Envious Ethnography and the Ethnography of Envy in Anthropology's "Orient": Towards A Theory of Envy

Drawing on prevalent Euro-American folk models, extant theories of envy in the social sciences tend to reduce it to an emotion embodied in individual subjects, who are believed to envy those who have more and those who are hierarchically superordinate. Yet envy can also be viewed as a social, intersubjective phenomenon—one potentially incorporating humans and various other-than-human entities into complex and unpredictable relationships involving occult phenomena like witchcraft and the evil eye as well as entire families, regions, and abstract identity categories of ethnicity, gender, and class. The tension between ethnographic accounts of envy in the Middle East and Middle Eastern accounts of envy provides an opportunity to explore the phenomenon of 'envying down' and an underappreciated, recursive dimension of envy: envying the efficacy of other people's envy. Envy is revealed to be reflexive, relational, and often institutionalized—even within the institution of ethnography itself.

While studies of envy in the social sciences customarily begin by bemoaning the lack of previous scholarly attention to the subject[1], this is not completely fair. Ethnographers have arguably been producing a wealth of subtle accounts of envy since the nineteenth century. The problem is that the most sophisticated of these studies have gone largely unacknowledged and unappreciated as such, while the most straightforward attempts to investigate envy ethnographically tend to follow psychologists, economists, and philosophers in taking for granted a certain Euro-American folk model that treats envy as a purely subjective emotion. To their credit, even the most psychologizing ethnographic accounts of envy have always provided a window into its workings in the context of deeply routinized, long-term, face-to-face relations, often involving kinship (Foster 1965, 1972; Ghosh 1983; Lindholm 1982, 2008). Ethnographic accounts have also brilliantly catalogued the innumerable ways in which envy can involve various other-than-human entities, from occult phenomena like witchcraft and the evil eye to

[1] For some, like George Foster (1972), this seems to arise from a desire to justify one's research by purporting to fill a "gap" of sorts. For others, though, like the more polemical Helmut Schoeck (1969), it is a result of a deliberate attempt to mould the social sciences in the image of left-wing politics by ignoring envy as a legitimate topic of study. A recent interdisciplinary volume about envy by Oxford University Press continued this tradition, bemoaning how little anthropologist have written so far on the topic (Smith 2008: 11-12).

entire families, regions, and abstract identity categories of ethnicity, gender, and class (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Elyachar 2005; Evans-Pritchard 1935; Maloney 1976; Spooner 1970; West: 2006; Westermarck 1926).

Despite the many insights generated by these approaches, however, they often inadvertently naturalize a limiting Euro-American notion of envy. Studies that follow this Euro-American folk model treat envy as an emotion and proceed to pursue a reductionist search for the abstract subjective quanta of envy. Thus envy comes to be theorized as a matter of being in the thrall of what the development anthropologist George Foster calls, "the image of the limited good" (1965:296; 1972:169; see also Lindholm 2008:233-238) or, alternately, envy is theorized as what the ethnographer (and now novelist) Amitav Ghosh terms a "contradiction" between "an asserted equality and objective conditions which make its realization impossible" (1983:222; see also Lindholm 1982:xxvii; Lindholm 2008:229-236). Both of these models accept that envy is best identified with what the accusation of envy claims to target: the bad feelings and resentment of the inferior regarding their own inferiority in relation to their social betters. Foster goes so far as to argue that, with few exceptions (like the "busy banker" and the "barefoot boy, fishing pole over his shoulder"), "one normally does not envy down" (1972: 171)[2]. It is as if the person who makes an accusation of envy (as Foster repeatedly does with reference to those he seeks to "develop") is little more than an innocent bystander.

Yet it is not clear why ethnographers should take the Euro-American folk theory of envy at face value, all the more so given the way in which it is often couched in the idiom of accusation. In contrast, ethnographers do not usually take for granted that the essence of

[2] While Foster is dismissive of such scenarios in which people embodying competing social values might envy each other, the phenomenon deserves more attention: how might the wealthy merchant envy the ascetic renunciate? How might the dowdy householder envy their vivacious servants?

witchcraft lies in what people claim to be targeting when they make witchcraft accusations. For instance, E.E. Evans-Pritchard prefaced his pathbreaking study of Azande witchcraft beliefs by saying, "Witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist" (1935:18). To the contrary, counter-sorcery tends to so dominate the ostensible social activity around 'sorcery' accusations that sorcery and counter-sorcery are often treated as almost indistinguishable—by analysts and even practitioners themselves (West 2006). The same skepticism attaches to a number of other forms of social scapegoating as well. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre famously pointed out how ridiculous it would be to try and explain the calumnies of the anti-semite in terms of the "Jews" that anti-semitism holds responsible for the world's problems ([1948]1995:69)—an observation that Frantz Fannon (among others) has extended to similarly quixotic attempts to define "race" as something inherent in "blacks" ([1952]1986:93). In *Racecraft*, Karen and Barbara Fields call this a "sleight of hand" that "transforms racism, something an aggressor *does*, into race, something the target *is*" (2012:17). Similarly, envy tends to emerge most visibly in the form of accusations that are often (but certainly not always) used by the socially dominant to essentialize envy as a quality of the weak and the marginal. As I have argued elsewhere, amidst enthusiasm for an 'affective turn' (Hemmings 2005), it is worth being wary of the potential category error of confusing people's actual feelings for 'the politics of accusation': moralizing discourses that attach 'ugly emotions' to stigmatized others (Hughes et al. 2019).

To accept that accusations of envy are not necessarily innocent and that ethnographic studies of envy may be implicated in the very dynamics they seek to study creates a serious analytic impasse. While few would deny that the weak and the marginal may in fact experience precisely the sorts of envy that they are accused of harboring, an ethnographically rigorous approach cannot ignore its own role in the materialization and institutionalization of that envy.

