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<tr>
<td>Journal:</td>
<td>Social Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>DOI/Link:</td>
<td><a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/sa.2013.570104">http://dx.doi.org/10.3167/sa.2013.570104</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Document version:</td>
<td>Accepted manuscript (post-print)</td>
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Out of Conclusion

On Recurrence and Open-endedness in Life and Analysis

Anne Line Dalsgaard & Martin Demant Frederiksen

Abstract

Based on long-term fieldwork in Northeast Brazil and the Republic of Georgia, this article explores how open-endedness can be incorporated into ethnographic analysis and writing, not as the empirical object, but as a basic condition for our knowledge production. In the empirical contexts that we describe, daily life is marked by poor prospects and lack of possibility, especially for young people. Rather than letting this guide our analyses and ways of writing, this article argues for the necessity of paying attention to the openness and potential of experienced moments of change. We propose that even relapses into former habits and predicaments may present a potential for change on a subjective level, as they call for re-starting one’s personal life. As a meta-story to this discussion, we reflect upon the process of putting our informants’ stories into words and analysis. Revisiting both field and text constitutes a hopeful practice similar to the one our informants practice. When hesitating to conclude, something is understood (i.e. something is possible), which would otherwise be left unarticulated.

Keywords: recurrence, hope, analysis, youth, epistemology, Georgia, Brazil
Endings

In the end, the business card actually turned into a business.

In the end, the business was substituted by a non-existing website.

In the end, nothing really happened.

In the end, he became a decent worker at the factory.

In the end, he was caught by the police and arrested for theft.

In the end, he took another shower.

Recurrence

It began with a review of literature on marginalized youths. At the time Martin had finished his fieldwork in Tbilisi for his master’s thesis and had to write an exam paper on a topic of his choice that related to his research. Martin contacted his future supervisor Anne Line and together they discussed the possibility of turning the review into a comparative article based on his work on young people in Georgia and her work in Brazil. The writing began as an attempt to criticize the then current tendency within anthropology and related fields to consider marginalized youths as either victims of structural constraint or agents in their own lives. They took as their point of departure two individual stories, Rezo and Fábio, who they knew well and who they saw as being
neither victims nor efficient agents. The first draft eventually turned into a grant application with
two colleagues to do research on questions of youth, marginality and futurity. The project was
funded and they both returned to their field sites where new data emerged. Of course, the lives they
had focused on during previous fieldwork had moved on while they had been away. The initial
conclusion of the first draft had to be changed and so a new draft was written. Meanwhile they had
become interested in writing styles and questions of the anthropologist’s possible responsibility in
relation to the lives she or he describes. A year or so went by. The stories of the two young men in
Georgia and Brazil moved on yet again. Anne Line lost contact with the young man she was writing
about and presumed he had gotten himself into serious trouble. Martin, on the other hand, had heard
from his informant that he had, despite several years of disappointment, succeeded in his attempt to
establish an actual business. Yet another draft, with new endings, was written and later discussed at
a workshop entitled “Time and the Field”. Comments from other participants were included, new
ideas for restructuring the argument and ending were written into the text. The initial literature
review was taken out, as it was no longer relevant. An invitation to submit the paper as part of a
special issue of *Social Analysis* was accepted and the paper was attempted finalized and sent in.
Almost a year passed without notice. Meanwhile new fieldwork, new data, updates on the worries
and troubles of informants, their missed chances and new prospects. When reviews came, certain
things in the paper no longer seemed right. A new argument emerged out of corrections and
adjustments and new theory had to be found. Once again, this meant beginning anew.

