Facing Another: The Attenuation of Contact as Space in Dhofar, Oman

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the properly spatial aspects of communicative practices among speakers of Śḥerēt, a Modern South Arabian language, living in Dhofar, Oman. I argue that participants in face-to-face interactions (particularly the domestic hospitality that dominates daily activity) move, speak, and position themselves in ways that attenuate interactional contact itself. This drawing out of contact is a site of normative practice across modalities including body posture, gaze, movement, and seating position in participation frameworks. Not simply creating distance or imposing categorical bounds on relationality, these signs attenuate the intensity of contact as the spatial extent of possible or actual encounters with others by complicating the accessibility of participants. As such, I constitute attenuation as an analytic that registers distortions of contact as manipulations of social space in a way that runs alongside (not counter to) other semiotic functions of gradation and categorization. The role of space as the medium of contact with others and its attenuation points to Dhofari concerns about accessibility that locally structure both interactional performance and understandings of sociality as such. This article in turn indicates new ways we can describe the nonneutrality of the spaces of social life.

If you lived on a large expanse of territory, under what conditions would space be a problem of daily concern? During my fieldwork in the Dhofar highlands of the Sultanate of Oman, despite the open landscape and relative privacy of our rural setting, I learned quickly that the space between selves and others was

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a major point of concern in everyday interaction. Almost every day, after the afternoon *ʕas'ar* prayer, I would walk, accompanied by at least one other young woman and often several, around the *ħokub* (the Śħerēt word for the group of houses and animal pens clustered like a small village) where we lived.[1] Our *ħokub*, populated by around 35 people, was surrounded by empty grazing land. The next settlement over was about a mile away; we could see it on our walk, on the next hillside. We were located on top of a short but abrupt range of mountains outside of the port town of Salalah, in Dhofar, the southernmost province of the Sultanate. During the last 40 years, many mountain dwellers (formerly seasonally nomadic) left the valleys below to build outcroppings of houses on the natural crooks of the highlands, settling in the path of the municipally paved and maintained road.

The house where I lived, and those of the neighbors, who were cousins, backed against a small ridge, overlooking a stretch of land that led off to a steep cliff. We were set almost one kilometer off the main paved road through the mountains, but a dirt track led across the front of our settlement, looping around to pass by our house and those of our three neighbors. On our walks, we would wander this small loop of road, sometimes ending up on the hillside in front of the *ħokub*, staring off the cliffs there into the deep valley below. Both by the women's own desire and the expectations of their family members, we were conscious of how we could be seen, wanting to remain both vaguely within the view of the house, yet careful of the possibility of encountering the occasional passing car.

One day, we were walking on the loop that led away from the *ħokub*. From where we were, if a car wanted to pass through our settlement, it would have to drive past us. In fact, a car was coming. There were four of us, and we all saw each other notice the oncoming car. It was summertime and dry. The road was dusty, so the car's progress was heralded by the loud crunching of dry rocks

1. A note about language: These highlands are a multilingual zone. I lived with families who spoke Śherēt, a language of the Modern South Arabian branch of the Semitic family, at home. Others nearby, whose lives were quite similar, spoke Mehri Modern South Arabian, Hobyōt Modern South Arabian, or the dialects of Arabic proper to the desert or Salalah. In our home, many people could speak Arabic, particularly those in their twenties and younger who had been educated in the government schools, though it was rarely used. Terms in italics are in Śherēt unless otherwise noted. As for the proper name of the language we spoke, there is some controversy in the area. I have chosen to use the name *Śherēt*, which is both an endonym to some family groups and the most commonly used term in contemporary English-language scholarly work on the Modern South Arabian languages. Regarding transcription, I use IPA conventions, except in using *ś* to designate a voiceless lateral fricative, *ġ* for the voiced velar fricative, and the macron over vowels to indicate that they are phonemically long. The glyph ʕ designates the voiced pharyngeal fricative known in Arabic as *ʕyin*. Śherēt has a series of ejective stops and affricates, which here are designated with the IPA convention of an apostrophe following the glyph.

and earth and a cloud of gray-white dust that billowed up in its wake. One girl suggested that the driver might be a specific someone we knew, citing her knowledge that this man drove a white Hyundai salon car (the only one available in Oman at that time was the Elantra, distinctively small and delicate looking among the other common makes and models of small car). If this man was in fact the driver, he would turn off onto the other side of the *ħokub* loop before reaching us. As we watched the car approach at speed, we let this statement hang. When it was closer, maybe 100 feet away, someone made the lateral click that often served as a negative rejoinder to yes or no questions. I had the weird sensation, a bodily almost fear, that the car would not stop and might even barrel through us. We all looked at it and, with palpable anticipation, noted that there was a man hanging his arm and head out the window of the back seat. Only certain people would draw attention to themselves in such a way: people for whom being recognized is not an issue.[2]

We walked a few meters off the road and turned around, giving the car our backs right as it sped past us. When they were out of sight two of the girls had the following exchange:

Girl A:	koh	ʃuhm	deysurʕan	tʿan	
	koh	ʃuhm	d-eysurʕan	tʿan	
	why	3MPL.PRO	CONT-go.fast.3MPL	DEM	
	'why are they speeding like that'				
Girl B:	kit		b-īnkʿerertʃʷ		tʿan
	koh-hit		b-(e)-mınkʿerert-ʃʷ		tʿan
	why-2FSG.PRO		PREP-DEF-butthole-POSS.2FSG		DEM
	'what's with you sticking your ass[3] out like that'				

Girl A asked her question, musing aloud, with some disdain, perhaps as a disavowal of our collective excitement at the men's approach, and Girl B goaded her in parallelistic response.

Our turning away concealed: it hid our faces and fronts and disrupted possible eye contact. It allowed us to avoid engagement, both in our turning, and in the woman's disdainful remark, which disavowed her own potential excitement at coming close to unknown young men. Of course, though, when you turn around

2. These are not bad people; that is certainly not what I intend here. Rather, these could be men who are already well known to our settlement. Otherwise, they could be men who already know they are completely unknown, and likely then are young men cruising a new area of the mountains, looking for a private picnic spot or a house where they can take tea.

3. This word is actually quite more vulgar (and indeed more humorous) than *ass* in English. It is more like *butthole*.

to hide your face, you stick out your ass. We were all reminded of this by the other girls' remark that registered and ratified the first's statement of disavowal.

It is not bad to be seen, as such.[4] Of course, it would be negative to appear to solicit the attention of unknown cars on the road, but if one turned away too late, the worst consequence would likely be mild embarrassment and light mocking from one's companions. Of course, it also wouldn't be good for the *ħokub* to gain a reputation as a place where roving women engaged passersby (even only by glances and not words). But as my male and female interlocutors frequently insisted, they did not want to place too much importance on reputation or on performing good in the eyes of others. Instead, they were more concerned with their own sense of their deeds and with avoiding attachment to the real or projected opinions that others had of them. This did not mean that they discard normative standards for behavior. Quite the opposite, they concern themselves with exposing less of their bodies, subjective states, and personal affairs to both more and less intimate others.