This is all the more true when seeking to locate envy in the postcolonial world. The identification of envy with places like the Middle East is especially redolent of Orientalism, a term that has become deeply symptomatic in recent decades of struggles around the representation of various regional ethnographic traditions in anthropology. Most notorious perhaps was the thesis of Edward Said's long-time intellectual antagonist, the Orientalist and later Neoconservative Bush administration adviser Bernard Lewis, who argued in "The Roots of Muslim Rage" that hatred of America in the region was rooted in envy. Indeed, with his mix of admiration and repulsion at the ability of "Islamic fundamentalism" to serve as a powerful check on Western domination by giving "aim and form to the otherwise aimless and formless resentments of the Muslim masses" (1990), Lewis arguably tips his hand. The public accusation of envy reveals previously submerged anxieties that other people's envy might actually be effective in countering one's attempts to maintain a "flexible positional superiority" (Said 1978:15-16).

Anthropology's explicit theoretical interest in envy lasted from the 1960s to the 1980s, arising from—but also running aground on—dynamics around the increasing reflexivity of anthropology as a discipline amidst a period of American imperial expansion and retrenchment. The more freely accusations of envy, resentment, and *ressentiment* around the politics of representation have flowed in the discipline, the more the empirical study of these phenomena has been muted. Despite Foster's claim that, 'one does not envy down,' Foster's own theoretical contributions to anthropology actually provide an ideal case study in how even the most empirically sound envy accusations can represent a form of 'envying down': in this case Foster's envy of the efficacy of the peasantry's envy in frustrating the work of development. And like other manifestations of envy, 'envying down' is not merely symptomatic of preexisting invidious emotions but also further reifies relationships of envy—all the while resisting explicit

recognition. This fraught intellectual history itself typifies the self-referential and self-reinforcing yet also self-effacing dimensions of envy.

Building on Said's critiques of Orientalist "imaginative geographies" of social difference (Said 1978), anthropologists like Lila Abu Lughod (1989) and Arjun Appadurai (1986) developed the concept of the "prestige zone" to highlight the slippage through which agendas within the ethnographic *literature* can efface the concerns of ethnographic *interlocutors*. In taking the Middle East (or any other place) as a potentially privileged site for ethnographic engagement with the phenomenon of envy (or any other topic), ethnographers inevitably run precisely this risk. Envy and its various institutional elaborations transcend the region in important ways, so why connect them to the Middle East at all if doing so risks making the region a prestige zone for stigmatized social phenomena like envy? Because it is precisely the process of theoretical stigmatization and avoidance that is key to understanding envy's workings. In a recent follow-up to Abu Lughod's piece, Lara Deeb and Jessica Winegar fret that there has been an over-correction—to the point where more urban, cosmopolitan areas and topics are now studied to the *exclusion* of the sort of more 'exotic' material that dominated an older generation of scholarship (2012:537-540). The increasing discomfort among ethnographers with the challenge of identifying phenomena like envy in the contemporary Middle East area studies literature comes to offer a useful model for the difficulty of locating envy in the world more generally.

Envy's peculiar, fundamentally relational character will emerge with the interplay between the ethnographic literature on the Middle East and the ethnographic encounter itself providing the empirical raw material for analysis. This focus on the ethnographic literature's relationship to the ethnographic encounter accentuates the ways in which envy entails multiple

self-referential layers and scales, which is key to its ability to leverage people's intersubjective entanglements to manifest itself as an objective social force. As the literary theorist Sianne Ngai has perceptively noted, envy is one of those "ugly feelings" that "contains a model of the problem that defines it" because envy is part and parcel of a set of anxieties that problematize the *objectivity* of the social inequality that is their own putative object (2005:21). However, engaging with a wider ethnographic archive will challenge Ngai's assertion that, "after [envy] enters a public domain of signification it will always seem unjustified and critically effete" as it is "reduced to signifying a static subjective trait: the 'lack' or 'deficiency' of the person who envies" (ibid).

In contrast, Middle Eastern ethnography will afford a view of social worlds in which envy is accorded far more power than the Euro-American folk model will countenance. Unlike attempts to mobilize "emotions" to construct artificial boundaries around persons as individuals, social institutions like the evil eye, witchcraft, honor, and hospitality reveal envy to be not so much a "lack" or something "effete" in need of critical recuperation but rather a potent social force in its own right. Most intriguing for an ethnographer like myself is the possibility that Middle Eastern ideas of envy could overcome the theoretical cul-de-sac of the "prestige zone" as critiqued by Appadurai and Abu Lughod through what Marilyn Strathern calls "negative strategies." This would involve a sort of "cathexis" or negative investment that emerges from, "moments when the invention of concepts in local ethnographic contexts rearranges conceived notions, thus bouncing back off assumptions which inform metropolitan theory… [giving] way to a reflexive move that reveals these ideas as projections of metropolitan thinking itself" (Strathern 1990:205). Amidst calls to decolonize the discipline, it is this potential ability of

Middle Eastern conceptions of envy to reconfigure metropolitan thinking about the latent role of envy within ethnographic description itself that makes such an investigation worth the risks.

This article begins by focusing on how my own experiences as an ethnographer studying the Middle East came to transform my understandings of envy: how I came to recognize envy where I had never seen it before and how I came to fear its malign, often occult effects. I focus in particular on my (often unsuccessful) attempts to use and understand the phrase *mashallah*, which by various accounts can be seen as a verbal incantation, a prayer, and a form of indirect speech indexing relations of envy. In the next section, I will show how the difficulties that ethnographers (like all social actors) experience when locating and naming envy are recursively present within the discipline of anthropology's historically fraught attempts to locate envy geographically and sociologically. In the final section of the paper, I show how discussion of envy in Middle Eastern ethnography came to be short-circuited as ethnographers increasingly worked to sublimate envy's negativity and transform their accounts of it into accounts of more pro-social phenomena, like generosity, egalitarianism, and grace. In the conclusion, I argue that this unwillingness to fully engage with envy has left ethnographers (and scholarship more generally) bereft of rigorous models of envy that can help make sense of a range of predicaments grounded in this contemporary era's increasingly rancorous forms of inequality.

