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Editor's introduction

Morten Nielsen's chapter focuses on the often tense and always unstable relationship between ethnographical data and theoretical insights in the process of writing up an anthropological account. The chapter is divided into two sections: It opens with the full article 'Contrapuntal cosmopolitanism' that was published in *Social Anthropology* in 2010 and continues with a commentary that traces its origin. The article explores forms of social relatedness among residents living in a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique. Based on the idea that reciprocal encounters create distances rather than approximation, the article introduces the notion of 'contrapuntal cosmopolitanism' to designate the production of viable (reciprocal) distances in unfamiliar milieux peopled by important but also capricious others. In the COMMENTARY, I discuss how I developed these analytical ideas through a provisional levelling out of scalar differences between ethnographic data and theoretical arguments. In this and all other writings, I access ethnographic and theoretical material as coded data using a software programme for qualitative coding. This establishes a provisional – and highly visual – conceptual assemblage of otherwise detached information, which appears as if on the same level of abstraction. Defining this approach as 'dialogic aesthetics', I outline the methodological benefits and challenges of working with ethnographic data and theoretical insights based on their aesthetic suitability for making provisional connections irrespective of scale and level of abstraction.

DIALOGIC AESTHETICS

Notes and nodes in analogical software coding

Morten Nielsen

TEXT

TEXT is the full article 'Contrapuntal cosmopolitanism: Distantiation as social relatedness among house-builders in Maputo, Mozambique.' It was published in *Social Anthropology* 18(4): 396–402 in 2010.

From the mid-18th Century *Encyclopédie*, we learn that a 'cosmopolitan' is 'a man without a fixed abode, or better, a man who is nowhere a stranger' (Diderot and d'Alembert 1751–65:4, 297 in Cheah 2006:487). Although this conceptualisation might indicate an equivalence to rootlessness, we should, Cheah tells us, rather imagine a form of belonging that 'involves the transcendence of the particularistic and blindly given ties of kinship and country' (2006:487). In short, as a particular form of social sensibility, cosmopolitanism refers to, and here I cite Fardon, 'a capacity to reach beyond cultural difference' (2008:238). Based on this initial reading, an imminent analytical task would obviously be to identify those cosmopolitan capacities which enable individual agents to rise, so to speak, above their 'proximal categorizations and identifications of nation, ethnicity, class, religion, gender, locale and so on' (Rapport 2006:24). Still, an increasing number of people are cast in worlds which fundamentally lack a fit between the material interconnectedness brought about by intense global flows and the degree of formation of non-local solidarities (Tsing 2005; cf. Hannerz 1987). The global society so important to cosmopolitan writers seems to lack behind, as it were, the rapidly expanding flows of material and economic resources and so our objective might perhaps be phrased differently. Let me again return to Fardon, whose ethical considerations regarding the unstable political environment in Nigeria might serve our purpose here as well. Fardon thus asks, '[w]hen is it reasonable to anticipate people will embrace fallibism and pluralism? When, most basically, can they *afford* to do so?' (2008:250, emphasis added).

In this article, I wish to rehearse one analytical argument which can be taken as a tentative response to Fardon's pertinent question. Based on prior and ongoing ethnographic research in peri–urban areas of Maputo, Mozambique, I shall explore forms of social relatedness which have as their cosmological and, indeed, ontological premise that the universe is only partially illuminated and so social interaction *ipso facto* occurs in a world that is both unknown and potentially dangerous. As I will show, reciprocal encounters are therefore based on distance rather than proximity. Although people acknowledge the crucial importance of social others, it is equally important to maintain appropriate distances in order to avoid awakening unwanted desires. I will consequently introduce the notion of *contrapuntal cosmopolitanism* to designate *the production of viable (reciprocal) distances in unfamiliar milieux peopled by important but also capricious others*. Before venturing into the ethnographical account, however, let me briefly make some initial remarks on the notion of the stranger in contemporary cosmopolitan writings.

The stranger

According to Kant, a global cosmopolitan order needs to be founded on a universal law of hospitality allowing us to 'venture out as strangers and sojourn in other territories' (Werbner 2008b:2). It is thus 'the right of a stranger', Kant says, 'not to be treated with hostility when he arrives on someone else's territory' (1968:213–216). Within contemporary cosmopolitan studies, Kant's emphasis on transgressing the distinction between stranger and friend continues to hold sway although emphasis has shifted towards the multiple ways that local agents connect and establish senses of belonging to multiple and only partially known places (Josephides 2003; Werbner 2008a). What I find of particular interest in these recent studies is the ubiquitous emphasis on what Blanche Dubois in Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* calls 'the kindness of strangers'. According to Cheah and Robbins, it is consequently through momentary attachments between strangers in a field which is 'less than kin or friendship but a good deal more than polite or innocent nonrelation' that 'intellectual order and accountability' is introduced in the new world of international civil society (1998:3, 9).