In turning away, we did not just offer another communicative sign—it was not just an exchange of back for front. Instead, we drew out and slackened the contact, which could have grown into or supported an interaction, between us and the car. This act distorted the possibility of our contact with the car, though we did not move any further away.

Turning away is not an act that is itself specifically prescribed. It is not attached to specific standards (degree or amount) that are evaluated by others: this action is not an index of a specific prohibition. Though one effect (and likely intent) of turning away was to make ourselves anonymous and homogeneous, the same could be accomplished by pulling the end of a headscarf across one's face, covering all but the eyes. This was also a common device of concealment at larger distances, but at the close range between the car and our position on the side of the road, we turned.

In turning, we did avoid the engagement that eye contact could have ushered in, but not because of any special or specific threshold of prohibition attached to the eyes or the front of a female body: this was a device of disengagement. As the final woman's remark shows, there is room for play (at least among us girls) and literal ambivalence around the exposures that the different sides of the body afford. This is an effort to draw out the space of possible engagement,

4. It's not that it is "bad" in an absolute sense or necessarily dangerous for the young unmarried women, whose company I primarily kept, to be seen or to engage in cross-gender socializing. Rather, in the right context and spaces (e.g., domestic hospitality) it is at once fun and uncomfortable, necessary, and a site of much self-management.

invoked by the car's fast-approaching proximity, that does not result in an absolute exclusion of ourselves and our bodies. The turning cannot be collapsed into a response to a prohibition nor an exit from social space; instead, it is involved in a more open-ended process of anticipating, sensing, and responding to the accessibility to others that underlies and surrounds linguistically mediated interactions. Our turning was not a question of hiding specific content or enacting a normative type but rather of the attenuation, or deformation and stretching, of the space by which we came into contact.

This article details the communicative practices that operate on the spatiality of actual and possible interaction in the Dhofari Śḥerēt speech community I work with. I would like to refer to the function of these practices as *attenuation*.[5] Attenuation names the stretching and deformation of the ways selves and others become accessible not *in* but *as* the spatiality of an actual or potential encounter. Here, I draw on the idea of relations of "accessibility" in William Hanks's (1990) work on the multiple dimensions (perceptual modality, social relations, symmetricality, etc.) by which deictic reference can construe the terms that structure the positions of interlocutors to a deictic field. Hanks's (2005) sociocentric decomposition of relations of accessibility into a durable field of possible and actual articulations of presence complicates any tacit assumptions that "co-presence" is digital, centered on the pair, or necessarily symmetrical. This opens up the *how* of presence as a site of qualitative inquiry that involves yet exceeds both specific perspectives (of selves or alters) and durable built environments. Where Hanks focuses on acts of deictic reference, this article analogously looks at practices that manage space as part of Dhofari concerns about how a self is present to such a field.

The notion of social space in play here is not only tied to the phatic initiation of interactional events, nor does it collapse into locally specific mappings and figurations of places. Instead, it pertains to the way people move in and around the specific spatial extents of interactional frameworks as well as domestic space more broadly. As a question of normative sociality in Dhofar, people attend to

5. *Attenuation* typically refers to lessening intensity or drawing out length; it is not an unmarked way to refer to an operation on space. This suits the data I present here. My purpose is not to propose a new category but rather to begin to develop an analytics and rhetorics for the spatiality of interaction and its continuity alongside other existing categories of semiotic operations (e.g., metapragmatic regimentation and gradation). As a term, *attenuate* (*attenuative*) has some precedents in morphosemantic—attenuative markers for verbal and adjectival predicates (cf. Overall 2017)—and pragmatic studies of meaning—on hedging and the relativization of one's own opinion (cf. Lakoff 1973). Thanks to Zachary O'Hagan for the representative citation to Overall's grammar of Aguaruna, a Chicham language of the Peruvian Amazon, and discussion of attenuative markers in Amazonian languages more generally.

and act on this being near in ways that suggest that exiting or measuring such a space is not a relevant question. In this context, these acts are less like verbally mediated enactments of avoidance (Fleming 2015) and instead are more like Goffman's "drama" of self-presentation (1959). However, for my Dhofari interlocutors, attending to their presence to spaces of encounter is a more continuous issue not as dependent on distinctions between a front stage and back stage. Attenuating presence (unlike presentation) does not depend on a specific individual's seeing or being seen by another: even those not visible to participants orient their movements in light of the possibility or actuality of interactional encounters in a way that is pervasive to Dhofari domestic life. Attenuations of how one is present to others in an interaction are instead a continuous function of presence in a space of possible (and perhaps, subsequently, actual) encounters. Interactional contact as such, in Dhofar and perhaps elsewhere, is thus deformed and distorted by practices that work to attenuate, not identify, typify, or categorize participants, events, or places.

With attenuation, I want to draw attention to three aspects of the communicative practices operating on space that this article details. First, they do not simply make participants more distant from each other. In many cases, including the example I cited above, attenuation cannot be registered by typical measures of distance. The observable distance or other geometry between us does not conclusively register what happened, as we turned away from the car. Second, that these practices do not break contact or completely preclude relations. When you turn away, you still "stick out your ass." Attenuation here does not cut or remake social relations but instead finds more room (expanding or slackening) within them. Third, these practices do not target interactional contact simply as a function of talk or of the textuality of interactional encounters. Instead, they touch on the necessary conditions of both encounter and its avoidance, on the fact that being accessible to others, contiguous to them, entails a kind of continuity of presence and potential attention that must be dealt with.[6]

The semiotic practices I describe below are heterogeneous. They are both obviously related to spatial arrangement (seating position, gaze avoidance, and posture) and less easily defined by spatial dimensionality (forms of talk that cover

6. The reasoning behind my deontic statement ("must be dealt with") is outside the scope of this article. It pertains to local deployments of Islamic concepts that structure a discipline of attending to the way one becomes an object for others as a matter of one's own attachment to the world (as opposed to contemplation of divine judgment), relating position in interactions with others to cosmologies of responsibility and knowledge that lend ethical and eschatological weight to everyday relations.

over emotional expressivity and personal information). I argue that the coordination of these semiotic acts under the rubric of normative sociality in Dhofar requires a reconsideration of the space between people before, during, and around the initiation of face-to-face interactions.[7] To do so requires approaching the real and observable space of social encounters not as a container to be filled nor as a projection from specific semiotic relations but instead as a continuous substance of the encounters that it can support, make possible, and make risky as well. In such a view, the verbal and nonverbal semiotic practices that I describe here can be seen as operations on (relations to) this continuous contact with others insofar as they draw out, extend, and slacken it, all the while without breaking, naming, or judging it with respect to a specific category or threshold. I am suggesting attenuation, then, as a continuous transformation of the continuous possibilities of contact with others.