Mashallah: Finding Envy in the Middle East

Mashallah is a common Arabic-Islamicate phrase that can be translated as 'God has willed it' or 'God be pleased.' The phrase is a prevalent feature of the visual landscape, adorning thresholds (figure 1) and cars (figure 2) among other things. It is used by Arab Christians as well, and its range extends far beyond the Arabic-speaking world thanks to the spread of Islam. *Mashallah* was one of the first phrases I learned when I began living with Arabic speakers, but

beyond understanding that it offered protection from the evil eye, learning to appreciate the wisdom behind the phrase (like most ethnographic insights) ultimately required being disabused of a host of unexamined assumptions through patient tutelage. Behind the phrase lay an important set of metaphysical and moral assumptions that I initially found baffling. Here I was, coming from a social milieu in the US where "I envy you" is a compliment, where everything is supposed to be *fascinating*, originally from the Latin *fascinatio*: to bewitch, to cast the evil eye. I found I was consistently complimenting people too freely and, in trying to be agreeable, making people deeply uncomfortable. Even more awkwardly, I found that when I complimented people's possessions, they would try to force me to take them. As I became more adept linguistically and culturally, I continually had to recalculate how to interweave my ongoing need to flatter people with the need to deny invidious intent. Part of that was constantly wondering why people around me were repeating the phrase *Mashallah*—and whether I should too. The implication here was that people needed protection from envy because it had the ability to afflict others in very concrete ways—although the remarkable polysemy of the phrase was a reflection of wide-ranging differences of opinion about just what the nature of those powers might be. Nonetheless these different uses of *Mashallah* all shared a tendency to see envy as fundamentally social and intersubjective and, moreover, entangled with institutions, communities, and other collectivities as much as individual human subjects.

For instance, many ethnographers will be familiar with the experience of having their belongings meticulously inspected by friends and relative strangers alike during fieldwork, especially when the ethnographer has privileged access to money and goods—as is often the case[3]. This facet of global inequality is so widespread that I was fully accustomed to this commonplace ritual when a host's teenaged son and his friend stopped by my apartment. Predictably, the latter went straight for the electronics that, despite being selected for their antiquity and ugliness, were still nicer than anything *he* owned. Each one elicited a string of mischievous *mashallah*s and questions about how much it cost and whether or not I would be interested in selling it. Suffice it to say that my attempts at hospitality that day were far from successful. I was quickly sidetracked into deflecting attempts to purchase my possessions, and I came across as a seasoned tightwad—an experience, again, that many anthropologists will recognize. Sadly, I never got them to sit down for tea. Eventually my host's son ushered his

[3] Discussion of the wealth gap in "reflexive" treatments of ethnography is ubiquitous, but they rarely theorize envy, particularly the ethnographer's discomfort at the possible envy of their interlocutors (but see Bleek 1979).

friend out the door, reproaching him for 'annoying' me, although it was probably my own ineptitude that made the situation unpleasant.

While it is impossible for me to know for sure what my would-be guests intended by their words, I want to emphasize here how even my own psychology remains somewhat inaccessible, buried beneath layers of bad faith and self-serving rationalizations. While the situation is redolent of a certain pattern Nietzchean resentment and *ressentiment*, relating those terms to specific psychological states and social roles has proven to be contentious and politicized. On the one hand, Weber took up the concept of *ressentiment* to argue that Abrahamic monotheism lends itself well to a "theodicy of the disprivileged," and an expectation that "the unequal distribution of mundane goods" will eventually be set right by "God's wrath" (1978:494). Perhaps it was just such a theodicy that lay at the heart of such *mashallahs*—and hence shaped my own defensive reaction to them. Yet on the other hand, Frederick Jameson has argued that such ideas about *ressentiment* might in fact be little more than a bourgeois fantasy, a projection of the elite's discomfort at "seemingly gratuitous lower-class agitation" (1981:202). In other words, I might be the only resentful one here—and I might primarily be resenting my own fantasy projection of my guests' *ressentiment*. Jameson argues that theories of *ressentiment* will have an "unavoidably autoreferential structure" insofar as they themselves, "will always be… the expression and the production of *ressentiment*" (ibid: 202). However, from an ethnographic perspective, it is worth resisting the analytic closure that comes with assuming resentment and *ressentiment* are limited to the superordinate because it ignores how elite envy might be the product of the well-earned and socially efficacious envy of the subordinate[4]. In the preceding case, there is even the

[4] Didier Fassin attempts a related solution to the problem when he effectively defines the subordinate's emotional state as *ressentiment* and the superordinate's emotional state as resentment. While denying accusations that he is normativizing the two states and lionizing *ressentiment*, he coyly accepts that he does intend a "political moral"

possibility that the socially inept ethnographer was largely a bystander projecting his own insecurities onto an unrelated circuit of resentment and *ressentiment* involving his host's son and a more disadvantaged friend. These are not mutually exclusive options, after all.

The ambiguity of the phrase *mashallah* is so marked that a recent study of the use of the phrase carried out by a team of researchers from Jordan University of Science and Technology argues that the phrase is largely devoid of semantic content, emphasizing instead its pragmatics. Drawing on a large sample of examples of the use of *mashallah* by Jordanian Arabic speakers, the researchers found that its pragmatics allowed it to be deployed as "an invocation, a compliment, an expression of gladness, an expression of modesty, a marker of sarcasm, and as a conversational backchannel." They conclude that, "this formula serves as a membership marker whose use marks the speaker as a social insider who avoids acting in a way that would invite the 'evil eye'" (Migdadi et al. 2010:480). This pervasive use of indirect speech to index the

(Fassin 2013: 265). Yet this seems to assume even more about subjective mental states on the basis of even thinner sociological grounds than Jameson's approach.

existence of the evil eye may explain why the predominant conceit about the evil eye is that it is a sort of conspiracy of silence—even among those who are supposed to study such things. To quote Brian Spooner, the evil eye is "a phenomenon familiar to all, but apparently as little described by ethnographers as it is discussed by those who fear it" (1970:311).

Yet despite being shrouded in bad faith, self-deception, autoreferentiality, irony, and implicature, there are moments when envy and its relationship to *mashallah* are subject to direct exegesis. One such commentary was presented to me, when a friend's toddler jumped up into my lap. As potent symbols of fertility and potentiality, small children might serve as the object of envy *par excellence* in many rural communities. I smiled and said "mashallah" and mentioned how cute she was. When she jumped down, she waddled away, tripped, fell flat on her face, and began to cry. Her uncle began explaining to me didactically that it is important to say "mashallah" in situations like this to protect children from "the eye of envy" (*'ayn al-ḥasad*). Her grandfather, however, dismissed the implicit accusation, pointing out to his nephew that I had very clearly said "mashallah" right before the accident, "so it must have been you [the uncle] who struck her [with the evil eye]."