Surely the continuous attempts at carving out supra–local domains capable of establishing momentary equilibriums between counter–acting social forces have had significant regulatory effects on a global scale. And in this regard, the imagery of the 'kindness of strangers' undoubtedly captures the essence of these political ideals. I remain sceptical, however, whether there is any mileage to be gained from using the concept as an all–embracive analytical trope when exploring different forms of cosmopolitan sensibilities. First, although people everywhere live global lives, in many instances they are coerced to do so by displacement and upheavals. In other words, the very impetus for venturing into unknown territories is based on enforced distance to the familiar rather than voluntary approximation towards the new. Such recalcitrant global encounters are perhaps best understood as what Clifford calls 'discrepant cosmopolitanism' which avoids 'the excessive localism of

particularist cultural relativism, as well as the overly global vision of a capitalist or technocratic monoculture' (1997:36). Second, when occupying 'strange lands' (pace Werbner 2008b:2), recognition of the other is frequently based on hostility rather than hospitality (Fardon 2008:240). It is thus my contention that although cosmopolitan sensibilities are part and parcel of any social fabric, they frequently arise through distance rather than approximation. What we need to explore, then, are *the multiple and heterogeneous ways that differently positioned agents produce viable distances in unknown territories by which to engage in potentially beneficial exchanges*. Let me therefore now turn to an ethnographic account from Maputo, Mozambique, in order to unfold how relatedness arises through imitation and distantiation. I start out briefly outlining key features of social cosmologies in Southern Mozambique before presenting an extended case study.

Social cosmologies in Southern Mozambique

According to widely shared cosmological beliefs in Southern Mozambique, the archetype for the physical world is a cosmic plane of immanence where all elements exist as pure movement in a chaotic open whole. In order properly to inhabit the physical world and thus extract benefits from disorder, it is consequently of paramount importance to organize the chaos and establish durable distinctions separating the inhabitable from the uninhabitable; order from chaos, e.g. through propitiatory rituals, house-building and everyday cleaning of land (*limpeza)* (Nielsen 2008:132–136). Still, despite continuous efforts at manipulating counteracting forces, they might backfire at any moment. All phenomena contain both constructive and destructive potentials and it is always uncertain whether they operate in beneficial or malevolent ways (West 2005:78, 193; 1996:25).

When the world is structured by crucial but constantly counteracting forces, social relationships tend to be equally ambiguous. To people in Southern Mozambique, the source of their agency is located outside themselves in their relationships to people and things in the surrounding world. Although the counterpart might at some future point reveal itself to be detrimental, people are essentially what their relations to others make them be, whether this other is a close relative, an inefficient state official or a deceased ancestor still asserting some form of dominance. However, these reciprocal ties might at any time backfire leaving the initiating agent exposed to the intrusive strategies of others. For many Mozambicans in the Southern region, then, everyday life signifies continuous latent exposures to capricious forces beyond their control. Like the Soweto 'world of witches' so vividly described by Ashforth (2005:69), life is built on a 'presumption of malice' where one has to assume that anyone with the motive to cause harm *will* cause harm. Indeed, not everything is known and what is known is that power works in hidden and often capricious ways. Or, put somewhat different: although chaos is a precondition to order, it constantly threatens to circumvent its momentary equilibrium.

From this admittedly sketchy outline of social cosmologies in Southern Mozambique, let me now turn to an ethnographic case study of how local agents

cast in an unstable urban environment manage to produce viable distances to important but potentially malevolent others, before concluding with some remarks on the notion of contrapuntal cosmopolitanism.

The administrator's house

On 31 October 2001, the Maputo Municipality authored the demolition of five cement-houses in Mulwene, a peri-urban neighbourhood on Maputo's northern periphery. The buildings had apparently been erected without proper building permits in an area reserved for an old people's home which was projected to be constructed shortly. A local community chief had informally sold off land within the reserved area and now 22 families were occupying irregular plots while hoping to be allocated formal use rights. According to residents living in the area, the projected construction project would cover less than a third of the reserved area and so they would most likely be allocated use rights to the plots they had been occupying illegally.

In 2000, Mulwene became the centre of public attention when it served as resettlement zone for the disaster victims after the devastating flooding which hit Mozambique during the first three month of the year. Realising the opportunities for creating a neighbourhood from scratch, the Maputo Municipality soon decided that the hitherto only partially occupied neighbourhood should be a 'model neighbourhood' (*bairro modelo*), with all the 'requirements that constitute adequate habitation', i.e. stable road net, functional water system and land parcelling in accordance with a fixed set of urban norms according to which legitimate residents would acquire use rights to 15 × 30 metre plots in which cement houses should be located three metres from the boundary line towards the street. However, given overall administrative weaknesses created through failed socialist schemes after Mozambican independence in 1975, followed by the more recent adoption of neo-liberal economic policies, Mozambique has proved completely incapable of realising such ambitious visions. Thus, newcomers currently access land informally through local chiefs and civil servants who are bribed to parcel out land irrespective of its lack of a legal basis (Nielsen 2007b).