"Spatial" Continua

The notion of the spatial extension of social contact I develop here is unlike typical notions of "social space." It is not a container that a person or object is inside of, nor is it a projection from a single point or origo. Space here is not defined by its limits or external bounds but, instead, internally as a continuum. Now, it is not at all esoteric for a linguistic anthropologist to invoke such ideas of continuity. Rather, continua are behind accounts of the categorical structures of language and typifications of social knowledge that have served as the fundaments of linguistic anthropology's insights into communication, grammar, and thinking as they relate to social life. The categorical segmentation of continua is a basic function of both grammar and interactional textuality, whether the continuum in question regards perceptual experience (Boas 1966; Jakobson 1971), intensity and duration (Sapir 1944; Whorf 1956), or real physical spectra (Saussure [1916] 1986). I am speaking about social encounters as involving a continuum like these others. I would like to reiterate, however, that I am not appealing to an individual's perceptual or phenomenological experience to constitute that continuum. I am suggesting instead that interactional contact may function as such a continuous and multidimensional extent. In Dhofar at least there is a normative

7. This article focuses on face-to-face encounters. This should not be taken as a general commitment to the primacy of the face-to-face over other relatively more mediated forms of interaction, nor a suggestion that contact in the way I describe it here is in some way necessarily related to the face-to-face. Rather, it is a reflection of the primacy of face-to-face contact in Dhofari social life. Though other more highly mediating infrastructures for communication are proliferating in southern Oman, the basic ideas and concerns about communication as such are, I suggest, best modeled in this ethnographic context through scenes of face-to-face encounter.

responsibility to attend to and manage such contact continuously: to maneuver without breaking and avoid without disappearing.[8]

Continua, in linguistic anthropology, are typically approached through the categories that segment them, and, in turn, it is this very categorization that tends to constitute what is *spatial* about social spaces. In Silverstein's formalization of a "semiotic-functional" approach to grammar, a "grammatical-categorical 'space'" mediates the perceptual experience of "stuff," whether that stuff is the phonetic signal or a world of referents (1987). To further distill this insight through one of its progenitors, consider Whorf. Whorf's work exposed the role of cryptotypic categories (count and mass) as a basis of understandings and practical orientations to time through "Standard Average European" linguistic systems. This reveals a mismatch between SAE and Hopi ways of referring to and practices around temporality. It also grants Hopi easier referential access to temporal continuity. Whorf calls this "stuff" a "subjective experience" of either "real time" or of "duration" (145; 142–43). Perhaps the primary origin of this notion of duration, as is implicit in his terms and as he signals in the article "Science and Linguistics" (1956, 216), is Henri Bergson's *Time and Free Will* ([1888] 1913).

Bergson argues that what seem to be the basic parts of a notion of time, sequence and the relative length of units, are actually not purely temporal but instead rely on space. In constituting duration instead as the basic quality of time, Bergson points out the reliance on spatial displacement that allows for the unitization of time in sequential measurements of length. Beginning with the argument that numerical multiplicity depends on the displacement of alike yet discrete objects in space, he dismisses the possibility of "counting in time rather than in space" ([1888] 1913, 78). Time, counted, is already spatialized in its very unitization: "we involuntarily fix at a point in space each of the moments which we count,

8. The necessity and responsibility to sociality that this continuum entails has precedents in Goffman's concepts of "the situation" (1964) and of "involvement" (1967). Goffman fleshed out the norms and circumstances that structure the responsibilities that communicative encounters demand of their participants. In his vocabulary, the situations out of which interactions cohere, and the (contextually variable) degrees of involvement by which they should be conducted affect the participants at hand as a function of face and footing: of interactionally emergent figures of self. But, what is it about the situation and about the nature of contact during an encounter that demand to be addressed? Two people, swimming in a "naked situation," do not only enter each other's presence only when one calls out. By virtue of the face-to-face arrangement of people, the pull of sociality, the speaker making an initiatory call is not the instigator of contact. Goffman knew this. He intuited the importance of the fact that people, even before they speak, are in the same space. However, he collapses the study of continuous contact to an exploration of the normative responsibilities to the "interaction order" through notions of reputation and recognition in the care of one's "face" or the disruptive forms of "alienation" (1957). Similarly, Edward T. Hall's work on proxemics (1959, 1966) and its recognition of the zone around a person as a space of interpersonal anxiety is also relevant. However, Hall as well is primarily concerned with the way cultural norms regarding the space around an individual affect either linguistically mediated interaction or the constitution of specific bounded places and not with semiotic manipulations of space.

and it is only on this condition that the abstract units come to form a sum" (79). Bergson argues that removing these implicit spatializations allows the root concept of time as duration to emerge. He defines duration as nondiscrete succession: "the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego . . . refrains from separating its present state from its former states" (100).

It is all important to note here that the "space" that Bergson removes from the time-concept to define duration is a Kantian notion of space as a homogenous medium in which objects can find location (by which locations can be fixed with absolute coordinates or other relative means). Space, in this sense, is impoverished of its heterogeneity; it is an empty medium made concrete through processes of subdivision, categorization, and measurement that depend on the logics of inside and outside that I spoke of before. For a being who, as Bergson writes, "had no idea of space" in this Kantian sense, it would be possible to "project time into space" thus expressing duration as a continuous extent, where "succession thus takes the form of a continuous line or a chain, the parts of which touch without penetrating one another" ([1888] 1913, 101). Like a notion of time without the unitizing contribution of spatially distinct objects, can we have a notion of space other than as a container filled by units of content?

If Bergson, and then also Whorf, can be said to extract certain spatial logics from time in order to imagine the continuum of duration, then I am proposing a spatial continuum similarly unmarked by metrics or units. We can extract (units of displacement as) "space" from space in this continuous sense (as stuff). Excavating this spatial continuum is necessary to address the real spaces of social interaction and any semiotic operations on them that may exceed processes of identification and typification. What I am suggesting here is that thinking in terms of this very continuum is necessary to understanding the attenuation of contact that marks Dhofari communicative practice as a deformation of that continuity and not its gradation or categorization.

Social Space: Category, Gradation, Attenuation

Without providing a full review and thematization of approaches to social space in anthropology, I wish to highlight some of the common features of the way both real spaces where social action occurs and the spatialization of social typifications have been treated as part of semiotic processes of categorization and gradation.[9]

9. Work on space and social processes of spatialization is a nexus of alliance across the fields of semiotics, cognitive science, anthropology, and geography and thus is quite heterogenous and will exceed even the loose typology that I discuss below. My point here is to focus on studies where space is invoked as part of an account of the effective forms and norms of meaning processes. There is also a rich literature that treats space

I will, in particular, mark the displacement and unitization that characterize gradation and categorization as discontinuous relations to continua.

Social space has been treated as segmented, mapped, categorized, or enclosed by linguistic anthropological work interested in social processes that pose and answer questions about the categorical identities of objects, places, and persons. In social contexts where ritual performances and honorific registers enact social hierarchies (Duranti 1994; Keating 1998), spatialized orders of social relations diagrammatically relate to spatial positioning within the extent of the actual event. In both Duranti's and Keating's work, these regimentations of space can more durably figurate, segmenting and typifying the areas in question, as well as serve as a site for maneuvering within social relationships and hierarchies. In Hanks's (1984) account of the Yucatec *saántiguar* ritual genre, ritual performances similarly derive effectiveness from the enactment of spatial orders in discourse and the arrangement of the ritual altar. In work on the enregisterment of standard, refined, or sacred speech varieties, a schema of center and margin spatialize hierarchies of social persons, access to speech types, or ceremonial importance, showing that it is not just the place one is in that can take on social meanings, but also that spatial distributions of exemplary forms of talk play a role in identifications of ways of speaking and types of events or persons (Errington 1988; Kroskrity 1993; Kuipers 1998; Silverstein 2003). In all these cases, space is a medium of distinctness and categorization. Social space is meaningfully segmented into distinct areas that displace one another (where their extent excludes the extent of other segments). The spatiality of events becomes a topic for social analysis insofar as the spatial qualities of displacement and unitization serve to order and differentiate roles, categories, and types.