According to local beliefs about the evil eye, any one of us could have been guilty of causing her to fall down—and we might not even know it. When I asked people in rural areas about envy or *ḥasad* in the abstract (and only in the abstract) people were strikingly forthcoming given the topic's treatment in the literature. Their accounts were also highly formulaic. It was a powerful force that came from the eye, usually unconsciously. The *ḥasad* of 'the people' caused children to fall ill. It made your tent blow over in the night. It made your chandelier fall on the floor and shatter. "*Ḥasad* is in the *Qur'an*," they would say. "You cannot be a Muslim if you don't believe in *ḥasad*," the more enthusiastic would allege. In a way highly reminiscent of

Evans-Pritchard's (1935) account of Azande witchcraft beliefs, the evil eye offers itself as a whole theory of causality that centers human relationships of envy and inequality as prime movers in the workings of the world.

There are other ways of thinking about *ḥasad*, though. Especially among urbanites and the well-educated, alternative readings of the concept sought to temper its cosmological significance much as the Quran itself does: by subsuming it within a broader monotheistic, monocausal framework. The result is a model of envy not unlike the one I brought with me to rural Jordan, primarily subjectivist and mentalist. In fact, Jordanian city-folk who adopted this model were liable to be as flummoxed by village conceptions of envy as I initially was. *Surat Al-Falaq* (The Daybreak)*,* the one Quranic verse to mention *ḥasad* and itself a widely respected cure *for ḥasad* that can also be seen in the background of figure 1, reads:

> Say, 'I seek refuge in the lord of daybreak,
> from the evil of that which He created,
> and from the evil of the darkness when it settles,
> and from the evil of the blowers on knots [sorcerers],
> and from the envier when he envies'

Compared to Azande witchcraft beliefs, which attribute almost all misfortune to human envy, human envy and human agency here cannot cause much at all without God's will. Strikingly, this verse posits God as both the ultimate source of envy and sorcery ('that which He created') and the 'refuge' from those very creations. This fatalist perspective on causality can be pushed further: in the Ash'arite cosmology of the Sunni revival (Harman 2011), an all-powerful God recreates the entire universe from moment to moment. From this occasionalist perspective, even the most seemingly entrenched form of hierarchy is merely a form of mercy, one of the many regularities in the universe that God perpetuates, such that humans may go about their affairs with a modicum of certainty and normalcy. This is redolent of the other side of Weber's reading

of the Abrahamic tradition: a reading that emphasizes a theodicy of the privileged coexisting alongside the theodicy of the disprivileged, insisting against protests to the contrary that privileges must be accepted as divinely ordained (1978:494).

Mashallah figures envy as a robust, objective, contagious, and fundamentally *social* phenomenon. The phrase might often be intended to deflect envy by asserting that everything exists, in hierarchy or otherwise, in accordance with a single, coherent, divinely-inspired plan. Yet envy and the use of the phrase *mashallah* are also deeply associated with a profound fear of occult, leveling powers that might outstrip the social order's ability to contain them—thus the insistent appeal to a God who might or might not act to save those in fear of envy. In extreme cases, the fear of envy might even incite people to turn away from God and instead embrace the very occult practitioners (the sorcerers or 'blowers on knots') that the Quran warns against (see the amulets in Figure 3). *Mashallah*'s vulnerability to sarcasm also works against the idea that it is a bulwark of a fixed social order. Above all, these examples force us to consider who is really

the envious one here, me or my interlocutors—and which of my interlocutors and when? As the next section will illustrate, this problem—far from being unique to the individual ethnographic encounter—has long bedeviled the discipline of anthropology's attempts to locate, name, and investigate envy as a social phenomenon.

Naming Envy in the Ethnographic Literature

Much of the impetus for the theorization of envy in anthropology can be attributed to George Foster's notion of the "image of the limited good" (1965). Foster was interested in the anthropology of development and applied anthropology, building on earlier work in peasant studies on economic leveling and the idea of the "culture of poverty" that would later become so central to neoconservative and neoliberal attacks on the welfare state. This era of research combined a heavy dose of anti-communist Cold War developmentalist ideology, with its belief in a unilineal evolutionary teleology of 'progress' on the model of the capitalist "West" and married it to the then state-of-the-art in diffusionist and structural-functionalist approaches. The result was a notion that envy moved through its own evolutionary stages, developing from witchcraft beliefs into the evil eye complex and finally being truly domesticated by the great literate religious traditions, especially Christianity. The project combined salvage ethnography with a sublimated fear of the world's dispossessed, and arose chiefly in American anthropology at a moment of profound optimism about humanity and technological progress before dissipating as that optimism began to sour.

In "Peasant Society and the Image of the Limited Good" (1965), Foster laid out the first programmatic statement on the need to approach envy as an ethnographic problem, using the putative disjuncture between "modern" and "peasant" notions of envy as the starting point for his analysis. In doing so, he moved envy out of the realm of the purely psychological in ways that

demanded either a culturalist or a sociological account. While Foster believed that this "image of the limited good" was outdated under capitalist modernity, he was vociferous in explaining why it was, historically, that peasants were "rational" to think that their neighbor's advantage could only come at their own expense. Foster asserted that in peasant communities, "all of the desired things in life such as land, wealth, health, friendship and love, manliness and honor, respect and status, power and influence, safety and security, *exist in finite quantity* and *are always in short supply*" (1965:296). He argued that, "the primary task in development… [is] to try to change the peasants' view of his social and economic universe, away from an Image of Limited Good toward that of expanding opportunity in an open system, so that he can feel safe in displaying initiative." Optimistically, he continued, "This is, of course, what is happening in the world today. Those who have known peasant villages over a period of years have seen how the old sanctions begin to lose their power. Local entrepreneurs arise in response to the increasing opportunities of expanding national economies, and emulative urges, with the city as the model, appear among these people" (Foster 1965: 310).