The forceful removal of the illegally erected houses seriously affected senses of security among residents in the area reserved for the old people's home. Fearing that their homes might be demolished, all plans of building cement houses were either postponed or completely abandoned. Despite the insecurities surrounding informal occupancy in the area, however, one impressive building project was initiated. In March 2005, the current administrator in Urban District 3, Victória Ussene, had apparently allocated a huge piece of land informally to the administrator in Marracuene who wanted to build a house for his mistress. I visited the site shortly afterwards, and it was indeed apparent that a construction project had been started. Sacks of cement were piled up and several local bricklayers were busy mixing sand and cement while erecting the first layers of a fence to surround what was at least a 30 × 30 metre plot. Shortly afterwards, the area was inspected by the local community

chief and an architect who registered all residents and measured the section of the area already inhabited. During the next two weekends, they parcelled out two blocks consisting of 16 plots (15 × 30 metres each) which were subsequently allocated to the residents who had previously occupied irregular pieces of land in the area.

Interlude: The production of distance

Before proceeding with the empirical account, we need to make a brief analytical digression in order to properly unfold key components of what I initially defined as *contrapuntal cosmopolitanism*. Let me start with Werbner's succinct statement that 'cosmopolitans insist on the human capacity to imagine the world from an Other's perspective and to imagine the possibility of a borderless world of cultural plurality' (2008b:2). In this sense, a cosmopolitan perspective is a way of coming to terms with difference in contexts of diversity; and, as I will argue, this is particularly so in relation to contrapuntal others. Seeing the world from an Other's perspective obviously entails an imaginary point of view from where one's own position is visible and, equally important, exterior in relation to the former. There is so to speak, a quantitative distance between self and other who remain outside and thus irreducible to each other in order for reciprocal exchanges to occur. If we take as a premise that any distance implies two end-points, or positions if you like, between which there can be established series of exchanges with unique rhythms and velocities, it logically follows that one's capacities to act are coextensive with the distance produced between self and other. In a nutshell, *the individual positions – or perspectives – are produced by the distance between them rather than vice-versa*. This is essentially what I take to be the key feature of contrapuntal cosmopolitanism and in order to substantiate this idea, let me once more return to the socio-cultural universe in Mulwene. As I will argue, informal housebuilding projects can be seen as a particular form of contrapuntal cosmopolitanism which produces viable (reciprocal) distances in an unfamiliar milieu peopled by important but also capricious others.

Standing in the shadow of power

I visited the area originally reserved for the old people's home in June 2005 when the architect and the community leader were about to complete the parcelling out of the two blocks. Outside the administrator's building site, I met Reugénio, his nearby neighbour, who was living in a two-room reed-hut with his wife and three children while saving up money to build a cementhouse. 'We're not worried anymore', Reugénio assured me with a smile. 'With the administrator here, they can't throw us out. Now, we want to build real houses as well.' Indeed, during the coming months, residents in the area commenced building projects in the plots parcelled out by the architect and the community chief. As Reugénio later explained, although the presence of the district administrator from Marracuene was considered as a potential threat to their continued occupancy, his construction project also cast a legitimizing light on their hitherto informal settlement. The building project

was undoubtedly 'on the margins of the law', as Reugénio eloquently put it, but it indicated how secure occupancy might be achieved. Hence, it was Reugénio and a small group of residents who contacted the architect through a local community leader and paid him to parcel out the area so that the two blocks were laid out in alignment with the district administrator's plot. According to state and municipal agents, the informal parcelling-out of the area did, in fact, transform the status of the residents. Whereas previously they were considered as illegal squatters who could be removed by force, they were now defined as potentially legitimate residents. As the head of the urbanization department at the Maputo Municipality argued, if people were occupying parcelled-out plots adjacent to an administrator's building site, they had to be legitimate residents. Furthermore, considering the missing administrative capacities, informal occupancy in Mulwene was frequently legitimised provided it adhered to the urban ideals associated with the initial aspirations of creating a 'model neighbourhood', i.e. cement houses located three metre from plot limits in 15 × 30 metre parcelled-out plots. We might therefore argue that the parcelling-out of the area near the administrator's house established an appropriate distance to potentially malignant others. Seeing themselves from the perspective of the state, Reugénio and his fellow residents knew that the only way of creating a secure future in an unstable social environment would be to align themselves with those forces (i.e. the administrator's building project) which were equally desirable and dangerous. Put somewhat differently, by parcelling out the area, the residents were making themselves visible in order to disappear in the eyes of an erratic other without which social existence in the city would be impossible.