Another approach to social space can be found in semiotic work that considers the notion of "gradation." Unlike the categorical displacement above, gradations do not rely on the displacement of types across rigid boundaries, but instead mark and regiment differentials and thresholds (Kockelman 2016a; Carruthers 2019). Here, "grading" is a relation to a qualitative continuum, visible within processes of commensurating individuals (Carruthers 2017) or maintaining and maneuvering within fields of differential intensities (Kockelman 2016b). Thus, these processes are also important analytical windows into the qualities, ontologies, and processes of negotiating such a categorically structured social space as I described above. Instead of asking about the identity of participants,

and place through sentiment, affect, or as atmospheres of lived experience, which is certainly in excess of the questions of categorization I raise here (Basso 1996; Feld 1996; Stewart 2007; Eisenlohr 2019).

places, events, or objects, gradation asks about thresholds. Gradations can rely on quantized or qualitative forms of comparison, but they are always relative (cf. Carruthers's [2017] discussion of Sapir [1944] and Kennedy [2007]). Whether gradations follow metric units or work on and with reference to thresholds of what is enough, they are tied to specific reference points for qualitative or quantitative comparison along specific axes of quality. Where gradation marks relative position on a specific axis (quantity or quality spatialized), attenuation as an analytic responds to the multidimensionality of interactional contact as actual space.

The categorical theories of social space and approaches to gradation that I mention here are like Bergson's spatializations of time. They are both relations to continua that either directly segment space or pertain to a gradient of content *across* space. My intent, in offering the term attenuation, is to describe a third kind of relation to a continuum: one of continuous deformation.

Attenuation

Attenuation, like gradation, may seem like it is about (absolute or relative) quantity. When we turned away from the car, one could metaphorically state that we "lessened" the contact between ourselves and the car. However, I am defining attenuation as an operation on the spacing out of participants and the distribution of contact as space, not just through the binary relation of, for example, the turner and interloping driver.

In turning, it is not that "we made ourselves further" in an attempt to disengage by crossing a threshold of "far enough away." Instead, we made more space between our group and the passing car, knowing we were still visible, our conduct still on the line. Our contact was attenuated, changing the shape of the space of our encounter or the way in which we were next to the car, without removing us completely or appealing to simple metric distance. In interactions that actually cohere into talk and in which participants are more explicitly verbally engaged, contact is attenuated in similar ways.

Many cars passed by us on our afternoon walks, but many times as well, the cars that appeared on the road were in fact headed toward our settlement. Sometimes they stopped at a neighbor's house, but often they stopped at ours, seeking the conventional hospitality of tea and conversation. On one such occasion, some women of the house and I were chatting on the patio. It was around 4:00 PM, and they had gathered after making up their faces, the finishing touch after afternoon prayer and its attendant ritual ablutions. We were cut short, however, by the arrival of three men. At that time of the afternoon such casual visits

from unknown men were typical. They pulled up in one car and appeared at the edge of the patio, hovering until we arranged a seating area for them. We had been sitting in a loose circle on the ground, with one of us in a chair. One of the women gestured to offer the chair to an arrived guest, but chairs were something of a novelty at our house and there were not enough for everyone. Catching on, one of them said:

nħã ʕagen ar sɪmmet

nħa(n)	ʕagen	ar	sɪmmet
1PL.PRO	want.1PL	except	mat

'we only want a mat/we will take only a mat'

The mother of our house set out a mat in front of them, in a far corner of the patio, and tossed out the two heavy pillows that had been where we were sitting. As she approached the mat, one man insisted she take one of the pillows. She obliged and sat to exchange greeting formulae with them. The rest of us settled near the entrance to the house, about ten feet away, on the concrete verge that led up to the open-air foyer (fig. 1).

In this seating plan, the guests and hosts formed distinct areas that conform to typical patterns. The guests settled around the focal area, with the food and mat, as the rest of the women (this anthropologist included) retreated closer to the door that led to the interior of the house from the patio, forming a clump. A single woman, the eldest of the house to whom it often fell to be primary interlocutor to guests, was in between the two groups.

Of course, these distinct areas of the participation framework are in a sense discontinuous, and presence in one area or another is categorically related to the roles and requirements of participation: distinct positions demand and enable different kinds of talk. There is also a potential reading of these different positions along a gradient of engagement. But, my primary interest lies in what the *how* of that presence interprets and not an interpretation of its *what*. Though the position of the focal group on the patio may vary, the rear clump will always be positioned in front of an exit. Even if the focal area takes up the space on the steps to the foyer, a rear clump will form near one of the side exits from the patio, which offer access to a side entrance of the house. The position-takings that constitute these frameworks are repeated orientations to the durable structure of the house and patio insofar as this structure provides possibilities for cover and routes for escape. The repetition of this framework of focal area, line, and clump then is not best understood in light of distance from other participants or the holistic enactment of a normative schema. Rather, the way contact is attenuated

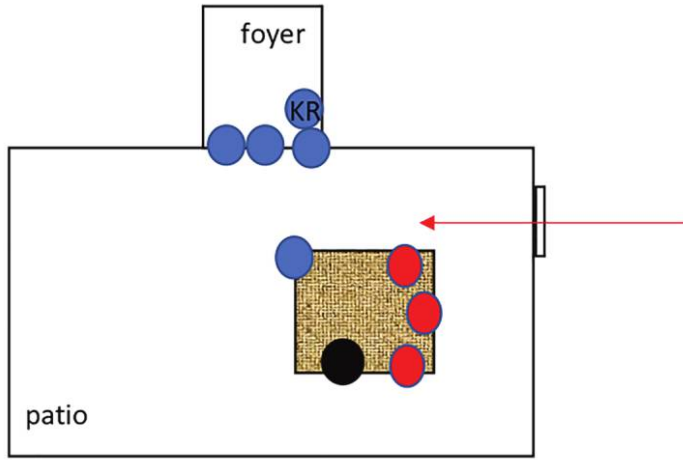

Figure 1. The male guests (red circles) entered (red arrow) and sat on the mat, near the food and tea service (black circle). Across the patio, the women (blue circles) sat at the edge of the open-air foyer.

in this configuration is a continuous deformation of the continuous issue of the presence of guests (as the specific social others most in question in this scenario).

These three groups are separated by a physical distance, yet I argue that distance is not the best means by which to understand their configuration. It is not the simple distance from the focal area that makes the clump a position from which contact is more attenuated. In different interactions, this group can be closer or further from the center of the action. However, with its access to the house, its shape allowing possible side play, and its positioning away from the focal area, the clump is always the "back" of the interactional frame. The participants sitting in the line, as they face the focal area, are more directly present in the interaction: they face the core group and potentially unknown guests. Like turning away from the car on the road, this configuration does not negate presence but, rather, stretches out its risks and requirements, belying simple binaries of participation and seclusion.[10]

10. Though these particular scenes involve gender in multiple ways, the claim that turning was a form of concealment is not simply an argument about the seclusion of women. Instead, though the intensities and devices may be different for men, similar considerations apply. The attenuation that I am describing exposes understandings of sociality as such: the responsibilities, demands, and conditions necessary to engaging others in interaction for both genders.