More famous than such ethnographic works (and much more widely cited), however, was the magnum opus of the German sociologist Helmut Schoeck (1969), the fervently anti-communist would-be doyen of envy studies. Schoeck drew on the work of Foster and other anthropologists (mostly people working on sorcery and the evil eye) to argue that envy was the result of an inability to accept the legitimacy of naturally occurring hierarchies in ability and deservingness. Following Weber, he argued that there was something specific about European Christianity that had allowed it to transcend the limitations human envy and *ressentiment* imposed on civilizational development. He declared, "In the West, the historical achievement of this Christian ethic is to have encouraged and protected, if not to have been actually responsible

for the extent of, the exercise of human creative powers through the control of envy" (Schoeck 1969: 160). Distancing themselves from such conservative appropriations of their work, anthropologists would increasingly efface the barely disguised condescension of their initial publications, with Foster himself coming to strenuously argue that envy was an important—but repressed—aspect of American society itself (1972:166-167). Yet no matter how self-reflexive he became, despite writing at the height of the civil rights movement, Foster never connected his idea of the 'image of the limited good' to the often-violent attempts of white Americans to protect their unequal access to the benefits of American citizenship—at home or in neighboring Mexico where he did his fieldwork. Soon though, the whole notion of the 'image of the limited good' would be largely discarded in favor of a model of people jostling for advantage within a pre-given social hierarchy (Ghosh 1983; Lindholm 1982). It was at this point that the study of envy petered out, with its initial, culturalist impetus expended and participants seeing little reason to carry it forward.

Yet for a brief moment, there were efforts to synthesize a generalized, cross-cultural approach to envy. The best exemplar of this approach is Clarence Maloney's 1976 edited volume on the evil eye. John Roberts' contribution draws on a quantitative analysis of Murdock's Human Relations Area Files to plot the regional distribution of evil eye beliefs amongst 186 distinct human "cultures." Noting high correlations between the evil eye and things like plough agriculture, the consumption of milk products, and premodern urbanization, he speculated that the belief arose somewhere in the Near East, from whence it spread outwards to South Asia, Northern Africa, the Mediterranean, and eventually Latin America. Writing in the conclusion to that volume, Garrison and Arsenberg asserted that invidia—envy—and evil eye beliefs "are emergents from behavioral processes involved in the more general categories of rivalry,

cooperation, and competition in the context of dominance and submission mediated by patronage in stratified, but not yet bureaucratized societies." As in the case of witchcraft, which they saw as the evil eye's "equivalent in egalitarian and ranked societies," they perceived the evil eye's persistence in the "lower strata of the modern nation state" (Maloney 1976:326) as a vestigial link to a bygone era. Without endorsing the implicit unilineal evolutionary underpinnings of this work ('not yet bureaucratized'), it is nonetheless important to acknowledge that some highly salient points about the distribution and manifestation of the phenomenon of the evil eye were well documented at the time. Chief among these were the concentration of evil eye beliefs in Western Asia and the Mediterranean basin, emanating outwards, and its correlation with particular sorts of social organization that combine entrenched inequalities with weak centralized control.

Anthropological theory's discovery of envy came late and initially depended (predictably) on the idea that envy was primarily a problem for *other people* and *other societies*. Even in his later work Foster argued, "envy behavior is particularly apparent" in "societies characterized by absolute shortages of the resources necessary for physical survival" (1972:168) while emphasizing that envy going forward would be increasingly a matter of misperception: the *image* of the limited good. The peasants just had to stop resisting the ministrations of Western development anthropologists and embrace the emerging global capitalist economy. Yet for all of his desire to vindicate the rationality of his research subjects and uplift them through greater integration within national economies, no less a famously jaundiced ethnographic observer than Oscar Lewis himself felt forced to title his own review of Foster's early work, "Some of My Best Friends Are Peasants" (1960). Chastened, perhaps, Foster would slowly abandon many of the hallmarks of this early work, increasingly vociferous in his position that envy was a human

universal and going so far as to argue that Americans could not understand envy without understanding how they systematically minimized the importance of envy within their own society (1972:166)—an idea at the heart of the remainder of this article.

Sadly, with the end of serious space exploration and the rise of the environmental movement, peak oil, and increasing levels of inequality, it is Foster's optimistic image of the *unlimited* good that now seems outmoded and fanciful. The flurry of interest in envy that Foster inspired with his idea of the 'image of the limited good' came at a time when it was widely accepted that consistent, exponential economic growth was not only possible, but feasible. As the historian Timothy Mitchell shows in his history of the Middle Eastern oil industry, *Carbon Democracy*, this was in large part dependent on a belief that humans were in possession of unlimited energy resources (2011:109-143). The oil crisis of 1973-1974 and the rise of the environmental movement may not have played a direct role in anthropological debates about envy and the 'limited good', but it book-ends a period of optimism in which the finitude of natural resources and the zero-sum nature of sociality were not taken for granted. The following section will show how the subsequent development of anthropological work on envy and its many institutional forms has gone underground amidst something of a backlash that mirrors the same sorts of avoidance strategies deployed by individual social actors when confronted with envy.

Writing Envy: Egalitarianism, Hospitality, and the Grace of God

There is often a duality to the ethnographic self-conception, mixing extreme grandiosity with self-loathing. Ethnographers may see themselves as protecting the weak or as handmaidens of colonialism; detached scientific geniuses with a 'bird's eye view' or vulnerable individuals toiling away in the empirical muck. The experience of ethnography also tends to involve

extremes: on the one hand, extreme privileges of mobility, externality to regular social norms, and often wealth and educational advantages. On the other hand, ethnographers tend to be extremely vulnerable, at the mercy of their hosts and – if they are anything like me in the preceding vignettes – in possession of a seemingly child-like understanding of their surroundings at times. So it should come as little surprise that, when it comes to academic fashions in the ethnographic representation of world regions, there is also a tendency to swing from extremes. The representation of envy in Middle Eastern ethnography has become attenuated in recent decades as increasing attention has been drawn to how ethnographic fixations reveal the desires and neuroses of the ethnographers who pursue them.