**Holding on**

A business card. He holds it in his hand as he approaches the anthropologist in the underground
passage way. He is a tour guide, or at least he hopes that one day he will be. The card features an
image from the cartoon Ice Age 2: a small animal clinging to a cliff, denying the fact that it is,
inevitably, going to fall. “Life is adventure or nothing at all,” the card reads. He approaches the anthropologist with the words “Could you help me? I have this business …” The anthropologist looks at the business card and wonders why the web address has been crossed out and there is no office address. Does his business exist or not? It is hard to tell; maybe it does and does not at the same time. In the Republic of Georgia, in the capital Tbilisi where he lives, chances are few. He has an education, but lacks the network and connections that are so vital in the country if one wants to advance or get a job. But what if he had his own business? Or it at least seemed as though he did? Would the foreigners living in the expensive city center hotels then maybe consider hiring him as their tour guide? Could he get a business by pretending to have one already? Or is he, like the animal on the card, simply clinging onto a cliff with his nails, destined to fall? Is he merely living in the future with no reference to his present situation, or is he making a future? Rezo is his name.

Somewhere else. A shower. A young man, brown skinned, with a hideous scar on his right thigh. He lives in one of the poorer parts of Brazil, in circumstances that are not conducive to being well-groomed. The house in the favela where he lives is hot in the daytime, and the steps up the hillside to get there are many. He used to work in a factory, carrying heavy loads, and he dreamed of becoming a truck driver to escape from the meaningless toil and the commandments of others. To be allowed a driver’s license at the factory he needed to talk to the right people. But how? One day in his lunch break he sat down at the table next to Mauricio, a superior with influence. But Mauricio got up and moved to another table. “It was my smell of sweat. Brazil is divided into those who smell of sweat and those who do not. Like Mauricio.” He refuses to be what they turn him into. But can he wash off a predestined future? The question is asked in every shower, in the changing of shirts and in the honesty he projects, because he is that kind of person, who could just as well be a reliable truck driver. Fábio is his name.
Introduction

Every moment has the potential to lead to something new; the question is how this potential is released. One may wait for the unexpected to emerge, assuming that “there is always the possibility, as in any mystery story, that factors will emerge and come into play of which one has no inkling, and that these unforeseen factors will free the future from the impress of the past” (Jackson 2005: 14). One may passively wait for “luck” or “miracles” in what Ghassan Hage calls a “hope against life” (Hage 2003:12). And in a way this is what Rezo and Fábio do. They wait for the right moment to appear, the moment when someone calls Fábio forward and acknowledges his honesty and hard work, and the moment when Rezo meets the right kind of tourists, ready for a dubious adventure. But they do not do so passively. In their revisiting of the recurring experience of setbacks, of impossibilities, there is a manifestation of a vibrant life, of a kind of unjustified promise. They could just as well give up, but they do not. They begin again. The potential of every new beginning is not an empirical fact; it may rather be an empirical non-fact, as a potential cannot, by definition, have the factive quality of a fact. A potential is a capacity of being or becoming, and as such it challenges the established way of arguing in anthropology for the credibility of our analysis. How do we write about something which is present by way of absence or, rather, by way of not yet being a fact?

Anthropologists have written about the subjunctivity and managing of uncertainty in human life (Good 1994; Whyte 1997; Steffen et al. 2005). These analyses have argued that agency unfolds in even the most difficult situations; that “humans are never merely victims of fate” (Jenkins et al. 2005: 11) and that people generally struggle to achieve some sense of control in life (Jackson 1998). These studies have emphasized the negotiation of uncertainty and the often ingenious handling of it. However, ours is less an interest in negotiation and problem-solving in relation to the question of agency and more a look to the manifestation of the subject over time. We
simply ask how we can understand the loops in the trajectories of life, which we observe, if not as repetition alone. Or put differently: is there more to recurrence than mere repetition? Drawing primarily on the work of Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004) we think of the process of repetition as a hopeful method, “predicated on the inheritance of a past hope and its performative replication in the present” (ibid.: 139). However, where Miyazaki looks at hope in a ritual, that is, in a collective context, we try to understand a subjective process by way of his insight.