In both the scene here and the one on the road, body movement attenuates the engagement or contact between participants. However, there are two differences between these scenes. The first is arguably minor: the effect of attenuation is accomplished through different semiotic means. On the road, turning away deformed our engagement. On the patio, the convergence of built space and conventional participation frameworks crystallized a layout appropriate to an event of hospitality where women of our house host unknown male guests. In both events, the control of involvement, visibility, and physical positioning play a role in two different trajectories, one attentive, albeit in a controlled way, and one avoidant.

This second difference is perhaps more drastic. The convergence on the road did not cohere into a linguistically mediated interaction, whereas the latter certainly did. In fact, our efforts on the road had the effect and intent of avoiding an interaction altogether. So, if these two acts share something, semiotically, it cannot be carried only by the ritualized demands of interactional textuality as the dynamic enactment of significant content. If in both scenes, participants conceal or attenuate contact in similar ways, it is with regard to the spatialization of that contact, independent of the verbal initiation of an interaction. Whether or not an interaction coheres, the fact that contact is also a question of space reframes the issue driving the bodily and linguistic practices of attenuation. This issue is not one of the initiation of an interactional event but of accessibility more broadly. It is not a surprise then that it is primarily (though not exclusively) nonverbal signs such as posture, positioning, and gesticulation that operate on spatialized social contact, rather than more categorical linguistically mediated semiotic processes. The possibility and avoidability of interaction, more connected to the risk of discomfort than the risk of failure to tokenize a type, are the matters of concern in understanding these practices.

In both Goffmanian notions of face and semiotic notions of figuration, risk features prominently. In semiotic accounts of figuration (broadly construed as regarding participants, events, objects, etc.), insofar as they reformulate and specify the function of performativity through wider anthropological accounts of ritual, they invoke the risk of failure (Keane 1996). Effectiveness tied to form carries with it the risk of misformedness in the actual sign event and thus, the failure or diversion of effectiveness. For Goffman (1967), the risk of actual sign events lies in the interplay of such social norms with the gaze of social others and the frameworks by which those others may come to control more or less of one's face. These two shades of risk converge in linguistic anthropological work on

identity and alterity, where in interacting one assumes both the risk of failure inherent in indexical figuration and the risks of being recognized as something one may not want to be or of entering a field where such figurations compound structural inequalities (e.g., Silverstein 2003; Rosa 2019).

However, the risk I invoke here is not about what one may (or may not) become but is rather a more constant question of how one becomes present to another. In Basso's (1970) study of Western Apache interaction, silence is an effective response to an analogous risk. A purported speaker's silence is appropriate to situations in which their interlocutor's social status is made ambiguous by situational factors or social or psychological transitions between categorical social roles (friend to lover, sane to crazy). But, at the core of these categorical ambiguities is an "uncertainty and unpredictability" that points to an excessive exposure of selves and others that underlies the typical traffic of signs within "established role expectations" (1970, 227). Similarly, what is at issue in Dhofar is not the consequences of failure to enact a categorical norm, but instead the danger of contact with social others.

In other cases, forms of avoidance (Stasch 2008) and anxiety around visual and other bodily accessibilities in interactional space (Groark 2013) have pointed to the potential danger of exposure to others' thoughts and intentions as a basic assumption shaping the practices in question. In Dhofar, the exact nature of the issue in contact with others is a broader question of the individual soul's relation to the phenomenal world, the explication of which demands a deeper engagement with Islamic practice than I have room for here. I offer the term *attenuation* as a semiotic operation in this vein: a negotiation of the way one is present to actual and possible others. In contradistinction to other analytical frameworks and social worlds where questions of identity and typification may be more salient, attenuation highlights the role that the spacings of bodies play in everyday Dhofari communicative practice.

Sociality in Gathering

The very process of "gathering" is creating a seating plan. This is true whether a gathering is small or large and whether guests or only family members are present. People sit to talk, or, rather, talking happens more while sitting than while working. Even if there is no ongoing event of hospitality, as family members move through domestic space, throughout the day and during the course of their activities and chores, they will accrete. People do not like to sit alone. If you are walking from one room to the next and come upon someone sitting alone or a small group of people, in most scenarios (unless you are so urgently in the middle

of something as to not acknowledge the group you pass by), this is enough of an invitation to sit down and spend some time. Performances of rushing about or busyness are rare; no one should acknowledge a gathering only to walk past it. If this does happen, someone sitting may even comment, joking with or mocking the person who is bustling around. People will circulate in and out of such informal configurations in between their tasks, in the middle of one, or while doing nothing.

The daily movements and sleeping schedules of coresidents varied. Some rose early to work with the animals, on small-business projects, or school; others awoke later and stayed up later in order to enjoy the solitude and calm of the late-night hours. Irrespective of the rest of their schedules, people came together in the hours between the afternoon prayer (3:00–4:00 PM depending on the time of the year) and the later evening (10:00 or 11:00 PM), at which time many would retire to sleep.

Even without guests, groups cohered from among the coresidents of our house and wider settlement. In my field notes, I turned to coastal metaphors, comparing us to grains of sand pushed into different configurations together and then apart by the ebb and flow of waves. Often, the anchor point for these loose interactions was the mother of our house and a tray of tea. It was common in the evenings to find the older men sitting at the house down the road, the young girls in the bedroom of the one across from us, and the married women lounging on the patio of our house. Even in these amoebic clumps of coresidents, basic features of hospitality recurred: the commensality of tea, and the demand for sociable participation, not self-involved busyness. Often, however, these afternoon and evening gatherings included guests.

For the most part, afternoon and evening guests would find members of the household already gathered on the patio. Met by no one, a guest would enter the door off the patio, which led not to the main area of the house but to the separate receiving room, or *majlis*. This room was separated from the rest of the house (in ours and most houses in the area) by a small hallway and internal door. The guests would enter and call out or knock on this door, alerting those inside to their presence (fig. 2).

The rest of the house, the living room (or *ṣāla* in Arabic and Śḥerēt), kitchen, and the bedrooms beyond, were not typically used for hospitality. The *ṣāla* and *majlis* were alike in their furnishing. Both had carpets and large pillows for seating laid out along three walls. But the living room was often used for daytime childcare and was frequently messy, while the *majlis* was often kept closed off from the inside of the house in order to keep out young children.