Perhaps nowhere is this rediscovered reticence around envy clearer than in the backlash against the blithe imputations of development anthropologists like Foster that the root of envy lay in the resentments of the world's poor. In their own ways, and despite working in apparent isolation at fieldsites on three separate continents, the anthropologists Amitav Ghosh, Charles Lindholm, and Julian Pitt-Rivers all revised Foster's model along remarkably similar lines on the basis of fieldwork carried out among the Egyptian, Pakistani, and Andalusian peasantry respectively. This involved applying the segmentary kinship model that Evans-Pritchard (1969) developed while working with the nomadic pastoralist Nuer to sedentary peasants organized along similar kinship lines but seemingly locked into Foster's zero-sum intra- and inter-household struggle for limited resources, especially land. In each case, envy was transformed into a struggle for status that finds its fullest expression in the more pro-social institutions of honor, hospitality, egalitarianism and, ultimately, religious devotion. In the process, envy's negativity undergoes a process of profound sublimation.

In *Generosity and Jealousy* (1982), Lindholm characterizes the Swat Pukhtun as defined by what he calls (after Evans-Pritchard), "an acephalous patrilineal segmentary system," which he defines using the proverb, "I against my brother, my brother and I against my [patrilineal] cousin, my brother and my [patrilineal] cousin and I against the world" (1982:xxvi-xxvii). A drive for self-aggrandizement must here be balanced against the need to seek out allies. Yet those allies (here defined almost exclusively in terms of male kinship) simultaneously struggle for control of the very patrimony that they must nonetheless work together to protect from outsiders. Lindholm notes how this is very much caught up with a "contradiction between an ideology of equality and a reality of class distinction" (1982:xxvii). In avoiding downward social mobility, it often pays to prey on brothers and cousins rather than total strangers.

Yet ultimately, this is of secondary interest to Lindholm's key focus: explaining Pukhtun hospitality. Here, he sees a key linkage: "The whole structure of Swati society, it seems, presses against demonstrations of affection and attachment, so these emotional relations find their release in hospitality and the dream of a friend." As he reasons, "if the culture does not allow easy expression of certain inherent and necessary emotions then they must be expressed in ritual and ideology" (Lindholm 1982:xxxi). With more modesty and self-awareness than many, Lindholm relates his own field research experience to the more general set of Pukhtun social values around friendship and honor:

> "I was a lone, rather alienated young man wandering across Asia. Zaman's offer of friendship, his sincerity and warmth, coupled with the intriguing exoticism and masculine quality of Pukhtun life drew me into a very intense emotional experience. At the time, I was willing to accept Zaman's word on everything and trust him completely; nor was I ever disappointed in my trust. In a sense, he and I were perfectly complementary because I had made myself an empty canvas where his generosity and honor could be portrayed" (Lindholm 1982:246).

The condition of possibility for Lindholm's fieldwork was precisely his ability as the ethnographer to be the rare social actor who is peculiarly qualified to fulfill the key characteristics of a Pukhtun friend, "strangeness, equality without rivalry, and an absence of competing interests" (Lindholm 1982:245). This is what allows the ethnographer (especially the white, male ethnographer) to accept the hospitality of his interlocutor and become, 'an empty canvas where his generosity and honor could be portrayed.'

Writing a year later but without making reference to Lindholm's work, Ghosh's 1983 critique of Foster's work drew on fieldwork in the rural Egyptian village of "Naçaawy" to describe a strikingly similar prototypical village community where the image of the limited good would also seem to hold in the most archetypal of configurations. This was a village where both land and water were finite resources and everyone knew everyone else's precise status (although livestock offered a path for upward mobility and notable focal point for envy accusations). Ghosh argues that envy arises because the village's "egalitarian ethos" runs up against a pattern of accumulation based on individual households. He writes, "The essence of the contradiction is property. Envy in Naçaawy takes the form it does because the ownership of productive resources is vested in households and because the subdivision of property turns brothers and cousins into competitors in production" (Ghosh 1983:222). Ghosh's thick description is perhaps more useful than his more abstract formulations, though—especially his focus on brothers and his meticulous documentation of the phenomenon of "envying down." He describes envy in the context of intimate, long-term relations, which can exhibit idiosyncratic characteristics. As Ghosh points out: the people most likely to be envious tend to be those closest not just in terms of social hierarchy but also as in terms of spatial proximity and kinship: neighbors and brothers (the better to see what one is envying perhaps).

Ghosh's description of local understandings of envy are worth quoting at length because of the ways in which they challenge the explanation of envy provided by Foster's "image of the limited good"—as well as Ghosh's own model of envy as a psychological response to the contradiction between egalitarian values and the realities of inequality inherent in a householding system. In contrast:

> "Villagers say it is always the rich man (*ilghani*) who envies the poor man (*ilfagiir*)… It is said that to become rich a man must have cunning… he has to save money for a long time, during which he must deny himself and his family everything that people in the village enjoy. He becomes a miser (*baxiil*); when he sees a stranger pass his doorway he is never heard to shout, 'please come in' (*itfaḍḍal*), nor does he serve tea or food to guests. Thus as a man grows rich his personality changes… and he comes to be filled with hatred and resentment against everyone around him… If envy arises whenever a household thinks it has a means of changing its position within the determinate set of relations within the village, it is the well-to-do of the village who stand as the defenders of the determinacy of those relations and, so, as the most likely agents of envy" (Ghosh 1983:221).

Considering Foster's contention about the implausibility of envying down, Ghosh simply responds, "none of this is true of Naçaawy" (1983:218).

It is not *just* Naçaawy, though. Ghosh's description works quite well as an alternative telling of my own abortive attempts at hospitality and agreeability in the opening vignettes[5]. Or compare Ghosh's description with the ninth-century classical Arab essayist Al-Jahiz's satirical portrayal of the miserliness of Persian *Khurāsāni* immigrants in *The Book of Misers*, like the following man who makes the mistake of inviting an Arab passerby to join him for lunch. When the Arab accepts his invitation, the man is at first confused and then alarmed, finally berating the credulous would-be guest:

[5] Michael Gilsenan also flags this sort of envying down as an "important discursive theme" in village narratives of upward social mobility in Lebanon, "dogging any successful man in the village and acting to diminish his claims to excellence" (1996:208). Lindholm too discusses envying down but, not dismissing it as mere psychological projection (2008:239), he comes close—despite offering compelling evidence that it is in fact the honor-obsessed elite of the Swat Pukhtun who hosted him who envy the most.

> "Confound you… Had I suspected you to be so stupid as that, I wouldn't have returned your greeting. The etiquette we observe under such circumstances as these, is… that I speak first and say "Come over here," and you reply with the words, "Good appetite! In this way, words will be given for words—but action in return for words and eating in return for speech is not right at all, and this would involve me in an excess of expenditure" (Al-Jahiz 1997:21).

