pickering: *The Mnemonic Imagination*, p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Keightley and Pickering: *The Mnemonic Imagination*, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Keightley and Pickering: *The Mnemonic Imagination*, p. 26.

<sup>19</sup> Keightley and Pickering: *The Mnemonic Imagination*, p. 76.

<sup>20</sup> Annie Rogers, Mary Casey, Jennifer Ekert, and Jim Holland, 'Interviewing children using an interpretive poetics' in S. Greene and D. Hogan (eds) *Researching Children's Experience: Approaches and Methods* (London: Sage, 2005), p 160.

<sup>21</sup> Sonia Livingstone, 'From family television to bedroom culture: Young people's media at home', in E. Devereux, (ed) *Media Studies: Key Issues and Debates* (London: Sage, 2007), pp. 302-21; Sonia Livingstone, Leslie Haddon, Jane Vincent, Giovanna Mascheroni, Kjartan Ólafsson, *Net Children Go Mobile: The UK Report*. (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2014).

<sup>22</sup> Elizabeth Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a Media World* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Lauri Hyers, Janet Swim and Robyn Mallet, 'The personal is political: Using daily diaries to examine everyday prejudice-related experiences' in S. Hesse-Biber and P. Leavy, *Emergent Methods in Social Research*, (London: Sage, 2006), pp. 313-36.

<sup>24</sup> Bhabha's 'third space', in Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994)

<sup>25</sup> See Caroline Dover, 'Everyday talk: Investigating media consumption and identity amongst school children', *Particip@tions* 4/1 (2007).

<sup>26</sup> Bird: *The Audience in Everyday Life*.