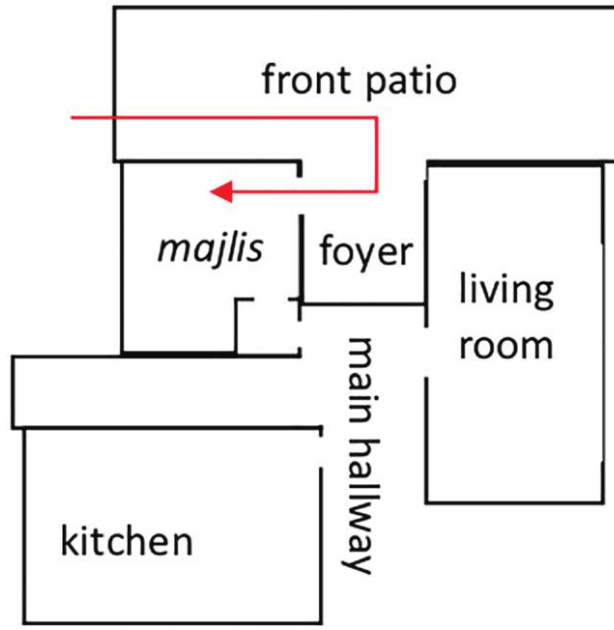

Figure 2. The front of the house (excluding rear rooms and apartments), showing the open patio and foyer, as well as interior *majlis*, kitchen, and living room.

Our house was open—anyone could enter the *majlis* and would be received—but the very design of the house set this room off from the rest of the living space. Furthermore, new guests would be greeted in highly formulaic ways by either grown men, if around, or the older married women in the house. These greetings, both here as well as in other contexts, are regarded as part of a locally normative and Islamically inflected obligation to welcome and wish well for one's fellows, but at the same time are subject to strictures on accessibility (cf. Hillewaert 2016). This openness, which can be tacitly assumed yet which is necessarily (or, rather, constitutively) accompanied by controls on the access granted have been described as a hallmark of hospitality as a moral and political regime in other parts of the Arabian Peninsula (cf. Shryock 2012, writing of Jordan). Where in Euro-American contexts, guests just "dropping in" would potentially be regarded as rude, in Dhofar, it is a point of pride to accommodate unannounced guests and that one's house would be subject to such visits at all. The house's design, and the way this design was used, was built readily to absorb visitors from outside, attenuating the possibilities for encounter in its very design.

In such afternoon encounters with new guests, it is obviously impossible to turn away, unlike on the road. If we were come upon by new guests, it would be unthinkably rude to ignore them without a greeting. Of course, it is possible to enter the less accessible, enclosed, areas of the house before the guests actually appear, but to do so requires attention, prescience, and speed. Furthermore, someone has to greet the guests, and a mass exodus of younger women, running from the newcomers would itself appear rude. So, guests arriving for short and impromptu afternoon hospitality would often come upon a group of residents consisting in multiple young unmarried and married women of the house, their mother, and occasionally a younger brother. Where and how these gatherings occurred depends on the need to attenuate possible contact. Different areas of the house, and differently laid out participation frameworks, afford different possible spreadings out of presence to others.

The concern for how one's house and oneself come to be seen by others is not simply a question of having a good or proper appearance, or of greeting guests in the cleanest and fanciest rooms of the house. These are not the considerations in play. Instead, my interlocutors were concerned with propriety as a function of engagement, not primarily with the quality of the impression or identity they presented. It was exceedingly rare to hear gossip, whether on the status markers or appearance of others' houses and possessions, or as mocking or commenting on others through morally critical labels or figures. I did, though, hear much instruction of others in normative conversational styles and prosocial affective performance through the negative characterizations of persons who speak to others in ways that are scolding, commanding, or angry. However, figures like the scolder or the commander were general and didactic, not invoked to sanction specific persons or past events. Attenuation is not simply a matter of the markers of reputation conveyed in the material circumstances of social encounters. Instead, the attenuation of contact, accomplished through dimensions of the spatial arrangements of participants, was an ethical question centered on the exposure of their bodies and their selves.

Participation Frameworks

Hospitality is emblematic of these ubiquitous events of sitting and gathering. As a fact of mobility and gendered propriety in highland Dhofar, those who would rove around the area, visiting houses such as ours, were mainly male. If women of our house did any roving and visiting, it was in the company of a brother, father, or husband. These trips would certainly not end in a visit to unknown hosts, but rather in less formal gatherings with family, most often

an older sister who married and moved away. In fact, if we were out driving around the area, the women would simply refuse to enter houses where we would be called on to be guests to people they did not know well. In new and unfamiliar homes, they would be obligated to act as full participants and unable to attenuate contact within an interaction or to leave it and withdraw to the interior of the house. So, in the most highly elaborated hospitality events, those composed of unknown and mixed-gender groups who would not normally share space, women were typically hosts. In these events, the attenuation of contact between participants is both a necessary condition to the interaction occurring (people will refuse to sit otherwise) and part of the built and social constitution of domestic spaces.

The general pattern of focal area, line, and clump repeats across interactions (fig. 3). This framework reoccurs within different specific houses or areas of a single house but always with the same orientation to the domestic space on the whole.

The focal area of a participation framework is where the guests sat. Typically, this is the area where the food or tea are first served. It is also demarcated by either a mat, pillows for seating, or both. Though our guests are most often male, the focal group is, at times, composed of women or mixed; in either case, they spread out, and do not clump closely together. Some interactions comprise only this focal area, and participants may face each other in a rectangle or circle or form two lines.

However, in an interaction where guests who are new to the family were present, there will often form a second vantage point outside the focal area, in

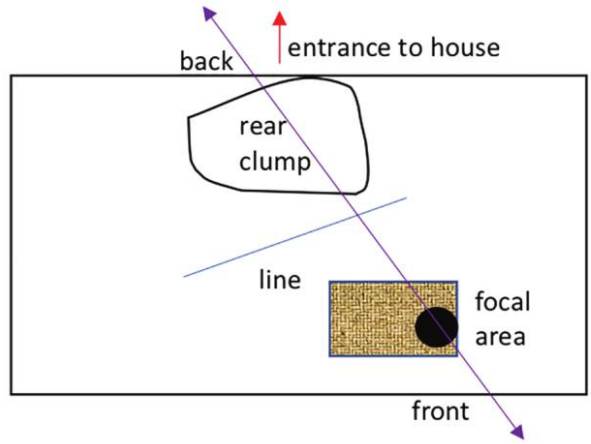

Figure 3. The three general areas, with typical orientation: the clump at the back of the patio, toward the entrance of the house, and the focal area at the front.

the "line." This front line is usually made up of women who are older, married, or have a family connection to one of the guests in the group. With unknown guests, female hosts will not sit in the focal area, sitting thus at its extremity. Though the line is physically separate from the focal area and thus is more concealed, those sitting here face the interaction and typically do not carry on separate conversation, with the rare exception of some one-off, necessary, and deliberately hushed command.

In the interaction I mentioned above, where three male guests joined some women of the house and me on the patio, our dispersal across this framework, and thus the attenuation of the contact between all of us as participants, made possible both engagement and disengagement (fig. 1). This interaction, like all others, began with the exchange of formulaic greetings between the men and the sole inhabitant of the line. Soon, two women, both young wives of men from our house joined the line. The most talkative of the three men greeted them, acting as though he knew their names. He had heard about these two, who were the older daughters of a prominent man down the road, but mixed up their names and was not sure which was the elder. This had the function as well of including the women in the line in the conversation, and one asked the name of the son of the man who had been doing most of the talking. This discussion of personal names and identities did not include the rest of us who had dispersed into the final area of this typical seating plan: the clump.