Our data stems from ongoing fieldwork in the Republic of Georgia and Northeast Brazil. Life in the two chosen regional contexts is marked by poverty and disappointment, and young people in particular find it hard to uphold aspirations for the future. Even though Brazil today is experiencing enormous growth and reimagining of the future, it does not change Fábio’s situation. He and many others of his age grew up in the depressing 1980s and early 1990s, and they have had little to look forward to when they were younger. Similarly, although more stable today than in the 1990s, the social and political situation in the Republic of Georgia continues to leave few if any options for Rezo.

Stories
Rezo was 20 years old, when Martin first met him in an underway passage. What distinguished him from his peers was that, in describing his own situation, he acknowledged that his chances were near nil. As he noted on one occasion, “It is not really nice to talk bad about the country you live in but … Georgia has some problems you know. For example, if you want a job, you have to know somebody, you know? Have relations.” Rezo was referring to the fact that getting a job was often equivalent to having a connection to someone who could either hire you or make sure that you were hired. It was clear to him that he did not have any such relations and did not see himself as having any obvious chances. He had begun to distrust the entire official system, and due to changes in the
educational sector the courses he had taken in ‘hospitality and hotel training’ were considered “too old” to be of any real use (although he had graduated only recently), making it impossible for him to find a job in the hotel industry. Furthermore, the hopes for the future expressed by the Georgian government and various institutions taking care of unemployed or homeless youths did not fit with his situation. But in some respects, it seemed that the recognition of not having any real chances and of the situation being seemingly hopeless gave Rezo an urge to continue to be on the lookout.

When Martin returned to Tbilisi after a year’s absence in the spring of 2007 Rezo was thus still looking for a job, still looking for a girl to marry and still walking around in the city in search of possibilities – or looking for possibilities to find him. He was, in this sense, not different from many other young men in Tbilisi: waiting for a chance to move on in life. Except for one thing; he proudly carried a business card in his pocket. The business, he explained, did not actually exist yet; he did not have an office, the webpage link had been crossed out, because it linked to a non-existent page, and if he managed to get some customers he was not sure what he would do or where he would take them. Still, he found that in order to do business he needed to have a business, and the business card served as an intermediate stage, an imagined future that was yet to become concrete. The image of the “squirrel rat” from Ice Age 2 was striking. In the movie, the rat is on a continuous chase of a small nut that it seeks to protect and to regain when lost. For reasons that Rezo had probably not had in mind, the image of the squirrel rat seemed to correspond well to his situation: on the one hand, here was a young man desperately trying to hold on to something, but it was also an image of the fruitless end result of the eternal chase – with a possible business instead of a nut. But of course, this was Martin’s interpretation, and not Rezo’s.

In Brazil, Fábio had almost given up waiting for the future that he wished for: a truck driver’s license and a job as a driver. Even so, the possibility that he could as well have become a truck driver, had he had a little help, seemed to change the situation he was in – or at least keep it
open. He was almost predestined to prison and early death: when he was still young, he got involved in criminal activities like so many young boys in the neighbourhood where he lived. His brother was killed when they were out stealing; his friend was killed when they were high on drugs together, riding on the roof of a train; he himself later went to prison as he was caught selling drugs; and although he got out with the help of a lawyer who could see his potential, he was soon wanted by the police again. Through the years that followed, he got himself into more and more criminal activities, and at the time of writing he is wanted by the police for having been part of a gang that has committed several very serious crimes. And yet he somehow escapes the lot that befalls others like him. When Anne Line first met him, he had already lived longer than many of his age mates. Through all that he has been involved in he has, to some extent, been able to stop and withdraw, when withdrawal was still possible. Out of a gang of nine men, Fábio is today the only one who is not yet caught. People help him despite the things he has done. They hide him, help him get a job as a construction worker in the city he has fled to and get him false papers when he needs them. According to his mother, this willingness to help springs from his sincere attitude, which people recognize and respect. The sincerity seems to be a result of his self-respect, which shows in small everyday acts.