Contrapuntal cosmopolitanism

If, as Beck argues, a cosmopolitan perspective is grounded in a negotiation of and with otherness (2002), then, surely, this must include elements of 'reflexive self-distantiation' (Werbner 2008b:18) whereby individual agents momentarily seek to position themselves as their primary contrapuntal other. Through this perspectival displacement between self and other, a social distance emerges which demarcates, so to speak, the scope for reciprocal interactions. In this regard, I find Robbins's argument that 'actually existing cosmopolitanism is a reality of (re)attachment, multiple attachment, or attachment at a distance' (1998:3) particularly pertinent. In this text I have thus been guided by the idea of seeing cosmopolitanism as attachment at a distance. I have argued that the idea of the 'kindness of strangers' has limited analytical purchase when studying local cosmopolitan encounters. Rather than focussing on social approximation, I have suggested that we explore how people distance themselves from others and through that distance establish viable reciprocal relationships. As I have furthermore outlined through the empirical case study, this approach is particularly appropriate when exploring social life in unknown milieux peopled by potentially malevolent strangers, such as district administrators and local community chiefs. Indeed, in Mulwene, house-building activities can be seen as creative attempts at producing viable distances in a partially illuminated

socio–cultural universe where capricious forces constantly threaten to circumvent any momentary equilibrium. To paraphrase Corsín Jimenez, house-building is here 'a matter of finding the right balance between the visible and the invisible elements of social life' (2008:180) which will hopefully open towards reciprocal exchanges with important but also potentially dangerous others. When the group of informal residents consolidated their occupancy by contracting an architect to parcel out the area, they were not merely imitating the workings of power. Rather, they were communicating in a widely shared aesthetic language in an attempt to enforce upon a recalcitrant world the need to recognise their position as unique but also at a viable distance from important others. As a reflection of what I have called contrapuntal cosmopolitanism, it is a kind of perspectival displacement where the individual agent makes him- or herself available in a form which can be recognised by the other. In order for an agent to elicit an effect from an Other, he or she must consequently manifest themselves in particular concrete ways (Strathern 1999:259), and in the socio-cultural environment in Mulwene, this is equivalent to building cement houses in parcelled-out plots.

Contrapuntal cosmopolitanism is thus about finding the appropriate distance to capricious others through ideational, communicative and physical media so that reciprocal exchanges can be realised without simultaneously being attacked by malevolent or greedy counterparts. Although highly volatile and exposed to shift-ing socio–political agendas, it is through such forms of contrapuntal cosmopolitan-ism that people living on the fringes of the Mozambican society manage to engage with important but also capricious others in unfamiliar social milieux.

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COMMENTARY

In the preceding text-piece, I engaged in a discussion about the status of the 'cos-mopolitan stranger' through a case study, which outlined how social distances are produced in a poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique. It was, in other words, the ethnographic data that opened towards a critical exami-nation of an abstract theoretical figure. In this commentary, I focus on how this analytical approach was developed and made its way into the text-piece.

Notes and nodes

In order to examine the figure of the 'cosmopolitan stranger' through my ethnog-raphy, it was crucial to bracket the distinction between individual levels of abstrac-tion. As I will outline, this was done through a provisional levelling out of scalar differences between ethnographic data and theoretical arguments.

I access my fieldwork data as coded information. All my ethnographic mate-rial is categorised using a software programme for qualitative coding (Nvivo 11 for Mac), which allows me to group notes, interview transcriptions, photos and sound-bites together, for example, as case studies or loosely defined thematic

taxonomies. In order for me to structure my data chronologically, each document or file that is imported to the software programme is given a name corresponding to the date it was originally made. Hence, when I categorise a whole document or a smaller piece of a text, say, as 'belonging' to the group of data pertaining to the case study about the administrator's house outlined in the text-piece above (these groupings are called *nodes*), it is automatically inserted in a consecutive order, so that when the particular node is printed out, I get a chronological account.

There is no coherence or closure to the way I code my ethnographic data. I think of the different nodes (thematic and case-based alike) merely as momentary entry points that allow me to continuously mould or shape my material in multiple and often contrasting ways. I will, for example, print out and compare two different nodes (say, the grouping of data that makes up the case study about the administrator's house and a thematic one regarding the production of social distances among residents in Mulwene) in order to imagine new argumentative lines cross-cutting both, and this will potentially lead to the creation of a third node (or the deletion of a previous one) (see Figure 9.1).