The clump is most often where younger and unmarried women will sit, all clumped up together. These participants may face each other, or even sit staggered, all facing the focal area, but in their closeness to each other they can constitute their own subgroup. In family gatherings and hospitality interactions alike, it is typical for people to come and go between the interaction and the interior of the house. While someone entering or getting up and leaving from a focal area may have to provide a reason or a greeting, the back clump is freer. People from inside the house may also come and join this group without making a full greeting to the guests and can depart freely as well. The attention of those in the clump can also be divided at times between their own group and the focal guests. There is often side play in the rear clump, though of course all are aware of their exposure, and voices are kept low. It is not impossible that someone in the clump will speak in full voice to address the group on the whole, but this most often happens when the clumped speaker is hailed in particular. These are more peripheral participants, in the sense that the expectation of full participation and singular attention is relaxed.

Rather than regimenting the peripherality (partial exclusion) of the members of the clump, the continuous attenuation of a single seating group into multiple areas makes possible both peripherality and engagement (progressive inclusion). Attenuation both stretches out the distance between (primarily) female hosts and unknown male guests but also by making room for their engagement and disengagement in a way that can allow for banter and even slightly risqué joking that in other conditions would be inappropriate.

The interaction progressed from greetings to greater inclusion of those in the clump; the guests started to ask questions of the group on the whole to which some women in the back responded. Without moving closer or changing position, they could participate as they wished. These men were funny, and though some of the women in the clump left the interaction to reenter the house, those of us who stayed got to joking around. One of the men called out to the girl next to me in the clump:

Man 1:	ēġayıbʒot ʕaʃw tʃwiʃfekʼ bebri?			
	ē-ġayıbʒot ʕaʃw		tʃʷiʃfekʼ	b-e-br-i
	VOC-girl DESID-2FSG get.married.IMPERF.2FSG PREP-DEF-son-1SG.POSS			
	Hey girl, do you want to marry my son?			
Man 1:	ımbere daʕod la bas[11]			
	ımbere	daʕod	la bas	
	boy	still.3MSG	not.bad	
	He's not so bad.			
Woman:	la bas	ʃeh?		
	not.bad	PRO.3MSG		
	Not bad, eh?			
Man 1:	wallar la bas			
	walla-ar		la bas	
	by.God-except		not.bad	
	By God, he's not bad.			
Man 2:	ıxer tōklıθ bımbere lo ykin ar la bas ıxer taʕamer biʃ ɬe lo			
	ıxer tōklıh bımbere lo			
	better tell.2MSG.SUBJ PREP-boy NEG			
	ykin ar la bas			
	be.IMPERF.3MS except NEG enough			
	ıxer taʕamer biʃ ɬe lo			
	better say.2MSG.SUBJ PREP-3MSG thing NEG			
	[*laughing*] It's better not to talk about the boy. If he's just alright it's better to say nothing of him.			

Such marriage jokes are quite common, though this would be impossible without the support of the seating plan, presence of many hosts, and previous several

11. *La bas* is a common Arabic expression, borrowed into Śherēt.

minutes of friendly and introductory conversation: these jokes can be appropriately playful in context. They are most commonly initiated by men, and never by a younger or unmarried woman, though I have seen older married women make more and less bawdy marriage jokes to men who knew them well. These jokes often also consist in bargaining about what a man would give a woman to get her to marry him or, as above, in a direct offer of oneself or one's son. As jokes that invoke desire, sexual relations, and intimate family scenes, they are both funny and uncomfortable and demand a funny retort or mocking annoyance from the woman in question. This playful kind of talk would not occur in any other setting than such a seating plan in our own house. The women I knew would report feeling too uncomfortable or physically anxious to speak out, chide others, or make playful jokes when we were at other's houses or in less regimented encounters in public spaces.

Across essentially all scenes of hospitality, where members of our house entertained guests we had more or less prior acquaintance with, participants would assemble in such a distributed fashion with remarkable regularity. However, this layout would adapt to unconventional and new scenarios such as outdoor gatherings and other people's houses, as well as to interactions comprising more and different arrays of hosts and guests. Its recurrent feature, perhaps more than the strict division of its groups, was its orientation: this layout had a back and a front. The "back" area faced the house, maintaining passage to and from the interior. The "front" kept the guests closest to their entrance into the interaction in the position that was most visible and least mobile. These gradations of proximity may help us explain and qualify these frameworks. One could argue that the displacement of persons "across space" in these interactions does in a sense map peripherality, and perhaps then also visibility and mobility, onto space as gradients. However, thinking in terms of attenuation here captures the fact that the regimentation of distinct and displaced areas or of normative quantities of participation is not what is at issue here in the use of space. Instead, the ways those in different areas are present to the interaction make relative disengagement possible within engagement. Stretching out contact here makes such interactional frameworks in these domestic spaces the appropriate scenes where unknown men and women can socialize in ways that mark and transgress designations of peripherality.

Directing Gaze

Seating plans are not only characterized by their relation to the house on the whole; there are also normative patterns regarding the relative orientation of

seated participants within these layouts. Even in smaller groups that are not divided, the orientation of gaze within groups in the focal area, clumps, and even small or more unified interactions is also a way in which contact is attenuated in order to modulate engagement.

Within the three areas I described above, participants can sit near each other at more distinct angles or looser curves. Such an analysis of angles in seating position depends on an intrinsic orientation of the seated body. In these seating plans, the direction of the front of the body is the relevant sign of where one is looking. Different segments of the body are independently mobile: I can turn my hips separate from my trunk and swivel my chin separately from the movements of my eyes themselves. However, here the intrinsic front of the body and not the actual and fleeting objects of gaze provides its assumed directionality. I am not arguing that this linkage of intrinsic orientation of the front of a body and gaze as directionality is necessary or universal. For example, a body-language analyst in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* may locate desire in the positioning and direction of the feet in particular ("if his feet point towards you, he wants you!"), though in other contexts such signs are unimportant. As such, I can define a range of possible angles of gaze between proximate interactants without making reference to specific acts of looking one way or another.

In figure 4, a diagram of a representative interaction, Red and Blue are facing the same direction, whereas Purple is perpendicular to both of them. In this seating plan, their gazes are relatively directed: the direction of the fronts of bodies is clear, and thus the angle of gaze is determinate. Even if someone turns their head to directly gaze at another participant, the direction of their bodies continues to serve as a sign of their gazes as mapped into frontward orientation. In a circular configuration, however, participants face each other: the orientation of their bodies and gaze do not map together into a single direction (fig. 5).

My argument is that it is perpendicularity, the very determinacy of the angle of gazes in the first configuration, that is a device of attenuation. In the seating plan depicted in figure 1, the woman in the line and the male guests around the focal area assume such a perpendicular configuration. Furthermore, one sign of the distinctness of the clump is its very undirectedness of gaze. As a sort of circle, we had no orientation to the gaze pattern in the focal group. We had been in a circle on the patio before the guests arrived and moved into that configuration of focal area, line, and clump on their arrival.