What is self-respect? In Georgia it is the pose you take on when you toast a friendship, those who died or those who will come. It is generosity toward friends, which is always an active choice (Frederiksen 2011a). In Brazil it is the simplicity with which you meet everyone, without anger or resentment, and the cleanliness even the poorest can produce. It is the ability to resist “heating up the head” as people say, like when Fábio said, “I will conform and continue my life forward, not look back. Because if the person looks back, at the things he already did, what will you get? Nothing! You have to look forward, try …!” Self-respect is thus closely related to the respect or recognition ascribed by others, but every moment involves a choice and is inherently dangerous,
as recognition from others can be withdrawn. Recognizing the potential of a moment is thus also a hesitation to conclude. Somebody may see who I really am, despite the neglect and disregard of others.

Fábio seems to have let in some hope by allowing the agency of God a place in his life, while staying as clean and prepared as possible. His acts are not conspicuous; they mainly consist in withdrawing, and not despairing, and thus staying alive against all odds. But something in him is active, as if the pain of knowing his situation keeps him awake. Rezo mimicked something that did not yet exist, as the business card contained Rezo’s hope of something coming into being, a not yet that, although non-existent, provided him with an incentive to keep striving. Moltmann’s (2004) notion of hope as that which has no place ‘yet’ (but is immanent) seems pertinent here. None of them are in safe havens, though. When Anne Line last heard from Neide, Fábio’s mother, she was angry with him, because he kept asking for money through his girlfriend, who phoned Neide. Fábio could no longer work where he was, his girlfriend was tired of supporting him, and Neide had her own worries. Frustration was building up on both sides, and Neide was afraid that Fábio would do “something stupid” and get caught by the police. Rezo managed to get his first customers, and the tours went well regardless of the fact that he had no previous experience of actually conducting tours outside Tbilisi. In e-mails and phone calls he told Martin how he still had a long way to go; he wanted to learn foreign languages and to create a website. He was not sure how to accomplish this, but his endeavor no longer seemed destined to the wild goose chase that might never end, as Martin had originally assumed. Rezo had in fact succeeded in turning his imaginary vision of his own future into a present reality that offered him direct possibilities and gains. But when the conflict between Russia and Georgia broke out in August 2008 it dealt a serious blow to the tourism industry in Georgia (Frederiksen 2011b). E-mails from Rezo stopped.
Both stories could end here with the conclusion that Fábio managed to stay clear of prison due to his hope of one day becoming a truck driver, while Rezo managed to get a business started against all odds. But it does not seem right to end here. Rather, they both have to face new mornings with sincere doubts and risks; both are likely (as our knowledge of them indeed has shown) to return to previous conditions and practices, showering and distributing business cards or doing whatever is needed to hold on to their potential. It is this process of recurrence – the continual setbacks and the starting anew – that has caught our interest. Something occurs in the recurrence. A kind of continuity appears, which may be imagined, but which nevertheless has real consequences (cf. Jenkins et al. 2005: 10).

**Hope**

In his book *I am Dynamite* (2003) Nigel Rapport writes that “construing and pursuing one’s life as an individual project is a route to a dignified and accomplished life” (ibid.: 14). This ongoing accomplishment is, to Rapport, the unfolding of an existential power, “the force, the will, the energy, in a word the agency, whereby individuals produce effects in their world – effect worlds, in fact” (ibid.: 75). While the individuals that Rapport takes as his “everyperson” (ibid.: 15; cf. Rapport 2010) are people who, at least so it seems, are more capable and single-minded than Rezo and Fábio, we find that Rapport’s insistence on the potential openness of every life has a bearing in relation to our cases as well. Neither Rezo nor Fábio moves through life as an “individual-as-projectile” (Rapport 2003: 261), but both possess an individual project, a “distinctness”, which manifests itself through their various acts (or non-acts) in a continual process of becoming, almost as an active waiting (cf. Jeffrey 2010).