Parallel to my coding of ethnographic material, I have taken extensive notes for nearly all texts I read, and these are organised on my computer in thematic folders. In the past, I have used these notes as tools for returning to (and remembering) the lines of arguments I wished to engage with in my own texts. In fact, I find that I rarely re-read the original article or book, relying instead on my written notes, which come to serve as a kind of textual proxy. Still, as the number of notes increased, I became equally frustrated about spending excessive amounts of time searching for the correct notes. Basically, I thought, it required too many unprofitable readings of notes in order to locate the right one. I therefore started coding all the notes I had taken for books and articles exactly as I had previously done
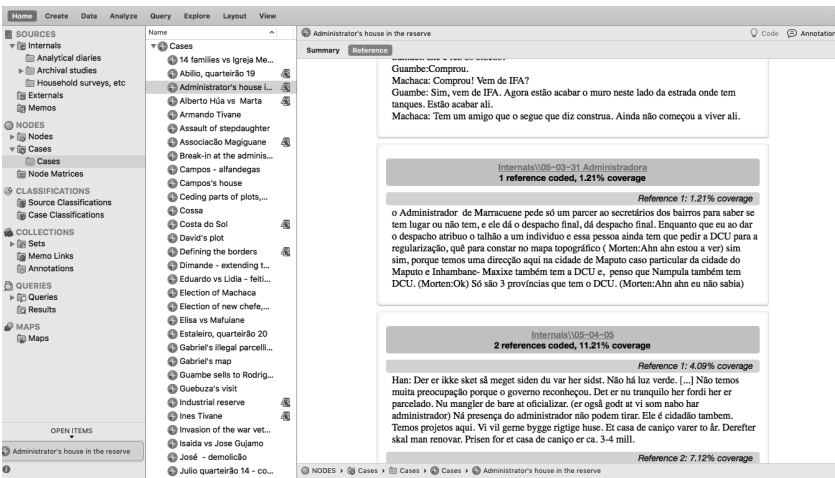

FIGURE 9.1 N–Vivo screen showing fieldnotes and interview excerpts regarding the administrator's house (the case study used in the text-piece above) coded as a node (column to the right). The middle column shows titles of other ethnographic case–studies as nodes.

with my ethnographic material, that is, importing individual documents to N-Vivo and categorising my notes as nodes. To take one example, under one taxonomic tree that I defined as 'cosmopolitanism', I have three individual nodes ('conceptual genealogy', 'cosmopolitanism and the nation-state' and 'the stranger'), each of which comprises pieces of text cut from my original notes to books and articles (see Figures 9.2 and 9.3).
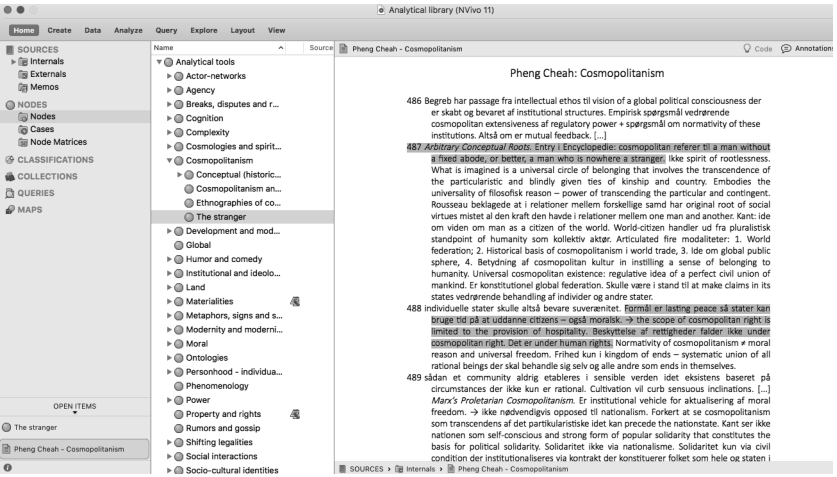

FIGURE 9.2 N-Vivo screen showing notes for the first pages of Cheah's article 'Cosmopolitanism'. The highlighted sections are those coded as 'the stranger' (see Figure 9.3).
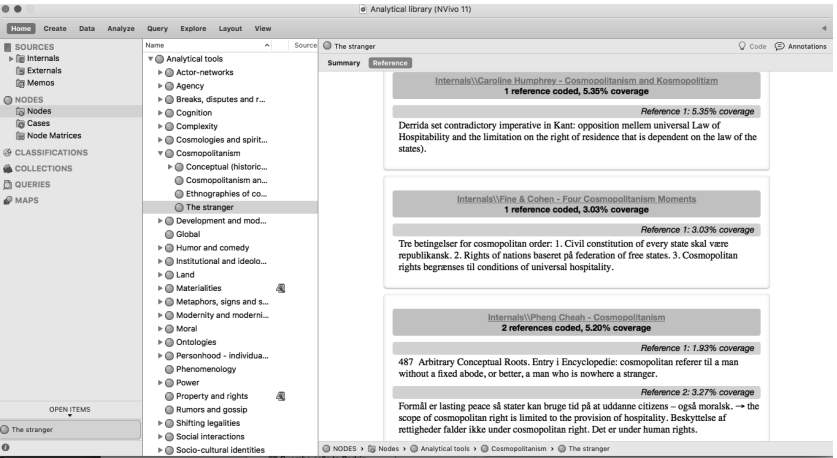

FIGURE 9.3 N-Vivo screen showing the node 'the stranger' where notes from Cheah's 'Cosmopolitanism' can be seen together with notes for other texts coded in a similar way.