This intense, resentful conviction that one is the only person in the world encumbered by a sense of fair play is at the heart of Al-Jahiz's etiology of *bukhul*—which while often translated as miserliness or avarice also captures a common species of *envying down*, a short step away from outright envying poorer people's envy. Ghosh is at his best when he highlights this ability of the rich to exceed the poor in their envy, challenging the degree to which envy is about finite resources and suggesting that it has more to do with keeping others down than satiating one's own needs and desires (1983:218)—although at times this seems to be at odds with his emphasis on the village's supposedly egalitarian ideology.

A further downside to reducing envy to a matter of jockeying for position within a single hierarchy, though, is that it leaves no room for the exploration of alternative ways of parsing difference and imagining hierarchy—ways that reveal the instability of the social order itself. Having found the abstract, subjective quanta of envy in bad feelings about inequality, envy comes to seem downright banal. Ghosh's focus on brothers and neighbors, though, brings to mind the narcissism of small differences. Brothers are archetypes of jealousy *par excellence*: in the Abrahamic cosmology the first brothers Cain and Abel represent the first murder. As Ghosh notes, "these relations involve the greatest number of mutual obligations, the closest associations, and the greatest expectations of equality" (1983:222). The list of potential catalysts for conflict is endless, the way that these idiosyncratic catalysts impinge on the social elaboration of envy is complex, and their ability to upend and challenge established status hierarchies needs to be kept in mind. Ghosh's emphasis on the villagers' plucky egalitarianism makes them

eminently relatable and his emphasis on the role of a political economy of peasant householding avoids essentialism. Yet his theory of envy is far more concerned with figuring out how his readers and his interlocutors in Naçaawy envy in *the same ways* than it is in figuring out why they envy in *their own unique ways*. In Ghosh's hands, envy undergoes a process of sublimation, losing its threatening, negative valence and emerging as a familiar, positive, pro-social impetus: egalitarianism.

This recourse to a thwarted egalitarianism as an explanatory mechanism may not be as innocent as it might first appear, though—even if it does create a framework for understanding envy as a shared condition of those being described as well as the anthropologist and their readership. Indeed, there are grounds for suspicion. Commenting on anthropological admiration for pastoral nomads' egalitarianism, Abu Lughod suggests in "Zones of theory" that, "a fascination with the freedom of pastoral nomads is in part a rhetorical assertion of the anthropologists' freedom from the projects of domination in which they participate, either directly or indirectly" (1989:286-287). She believes that this can help understand why, "segmentation may seem to be the only issue in the anthropology of the Arab world that relates to a classical anthropological debate actually transcending the region" (Abu Lughod 1989:285):

> "In many cultures, including several Western ones, agonistic encounters are emblems of virility. A certain admiration tinges descriptions of the fierce independence attributed to those in segmentary societies, including Middle Eastern tribesmen. These are real men, freed from the emasculating authority of the state and polite society. Furthermore, for many writers, these tribesmen represent romantic political ideals of freedom from authority and loyalty to democracy" (Abu Lughod 1989:286).

Whatever their complicity in colonial and neocolonial projects, both Ghosh and Lindholm luxuriate in the fissiparous, self-assertive milieu of their informants, emphasizing an underlying affinity of values. Little wonder then that anthropologists of the Middle East are so enthusiastic

to return to this image of egalitarian segmentarity again and again. Lindholm goes so far as to assert this privileging of similarities as a programmatic stance distinguishing his work from earlier studies of emotions: "they concentrated their work… on difference, and not on what must be retained for man to remain human. My purpose is to redirect attention to this element, to the underlying and universal emotions that make us all kin" (Lindholm 1982:xxxi). Ultimately, in keeping with the time period, Lindholm's ethnography is not particularly interested in envy and jealousy beyond the ability of these emotions to explain the more pro-social side of Pukhtun life and thereby sponsor their inclusion within a larger human family.

Like Lindholm and Ghosh, who take up Foster so as to transmute his idea of envy into something less threatening and more pro-social like generosity and egalitarianism, Pitt-Rivers (the third and final latter-day critic of Foster's model of envy) is also keen to sublimate envy into something more relatable: grace. Pitt-Rivers is also concerned with peasant notions of honor grounded in segmentary kinship and the defense of (and conflict over) shared patrimony. The line between envy and grace is blurry at best for Pitt-Rivers and, indeed, envy emerges in his rendering as grace's dark double. Responding to Foster's later (1972) assertion that American tipping culture (with its emphasis on leaving a substantial "gratuity" for the server) is a manifestation of American society's repressed fear of envy, Pitt-Rivers presents an alternative explanation. He grants that there is "substance" to the explanation that tipping arises from "the need to assuage the envy which a server might be supposed to feel towards those whom he serves, rather as the envy of witches is sometimes bought off by a gesture of gratuity" (Pitt-Rivers: 2017:80). Yet he proposes that, when freely given, "the tip does no more than underline the absence of contractual obligation… and hence the superior social status of the giver" (ibid). Putting to the side the question of what the Oxford Don and Berkeley Professor might be

revealing about themselves (and their respective views of the lower orders) when they attribute a particular rationale of tipping, it is striking how open-ended the interpretation of these sorts of social institutions can be. As Pitt-Rivers writes, "an excess of hospitality can humiliate as much as insufficiency. For honor looks always up, pity, the poor relation of grace, looks down, but it is not always easy to tell which way people are looking" (Pitt-Rivers 2017:81). Again, envy emerges from an intersubjective relationship, but it is hard to parse and fix respective roles.

All of this, nonetheless, is leading directly towards the divine: grace and the Arabic *baraka* are ultimately concerned with the distribution of the divine bounty, in all of its excess. All humans are called to participate and, as Pitt-Rivers argues, "the moral obligation is only to return grace and what is resented if it is not returned is not the material loss but the rejection of the donor's self" (2017:97). Indeed, when receiving hospitality in Jordan I am often reassured that it has nothing at all to do with me—that I should not concern myself with ideas of reciprocity. "This is *baraka* (grace/blessing)." "It's not for you—it's for God." This is a not-altogether-serious invitation to (and simultaneous refusal of) full sociality offered along with tea, coffee, and heaping plates of meat. In contrast, when I wish to refuse such offers of hospitality, I am expected to repeat with increasing vociferousness "God bless you too!" (*allah yabārak fīk*). Such a denial of self also represents a particularly elaborate and intense strategy for avoiding envy, one which introduces an omnipresent and omnipotent deity as the ultimate prophylactic against incipient relations of envy.