Seen from a common-sense perspective, human life is at all times open-ended, as no one per definition knows the end before it is reached. Hence, we may argue that as long as we in our
analysis hold on to one view of what the future might bring, be it solely pessimistic or hopeful, we do not fully capture life as lived. A finished story is somehow “over”, lifeless. It is, as John Berger (1982: 284) writes, that stories walk like men and the suspense does not relate to the plot as much as to the passage from one step to another. Thus, knowing the end is not as interesting as following the process. What will happen next? This openness entails hope, because as long as the story has no conclusion, it can always be different. In both our fields, daily life is filled with seemingly mundane routines, or recurrences, that partake in upholding this openness to the world and the future. It is the propensity for change and the potential of each moment that, we believe, must be kept in mind while engaged in anthropological writing.

Indeed, hope is praxis, keeping things open, as Miyazaki writes (2006: 5), and not an emotional state of positive feeling about the future or a religious sense of expectation. It is a method of radical temporal reorientation of knowledge, a process of looking forward instead of backwards, as he describes it in relation to a gift-giving ritual in Fiji (Miyazaki 2004). The ritual was not designed to generate hope, as Miyazaki initially understood it; rather, it was in itself a hopeful praxis, where the maintenance of a prospective perspective was at the heart of its performance. Hope, he understood, was the submission, ritual after ritual, to keeping the future open by holding one’s agency in abeyance, leaving the fulfillment of the story to higher powers. There are, we believe, striking parallels between Miyazaki’s description of gift-giving rituals and the lives of Fábio and Rezo. The maintenance and repetition of everyday routines, such as Fábio taking his showers and Rezo polishing his shoes before venturing on to the streets with his business card, are both forms of hopeful praxis that render their lives – and stories – open.

There are, writes Richard Wilk, “subtle and often subjective differences between the routines which make life possible, and those which make living miserable” (Wilk 2009: 144).
In the repetitive gestures involved, for instance, in t’ai chi, repetition is aimed at perfecting and refining the act that is repeated (ibid.). But the return to and repetition of a previous condition or action (that is, recurrence) may also be conducive to change. It is, we believe, in this sense that we can understand recurrence as a practice of hope. Indeed, hope and hopelessness are mutually related: two sides of the same coin (Crapanzano 2006: 17; see also Zigon 2009). At times, in a paradoxical manner, there is no way out of hopelessness but accepting it as part of life. It is often in that which is not that we find hope – not only because hope is the “not yet”, but also because hope has to do, in many cases, with not doing something that one would otherwise have done.

Repeated acts or withdrawal from action may have the quality of similarity, but they are not necessary identical – and this is the crucial point. Repetitions rarely (if ever) take place in a social vacuum. The social context in which they occur may change and coincidence may allow for “vital conjunctures” (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2005), which seen in retrospect change the trajectory of a life. The repeated acts may be seen by others in ways that result in alteration. For instance, Fábio’s insistent showering may be recognized by others as a sign of decency, which changes their perception of him as a person, and Rezo’s distribution of his business card may be read by a passer-by as a sign of persistence, qualifying him for a job. It is impossible to foresee such potentialities in any exact manner, but their possible presence is at the very heart of the hopeful aspects of recurrence.

In the article “A Day in the Cadillac” Morten A. Pedersen describes a hopeful day with a group of young men in Ulanbaatar, Mongolia, and argues that otherwise heterogeneous and disparate impressions of self and situation are gathered into fragile assemblages during such moments of hope where one is seen by oneself and others as a whole person (Pedersen forthcoming). Such moments of joyful realization and prospect are probably not absent in Rezo’s and Fábio’s lives, even though we have not been part of them. But we have found a different kind
of wholeness: one that emerges out of a continuous process of revisiting (our informants’ setbacks as well as our returns to the field). The process of revisiting leaves impressions that add up to more than their sum, as if in a montage, where the simultaneity of often different impressions create the impression of something otherwise not perceptible (Eisenstein 1972; Dalsgaard forthcoming). This impression of encompassing wholeness belongs to the viewer, and, therefore, what we try to grasp here does not necessarily contradict Pedersen’s description of his friends’ moments of coming together. Ours is an interest in the persistence, which keeps Rezo and Fábio going. The “viewer”, as we see it, is not only us, the visitors, but also Rezo and Fábio, who are witnesses to their own lives. However, the existence of this inner continuity is deferred by us, not empirically justified, except for the fact that it manifests itself over time as persistence despite setbacks. As the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein writes, this kind of wholeness can be experienced only when time is introduced. Stillness cannot do it alone, it needs motion and rhythm in order to appear: “In the three-dimensional space it is not spatially possible to represent it, only in the four-dimensional space (three plus time) does it emerge and exist” (our translation, ibid.: 109).