What I found after having commenced coding ethnographic data and text notes in a similar manner was that the distinction between their individual levels of abstraction were momentarily bracketed. Although the 'cosmopolitan stranger' is undoubtedly an abstract figure – that is, in an analytical sense, detached from everyday social life – this difference is eliminated by the coding procedure. A node is a fragmented constellation of information that condenses longer strings of arguments to a series of assertions. Consequently, the pieces of information that end up in the individual node will invariably lose their connection to the textual context (i.e. the notes for a particular book or article) from where they were cut. Although, at a later stage in the analysis, this connection needs to be re-established, its momentary absence allows for analogical connections to be made between arguments, ideas and ethnographic data that would otherwise remain unnoticed. As preparation for writing the text-piece above, I printed out the node comprising all ethnographic material regarding the administrator's house and the node on the 'cosmopolitan stranger'. Each node comprised approximately six to eight pages, and by printing two pages per copy, I could physically overlook all the material at once. It was consequently possible to make immediate *visual* connections (rather than merely intellectual) between detached pieces of data which might not otherwise be associated. You might argue that this exercise prioritized the aesthetics of information rather than its status in relation to a coherent string of arguments. Still, by initially bracketing connections to their conceptual or ethnographic context, each piece of information was measured (or scaled) only by its capacity to be articulated with other pieces of information within the immediate frame set by my objective with the text. And, as I will argue, the sheer visuality of having the printed nodes next to each other allowed for connections to be made without distinguishing levels of abstraction or prioritizing the possibilities for either deductive or inductive assumptions.

In sum, treating ethnographic data and text notes alike has allowed me to approach my material from multiple different perspectives without giving privilege to any one in particular. I will therefore argue that this kind of qualitative coding may fruitfully be considered as a heuristic tool for making any theoretical assertion or data piece function as an experimental premise for the analysis of particular themes. In the coming section, I go on to outline how this approach opened towards an analysis of the 'cosmopolitan stranger' based on ethnographic studies of the production of social distances in Mulwene, Maputo.

Ethnographic scaling

As I read through and took notes for articles and books on cosmopolitanism, it struck me that the notion of the 'stranger' was an interesting recurrent theme, and so I made it into an N-Vivo node and coded all text-pieces that could somehow be related to it. According to a number of authors writing on cosmopolitanism, a true cosmopolitan ethics is rooted in the Kantian law of hospitality, which stipulates the need for kindness towards individuals venturing out as strangers to 'sojourn in other territories' (Werbner 2008b:2; cf. Cheah 2006:488; Fine and Cohen

2002:143). However, when thinking about social life on the outskirts of Maputo, this Kantian understanding of social relatedness seemed to be quite problematic. As many residents told me, Mulwene was a community composed of strangers, who were forced to live together as flood victims after the devastating flooding that hit Mozambique in 2000. And in order to survive socially in this unknown territory, it was crucial to establish appropriate distances to important others who might otherwise attempt to draw unwanted benefits from one's momentary openness. Thinking about this, I returned to my ethnographic data and located a node about the production of 'social distance' in Mulwene, which I printed out and placed on my table beside the node on the 'cosmopolitan stranger' (see Figure 9.4).

From only a first reading of the coded material, a confrontation between the 'cosmopolitan stranger' and local ideas about social distance in Mulwene seemed like an idea worth exploring. I highlighted particular phrases and descriptions from my fieldnotes that emphasized the contrast: Alcobias (a local resident) saying that friendships in Mulwene were based on particular interests and that 'people only want what you can give and after that they'll send you away'; Nelson (my friend and assistant in Mulwene) telling me that 'those who have something to hide don't speak up'; and Paulo Litsuri (a local resident) claiming that 'everyone's against me; there's a lot of wrongdoings being done in this community'. One of the final text-pieces coded as 'social distance' was cut from a particular case study regarding an illegal invasion of a plot by Alberto Manjate, a local bricklayer, and when reading it I was immediately reminded of how I came to focus on social distances in Mulwene. In fact, my encounter with Manjate did, indeed, constitute a unique 'ethnographic moment' (Strathern 1999:6) which came to guide my ongoing studies of social life in Mulwene and consequently also my approach to writing the text-piece under discussion. Let me therefore briefly describe this crucial occurrence and its analytical repercussions.

FIGURE 9.4   N-Vivo screen showing the node on the production of 'social distance' in Mulwene.

According to Strathern, it is at certain 'ethnographic moments' that the already known may be transcended by establishing new connections between 'the understood (what is analysed at the moment of observation)' and 'the need to understand (what is observed at the moment of analysis)' (1999:6, 12–13). Strathern recounts the first time she saw mounted pearl shells in Mt. Hagen (Papua New Guinea) 'slung like pigs from a pole being carried between two men, who were hurrying with them because of the weight, a gift of some kind' (op.cit.:8). Although she did not know it at the time, the transactions with pearl shells would come to guide Strathern in her analysis of Papua New Guinea Highlands social life. Images like the aforementioned came to crystallise, so to speak, the 'ethnographic moment' that enabled Strathern to explore the intricate systems of prestations and alternations of perspectives between donors and recipients in Mt. Hagen and elsewhere.