This directedness of gazes is not simply a device to attenuate contact between genders. It is common as well in all-male interactions and in the focal areas of large mixed-gender participation frameworks, where men will sit perpendicularly

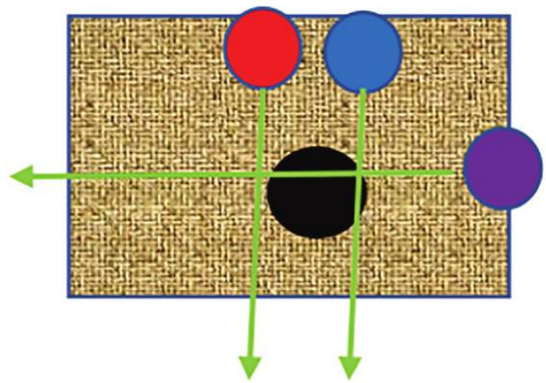

Figure 4. Participants do not face each other, rather the vectors of their gaze form perpendicular lines.

to each other, rather than in a loose circle, or directly facing one another. This would happen whether the interaction was outdoors, occurring on or around a rectangular mat, or indoors, around the corner or sides of a room. I recall many dyadic interactions as well, where the two participants would not face each other but rather sit perpendicularly even without the "guidelines" of built space. Even if both participants are sitting along the same wall or side of a mat, one will face the side of the other.

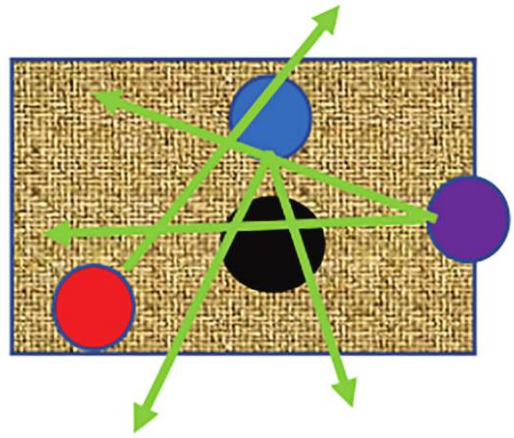

Figure 5. In a circle, the direction of the body does not have a clear direction with respect to other participants.

This is not to say that people will not ever sit facing each other; I did not hear anything about those seating positions as such being rude, or necessarily avoided. Nor was there any metapragmatic discourse that I heard advocating sitting in perpendicular fashion, except for an avoidance of "giving someone your back" (e.g., sitting in front of them). Yet, staring and looking were often focal points for expressions of discomfort in social engagement.

One rainy evening, we were entertaining a guest in the living room of the house, seated in perpendicular lines along the edges of the room. Even though we were sat in just this sort of attenuated layout, a woman made comments to me about the gaze of our guest. There was something odd and discomfiting about the evening that both she and I felt. Instead of describing this feeling, she turned to me and said, "his eyes are just like that" as if to address some comment of mine she felt but that I had not expressed. It is less important here to discuss what exactly the source of this discomfort may have been. What is important though is that she felt she needed to address it, and she was able to use gaze to disavow her own discomfort and to explain to me the discomfort that she supposed I felt. Furthermore, I record several occasions in my field notes when a woman would ask me or another:

kit dɪtħeyrokʿ tʿan
koh- hit d-ɪtħeyrokʿ tʿan
why-2FSG.PRO CONT-look.2FSG.IMPERF DEM
'What's with you, why are you staring at me like that?'

Direct gaze is spoken about as producing discomfort. Pointing it out was a way of trying to disengage from the other and even had a slightly aggressive tone, suggesting creepiness on the part of the looker.

In both of these forms of attenuation—seating position and the directedness of gaze—it is not operations on the distances between people that matter. Instead, it is the drawing out of the spatiality of engagement, the continuous stretching out of contact in terms of the obligation, responsibility, discomfort, danger, or involvement in copresence. This is not an operation on any content pertaining to talk, event-type, or participants. Instead it is an attenuation of how they are accessible to each other. This accessibility is, again, not simply a function of the initiation of a verbally mediated interaction but instead is a less specific question of how people are present to the same space. As such, the normativity of and importance placed on these attenuations of contact point to the vicissitudes of being present near others as a key dimension of Dhofari understanding of the demands and dangers of sociality.

Conclusion

As an analytical problem, the "space" part of social space is often taken as a given. Or, it is treated as like a white-walled gallery, displaying the colorful paint of cultural categories, social schemata, and emergent figurations. However, to take space as social means to understand the way that space is always implicated in possible and actual social encounters and, as such, is never neutral. Contact with social others depends on and calls into question the spatial arrangements of parties to an encounter. The devices of attenuating the space of contact in Dhofar—gaze, body movement, and position in participation frameworks—exemplify a form of attention and conventionalized practice pertaining to this spatialization, not only to the enactment of participant roles and identities. By situating these practices as spatial operations, I seek to foreground the attenuation (distortion and stretching out) of contact with others, not only these conventional indexicalities, as key forces within the experience and practice of sociality. This is not to say that standards of appropriateness or questions of reputation or identity are not at all present in Dhofar. Rather, these practices suggest that normative and appropriate sociality is also a question of manipulating and deforming contact. This is a question of how one is present, spatially, not only a way of being a kind of object or person.

In a study of Samoan ceremonial greetings, Duranti (1992) argues that the schematic organization of participants is both an enactment of spatialized social hierarchies and a site in which they can be negotiated. Positioning and posture in space is at issue in one sense as a way to maneuver within a hierarchical map of social relations. Spatial arrangement, withdrawal, concealment, and gaze avoidance are important for Duranti, as they are in the Dhofari case as well. In Duranti's case, it is the diagrammatic relationship between participation frameworks and spatialized structures of information across different "planes of reference" such as symbolic, social, or economic hierarchies that makes these semiotic operations on space effective (1992, 658).

However, Duranti's account of greetings does not only depend on the categorical division and schematization of space. He argues that patterns of gaze avoidance are connected to "restrained affective presence" and the management of confrontation, echoing local understandings of the need to attenuate the contact between individuals of great internal power over space (1992, 682). This points to something else that defines and fills the space where people come together. Interactional contact presents the dangers of the mana that one can be exposed to when facing others in such moments of greeting and ceremony, where sociality

as such is highlighted (sociability in Simmel's [1949] sense). Attenuation deals with interactional contact insofar as it entails such mutual exposures.

My interlocutors described encounters with others as potential sources of disturbance. They noted the emotional and corporeal excitations of being seen, being near, and being heard. They worried they were too attached to or dwelled too much on the opinion that others had of them. They described a responsibility to attenuate these possible relations, both in and around interactional encounters, as a project of remembering and contemplating their relationship with God and divine judgment, a soteriological dimension that I take up in other parts of my research. This does suggest, however, that the analytics of attenuation uniquely point to a notion of sociality in which the way one is near others is the key issue. These problems of contact are emblematized in verbally initiated interactions, though they also underlie other scenes of being present to others. The continuous presence to others that is attenuated as space sets the ground for further inquiry into other kinds of work, play, risk, and reward that may run between, around, and orthogonal to other semiotic processes of identification and gradation. The presence to others that attenuation addresses is a window to further explorations of the bodily, affective, linguistic, or otherwise interpretations of what the nearness of selves and others is actually made of.

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