**Writing**

As said in the beginning, the pattern of recurrence in the two stories only appeared to us as we kept returning to the field. In revisiting our field, we have both returned to social realities we know well and interviewed young people we have known for a decade or more. Thus, we are addressing a question related to longitudinal studies: Is it the same continuous social reality we return to? If so, what is the character of the continuity? And if not, how do we allow for the unexpected to occur, when experience tells us how things are most likely to develop?

In our analyses we, the anthropologists (and markedly within youth studies), tend to become the judges of whether the hopes of our informants should be deemed prospective or
deceptive. Or, in other words, we tend to write analyses that are either too pessimistic or too optimistic, because we wish to determine the future or come to terms with it in a very literal sense. This, we believe, is a problematic that can be traced back to the traditions of narration that dominate our ideas of good analysis. The full meaning of a story, Hannah Arendt tells us, reveals itself only when it has ended (Arendt 1958: 192). It is therefore not until after the fact that we can fully grasp what was at stake in a given context. With a focus on the future, however, it is impossible to get beyond the fact, as the future continuously turns into something new and not yet tested. Every time we returned to the field our conclusions, “endings” so to speak, were put to shame by the course of events.

The method of fieldwork allows us to follow people in the present and to listen to their stories about the past. But the stories and lives of our informants do not come to a halt when we as fieldworkers return to our universities and have to “get something out of” the days we spent together. For our informants (and for us while it happened) the moments we spent together were open-ended and part of the process of life, but for the analytical mind, “life as lived” is soon turned into a past we distance ourselves from and objectify. Reflection upon past moments is inherent to meaning-making (cf. Muzzetto 2006), but for our informants reflection is still part of an ongoing process. In our analyses, however, we are seldom aware of the future-oriented aspect of reflection, of the consequences of our thinking. This temporal inequality is a crucial difference between lived moments and written and hence objectified (maybe even reified) pasts, which can be taken into account in analysis. As long as the future is open for our informants, the new and unexpected may still happen. One way of coming to terms with this, we believe, is to let the time of the field, including recurrence and potential, be reflected, not only in our analysis of the field, but also in the text itself.
Such a focus on the relation between field, time and text in some ways relates to Johannes Fabian’s much quoted volume *Time and the Other* (1983). Here Fabian argues for a style of writing that incorporates concepts of history and time as a means of portraying coevalness between ethnographer and informants by, among other things, avoiding the ethnographic present that freezes societies in time. As Kevin Birth (2008) sums up Fabian’s argument, “Stating that ‘The X are matrilineal’ implies that the X have always been and always will be matrilineal even though all societies change […]”. Thus, the ethnographic present removes the Other from the flow of time and denies the human propensity to change” (Birth 2008: 4). We agree with Fabian that freezing our informants in time denies them the propensity to change in the future, but we wish to take his argument one step further in stating that ‘freezing in time’ is not only a matter of grammar; our narrative style that leads toward conclusion is a much stronger denial of openness and change, at least in the way we usually employ it.

Conclusions about the present most often involve implicit predictions about the future, but it is difficult, perhaps even hazardous, to predict what will happen to persons or societies (Boissevain 1992). Returning to the same field over a period of years made Jeremy Boissevain aware of the relativity of the social life he was studying. Looking back on his previous work, as he returned to the field after a period of several years, he could see how his attempts to predict what might happen did not correspond to reality. The relativity of the moment makes it impossible to foresee exactly what the moment will turn into. Boissevain concludes that it is essential to place one’s analysis “in a time frame that provides a longer perspective than the few years you have personally experienced. This means more history, more examination of the past” (ibid.: 78). But as Kevin Birth (2008) has so precisely observed, the past is never just one, and to give it a place in analysis means first of all knowing which past is at play in the given lives under study. Which personal experiences, concepts of time and culturally shared ideas are combined? Placing ourselves
and our informants in time, sometimes shared, sometimes not, is thus as much a phenomenological endeavor as a historical one.