I know precisely when my own 'ethnographic moment' occurred: 11 April 2005. I had been doing fieldwork in Mulwene for more than eight months, focusing predominantly on disputes over land rights while trying to understand the social-cum-aesthetic dynamics of local house-building processes. Beginning in March 2005, I had followed a particular case in which a local bricklayer, Alberto Manjate, was claiming rights to a piece of land he had apparently been allocated informally by a community chief in return for building the latter's house (Nielsen 2014). Unfortunately, the same plot had also been allocated to a school teacher through the Ministry of Education, and so Manjate would most likely lose not only access to land but also the possibilities of building a durable cement house for his wife and three children. Up until that point, Manjate and his family had been living in a small reed-hut he rented from his aunt, but given the prospect of acquiring his own land, Manjate had told his aunt that they would leave within a few weeks (and she proceeded to sell the plot where her nephew had been living). Hence, realising that he and his family might soon end up being homeless, on 10 April 2005, Manjate invaded the disputed plot and immediately proceeded to make his presence visible. I visited Manjate on 11 April 2005 and it was, indeed, apparent that he had been active. Along the left side, a small two-room reed hut had been erected on a stamped raised platform held in place by a row of cement blocks. Starting a few metres from the boundary towards the street, a rectangular furrow had been made reaching approximately halfway across the plot, and cement blocks had been placed on all its edges. After a guided tour around the plot, we sat down to discuss the recent events. I asked Manjate about the intentions with the furrow that looked as if it were the initial step towards making foundations for a cement house. Manjate shook his head. 'I really didn't start making the foundations to build a house. [...] I made the house so that they will give me another plot. That's the only way to do things here in Mozambique'. After a while, Manjate had to leave for a meeting with the local community chief, and I followed along. When we reached the entrance, we could see a white four-wheel drive Toyota crossing the square. Manjate stopped and followed the car with his eyes. 'Is it them?' Manjate's question was suspended in mid-air without a proper addressee. I replied by asking who he thought it could have been. Manjate resumed walking before

responding. 'I don't know'; his voice was barely audible; 'someone who's coming to resolve my problems'.

In several of my writings about social life in Mulwene, I have focused on the potentials of construction projects for making house-builders socially visible among peers, community leaders and state officials (Nielsen 2007a; 2007b; 2010a; 2010b; 2011; 2013; 2014; 2017). I have consequently argued that people who occupy land illegally may come to acquire status as legitimate residents, provided that they build cement houses in parcelled-out plots in accordance with officially sanctioned building regulations, for example, regarding building materials and the location of the house within the plot. In that sense, Alberto Manjate was making himself visible by digging out a furrow three metres from the boundary line towards the street. It was, in a very concrete way, a physical manifestation of how legitimate building projects were made and thereby also an indication of his potential status as proper resident. His hopeful question ('is it them?'), posed while looking at the white Toyota passing us at the square, may fruitfully be interpreted from this perspective. Having just dug out the furrow for a cement house, Manjate believed himself to be properly positioned in order to be seen by some (unknown) authority who would resolve his problematic situation. In my analyses of this and similar cases, I have argued that house-building projects serve as aesthetic media for creating appropriate distances to important, but also potentially malignant, others, such as civil servants and community leaders. Simply put, by building a house in a parcelled-out plot, one that corresponds to the official norms regarding urban regulations, the house-builder's illegal occupancy will most likely be informally accepted by state and municipality. And indeed, Manjate's strategy was successful. After a series of prolonged meetings and debates, Manjate was allocated use-rights to a 15 × 30-metre plot nearby, where he continues to live with his wife and three children.

The incidence at the square constitutes for me a crucial 'ethnographic moment' that still informs my thinking about social life on the outskirts of Maputo, Mozambique. When examining relations between civil servants, community leaders and residents occupying land illegally, I am continuously drawn back to the square in front of Manjate's house where I first caught a fleeting glimpse of the potentiality of house-building *as* potentiality (i.e. as a potent power of transformation). As an instant image of the problematics of social distance, it has become a qualitative scale, so to speak, against which I gauge other ethnographic material. Hence, subsequent analyses of case-studies on disputes over land rights have evolved through continuous considerations of the ways in which local residents seek to position themselves at appropriate distances from important but potentially dangerous others (see also Stasch 2009; 2011). As a 'scaling format', I have assessed to what extent people emerged in the field of vision of others *while moving away.* In other words, a specific focus on the production of social distances through house-building projects has allowed me to speculate about a peculiar kind of inverse reciprocity where counterparts become (partially) visible only as they are distancing themselves from each other. The oddity being, of course, that social distance might be equivalent to physical proximity.