Yet again, however, ethnographic engagements with envy struggle to escape from its gravitational pull, often by trying to substitute something that is more pro-social, which might help to realize a unified human ecumene. Since Foster, this attempt to transform envy into the flip-side of something else (generosity, egalitarianism, and grace) has become increasingly

pronounced. Ethnographers here seem to be taking a page from their interlocutors, who also seek to transform envy into something else, much like my Jordanian interlocutors with their *mashallah*s and *allah yabārak fīk*s. The slipperiness of the roles in interactions and the language's lack of semantic content (eg. its vulnerability to sarcasm or pandering) both conspire to keep envy just at the threshold of consciousness. One might even ask whether envy builds worlds, whether many of humanity's most cherished institutions and practices are semi-conscious rejections of envy. It is worth investigating. In her excellent analysis of how evil eye beliefs in an Egyptian workshop can serve as a critique of emerging neoliberal logics there, Julia Elyachar argues that these are far more than mere [verbal] talismans—they are also powerful symbols that constitute physical evidence of "positive value production" that can, through movement in social space, "produce the same practices that were found in the previous setting" (2005: 164-164). In any event, envy is deeply dependent upon the social worlds of those who feel it, suspect it, and make accusations about it. If one is truly committed to a universalist conception of humanity, then these sorts of petty differences (however petty) cannot be dispensed with summarily but rather represent something worth grappling with.

Conclusion: Envy and the Racecraft of Ethnographic Comparison

Comparing how envy operates in the discourse of ethnographers and their peasant-villager interlocutors respectively reveals similarities and divergences in how envy is mobilized at a number of scales and levels of abstraction by differently situated social actors. As ethnographers have become more self-conscious in recent decades, though, they seem to have become as circumspect about making explicit, public accusations of envy as their interlocutors. There is an increasing tendency for talk of envy to be recognized as revealing more than it might mean to—although such a recognition inherently resists explicit discussion. It manifests itself

instead, much like envy in the archetypal village of twentieth century ethnography, through denials, ambiguity, and abrupt attempts to invoke something more pro-social. This is not to ignore the important divergences, though: whereas envy 'in the village' is structured around kinship, agricultural wealth, and neighborly conviviality, ethnographic envy is about authorship and the more or less consensual interpellation of whole identity categories through the institutions of mass culture.

Karen and Barbara Fields (2014) have explored this homology through the concept of *racecraft*, which they develop through a reading of racism based on the structural-functionalist explanation of witchcraft developed by Evans-Pritchard in his work among the Azande. From interpersonal microaggressions to the junk science of 'race science,' race – like witchcraft – "explains unfortunate events" (Evans-Pritchard 1935:18). Like some sort of ideological voltage converter, race, racism, and "racecraft" help people structure their accounts of misfortune in terms of broader collective struggles over power, prestige and other limited goods by "step[ping] down the current of macro-economic inequality to suit the small appliances of everyday life and the limited purview of their hard-pressed users" (Fields and Fields 2014:271). In doing so, the two show not only how social tensions scale, but also how this scalar dimension is pragmatically mobilized by social actors (especially more dominant ones) to maintain and reinforce various inequalities. Like Evans-Pritchard and Fields and Fields, I have sought to take something often relegated to a psychologized subjective realm (racism and witchcraft; and envy in my case) and highlight its social character and implications. A key implication here is that, especially where they are asked to take the paranoia and loneliness of those at the top of the social hierarchy at face value, ethnographers need to adopt a methodological skepticism towards elite-centric narratives of envy.

Long after the term "Orientalist" has become pejorative, the popular image of the Middle East remains a contradictory mixture of admiration and contempt so typical of invidious portrayals. George W. Bush, launching his "War on Terror" in the Middle East, famously declared, "They hate our freedoms." At the same time, the region remains a site of various Western fascinations, which this paper has tried to document. For Bush, of course, the region was supposed to be a source of unlimited energy resources and hence unlimited wealth that might help to perpetuate the seemingly limitless economic growth of the industrial era that was then beginning to flag (Mitchell 2013). Today's image of oil-producing states' cradle to grave social provisioning, which purportedly allows their citizens to lead lives of voluptuous dissipation, has a certain continuity with earlier tropes. This is to say nothing of Orientalist fantasies of fanatical, single-minded religious conviction and tribal honor, both of which are seen to dispense with the ambivalence and indecisiveness of putatively 'modern' Western thought. If the continuing popularity of desert romances in the post-War on Terror world documented by Hsu-Ming Teo (2013) is any indication, there is also a continuing sexual fascination with the region, combining hyper-virility with hyper-chastity. This feeds off of older Orientalist tropes of honor: "real" masculine men and virginal women. One might be forgiven for asking: who hates the freedom of whom here?

In this context, simply making the Middle East a "prestige zone" for a positively valorized concept like hospitality, egalitarianism, or grace would do little to correct for earlier tropes if it merely emphasized the admiring dimension of envy while leaving the contemptuous dimension implicit. What ethnographers transmit from their interlocutors to wider ethnographic debates must serve not as crude theoretical metonyms for typifying geographic regions and biological individuals, but rather as supple analytics that can travel *amongst* continents and

bodies, even implicating ethnographers themselves. To return to Strathern, it is not about comparing "individual concepts," but rather finding "ways to compare theories of social action themselves" (1990:214). To fulfill such a role, more nuanced notions of envy (including the notion of envying down) must be able to illustrate how different, empirically identifiable social institutions the world over (from witchcraft, Islam, and the evil eye to hospitality, honor and racism) elaborate envy along diverse, distinctly social lines. Such notions can help to challenge received notions of economic rationality, personhood, hierarchy, difference, and freedom. Perhaps such notions can even serve as an alternative framework to the virulent anger and resentment that has arisen in the West towards the so-called East in recent decades and centuries.

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