Likewise, a focus on futurity is necessarily phenomenological, as even the discourses about future outcomes are lived, insofar as they are meaningful to somebody (Frederiksen 2011a). To write in a future-oriented way does not imply prediction; in fact, it means quite the opposite, namely that anything can happen, be it felicitous or not, as the future is inherently unknowable. Indeed, as Miyazaki notes, “the retrospective rendering of hope, as a subject of analysis, [forecloses] the possibility of describing the prospective momentum inherent in hope. As soon as hope is approached as the end point of the process, […] the newness or freshness of the prospective moment that defines that moment as hopeful is lost” (Miyazaki 2004: 108). A main objective in this article, therefore, has been to explore whether it is possible or maybe even necessary to deploy a sense of open-endedness in our analyses, thus highlighting the fact that life is a process that continuously extends into the future.

Ending?
If Rezo’s or Fábio’s stories should be finished it would mean that they had died. Fábio is certainly on thin ice, as he is sought by the police, and though Rezo might have made it with his tourist agency, he will soon be eager to reach even further or fight to keep it going amidst the challenges of the societal changes surrounding him, not least the recent war with Russia that turned many young Georgian men’s lives into a question of life and death. We cannot tell if they will be here ten years hence. It is as though talking with Fábio’s worried mother on the phone, when Anne Line is back in Denmark, both leaves hope open and demonstrate that things are not well. Had he been safe, his mother would neither have called nor have been worried about where he is. He is not safe, but, on the other hand, he is not dead either. Had he been, she would probably have known where he was.
Receiving Rezo’s e-mails is likewise keeping a hope alive, and yet – would he write, if he had better things to do? Are the recently missing e-mails in Martin’s inbox a sign of trouble or animated progress? These are omens full of promise, but also of uncertainty, and they give rise to questions that keep the relation to the field vibrant. The unfinished relationship is productive as a stone in the shoe that keeps disturbing us. Indeed, as Anthony Cohen has observed, the writing of ethnography is a provisional endeavour in the sense that our understanding of what took place during fieldwork is likely to change over time - a good example of this being Renato Rosaldo’s classic description of bereavement among the Ilongot and how his understanding of data changed over time, forced by the death of his wife (Cohen 1992: 2, Rosaldo 2004 [1984]). Rather than seeing this instability as a troublesome aspect of knowledge production we (and Cohen) find it to be an inescapable condition to be met and explored creatively.

In constantly rewriting this article, new endings have been designed in order to test various possibilities, and these have in time opened up new questions and perspectives coming to life. Numerous sections and paragraphs have been written only to be cut out later, used for something different or left in a drawer. The recurrence has in many ways created its own form of excess. Some arguments have been lifted into other articles, an entire research project was funded and concluded in the process, and new ideas for other projects have emerged. You could say that the lacking conclusion of the article is a sign of long-windedness and lack of determination. But we will argue that there is more to the process than capriciousness. In the process something was seen, which would probably not have appeared in a less hesitating analysis: The truth about an individual life (and hence, about a particle of the possible) is discernible only in the sameness of its varied, often divergent manifestations.

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank the participants of the workshop “Time and the Field” held by the Danish Research School in Anthropology in August 2008 as well as Susanne Højlund and Lotte Meinert for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this article. Morten Axel Pedersen provided valuable suggestions in the finishing process. The article is written as a tribute to our mutual friend Marie Højlund Bræmer.

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Brotherhoods and Temporal Margins in the Republic of Georgia” is under contract with Temple University Press.