Returning to the writing of the text-piece above, the categorization of ethnographical data as 'social distance' is, as I have just outlined, an outcome of a

prolonged analysis where I have explored various overlapping facets of social life in Mulwene. In a sense, the conceptual condensation of ethnographic material as a node is a kind of 'eclipsing' of the former by the latter. As Gell tells us, that which is eclipsed remains 'present in the content of whatever is foregrounded. A view of the sun in eclipse is still a view of the sun, not the moon, though it is the moon one sees' (Gell 1999:62).[1] Hence, the eclipse of ethnographic material by the node 'social distance' condensates a complex social dynamic as a singular analytical image. And it was in this eclipsed form that I could then proceed to make an explorative confrontation with the abstract figure of the 'cosmopolitan stranger'. Thinking about how social distances were made in Mulwene, I returned one last time to my coded ethnographic material and located the catalogue of case-studies. Browsing through the list, I tried to find the appropriate one which would productively articulate the production of social distances. From reading only the title ('The administrator's house'), I remembered the process and already at that point decided that it might serve to connect the description of social distances in Mulwene with an analysis of the 'cosmopolitan stranger'.

Summing up, it is my argument that the provisional levelling out of scalar differences between ethnographic material and notes for books and articles through similar processes of qualitative coding is what allows me to explore different themes from multiple and often contrastive perspectives. We may therefore imagine that theoretical assumptions are approached recursively, as it were, through particular ethnographies. Hence, in order to engage in an intellectual discussion about a cosmopolitan anthropology, I (imaginatively) placed myself firmly at the square in front of Alberto Manjate's house. Put somewhat differently, I knew from the outset that the production of social distances (as a concrete ethnographic phenomenon) should function as the qualitative scale against which to plot the discussion about cosmopolitanism. The ethnography served as the analytical argument for engaging with a theoretical debate rather than vice-versa.

Dialogic aesthetics

Surely, notes are not literature and nodes are not notes, and so it might be argued that cutting up already condensed notes removes any meaningful correspondence to their origin. I will nevertheless argue that the material *as nodes* resurfaces in a radically different aesthetic form, which cannot be equated with its origin (say, a transcribed interview or a journal article) (see the introduction to this book). By conjoining bits and pieces of information in a conceptual assemblage (e.g. the node 'social distance'), a new and, indeed, very unstable constellation of meaning(s) emerges in the intervals between different components. Each excerpt is in itself too condensed and fragmented to convey a homogeneous content, so they overlap and borrow meaning from each other through the momentary connections established by the node. The methodological benefits of coding data as nodes is perhaps best understood, then, as a 'dialogic aesthetics' established between authors, themes and ethnographic data. Given the detachment from their prior context, each element acts as a singular assertion which is measured only by its capacity to connect with others, a capacity which is, however, always

defined by *other* singular assertions. In other words, a fragment of coded text may be connected to any other based simply on its aesthetic suitability when evaluated using the latter as scale.

As might be apparent by now, any written text I produce is filtered through my archive of coded material, which functions as a kind of analytical encyclopaedia built by traces of my entire catalogue of ethnographic material and books and articles I have read throughout the years. One might ask, then, what does *not* end up in the archive of coded texts? What is the filtering mechanism allowing certain pieces of information to emerge as nodes? Although these questions seem like the pertinent ones to ask, they are based on the premise that a node somehow equals a coherent content which, I must emphasise, it certainly does not. Given the fragmented nature of coded data, individual nodes lack internal cohesion. What they do, however, is to allow for tenuous connections to be made between pieces of text based simply on the immediate (and visual) aesthetic impression of an analytical assertion or a fragment of ethnographic material cut from their context. The outcome is a tentative framing of a particular theme, an 'analytical prototype', if you will, which invariably undergoes numerous transformations as the writing process rogresses.

Surely, this usage of ethnographic data and theoretical-cum-analytical literature may seem counter-intuitive when compared to conventional academic approaches to writing. As a heuristic device for igniting a writing process, it does, however, have certain advantages. First, it allows for a momentary exteriorization of the intellectual thinking process. Simply put, by seeing the pieces of information, which go into the overall arguments of one's text grouped together in conceptual assemblages, new connections are forced upon the material. Obviously, it is subsequently crucial to probe the suitability of these emerging associations by relating each piece of information to its already established context. Second, through the visual associations, the material (both ethnographic and analytical) is squared and any difference in abstraction is momentarily bracketed. It thus becomes possible to engage with the material from any possible entry point. This does *not* imply that all arguments perforce have to be assessed using the same analytical scale through and through; it merely suggests an initial experimental encounter with the material based on a dialogic aesthetics rather than reference to pre-defined inductive or deductive assumptions.

Note

1 The eclipsing of strings of arguments is a conventional anthropological maneuvre, e.g. when we want to speak about reciprocal exchanges in Melanesia by condensing a complex social phenomenon to a single phrase.

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