

Beyond repair: Staying with breakdown at the interstices

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journals.sagepub.com/home/epd**Tatiana A Thieme** 

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Abstract

This article engages with the notion of ‘break-down’ as a way of going beyond claims to recover the discarded or practice repair. It experiments with ethnographic cross-pollination, setting vignettes from seemingly disparate field-sites alongside one another, to meditate on singular unfinished moments that together reflect wider dynamics of invisibility, negation, stigma and suspension at the urban interstices. From the peripheral neighbourhoods of Zaria, Nairobi, Paris, Berlin and London, these vignettes evoke shifting relationships to labour in precarious urban environments, where fleeting but situated codes, logics and deals have emerged out of seemingly broken urban worlds. Engaging with Stephen Jackson’s notion of ‘broken world thinking’ and Donna Haraway’s invitation to ‘stay with the trouble’, this article argues for staying with the breakdown.

Keywords

Breakdown, fragments, labour, precarious urban environments, ethnographic cross-pollination

Introduction: It’s not OK

This article is situated within a moment of profound reckoning – when reflecting on allyship and vulnerability cuts across personal relationships, teaching practice, research methods and modes of writing up ‘the field’ (Behar, 1996; Nagar, 2019). More than ever, the personal and professional are political, and all raise pressing methodological questions that apply to research practice during a time of suspended possibilities for *doing* fieldwork away from home. This invites a moment to sit with our field sketches and story fragments, as an *entrée* back into ‘the field’, to reflect on the measures of presumed proximity with our research sites and subjects, and on the particular intimacies and vulnerabilities that never got written up in core empirical discussions of more conventional academic writing.

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As a whole, this article is an experimental structured improvisation. It takes up the invitation to engage in a kind of ‘re-description in order to understand what might be going on while keeping an eye on clarifying resonant propositions’ (Simone and Pieterse, 2017: xiii), presenting a set of fragment-like vignettes of different material and human labour set in broken urban worlds. I explore some of the meanings, relations and entanglements that braid together seemingly disparate scenarios that took place during fieldwork conducted in different cities of the global South and North. I write about them alongside one another to reflect on the multi-situated intimate circularity of ethnographic encounters, dilemmas and vulnerabilities that carve out openings for *thinking with* more than one ‘problem space’, while recognising that each carries its own [...] incomparable singularity (Jazeel, 2019).

The first part brings together a set of literatures that form three theoretical meditations, ‘ending, stretching, limiting’ the *imagination*¹ to conceptualise the generative notion of *staying with breakdown*. The article then includes a reflection on ‘patchwork’ and ‘vulnerable’ ethnography, as both research method and writing practice. The empirical vignettes that follow focus on short ethnographic stories of fragmented predicaments in different field-sites, which each reflect wider (and in some ways shared) forms of breakdown. When mainstream systems do not work for the urban majority, the alternative logics that emerge inhabit liminal spaces, and assume particular dispositions that are neither just troublesome nor hopeful, but rather a fragile oscillation between the two. This liminal zone simultaneously rejects prescriptive aspirational futures and pessimistic outlooks, anchored instead in a ‘precarious present’ (Millar, 2018) that ‘stays with the trouble’ (Haraway, 2016).

More than waste – End of imagination

The paradox of modernity is perhaps most epitomised in the social construction of waste (Moore, 2009). Waste contains a constellation of meanings, ironically inversely proportionate to its common stigma as void of value, discarded matter, to be removed from view. Scanlan’s (2005: 5) definition of waste as ‘the phase in the life of an object’ offers an appropriate starting point for examining the embodied, discursive, political, spatial and temporal registers of urban life in all its disaffections, affirmations, losses and gains. Scanlan’s definition of garbage suggests that discards are marked less by their materiality than by their temporality, where the perceived loss of use or exchange value in an object does not infer ‘end of life’ but rather *the end of imagination*. An object may seem useless in one context, but as an object or set of materials, it may have a second or even third life depending on its circulation across time and space (Crang, 2001). One of the most notable ways to recover the discarded or defer ‘the end of life of things’ is through the practice of maintenance and repair. These can often be neglected forms of labour despite being vital to keeping ‘modern societies going’ (Graham and Thrift, 2007: 1). In their modest but crucial role in rendering the inner-workings of technical infrastructures going and visible, maintenance and repair have often remained under-valued. And yet, as Graham and Thrift show, it is precisely when things are ‘out of order’ that modes of ‘human labour and ingenuity’ are tested and at their most creative, precisely because it is not always obvious how to fix a thing in disrepair (Graham and Thrift, 2007: 4). Thus, repair and maintenance become vital metaphorical and material manifestations of how technical systems, as well as cities themselves, actually *work*, [as] socio-technical systems (Amin and Thrift, 2016) that are constantly at risk of breakdown. As repair might extend the life of an object or technological system, or bring these back to a ‘phase’ of functionality, [...] the validation of acts of maintenance and repair are associated with the promise of some return to utility. . That

which has broken becomes *ok*, if slightly more fatigued and vulnerable. But what happens when there is no fix? The next section considers what lies *beyond repair*, conceptualising the notion and process of ‘break-down’, as a modality of rupture, and another ‘phase in the life of’ things, people and systems that call, not for a fix, but for a ‘staying with’ (Haraway, 2016).

Staying with breakdown – Stretching the imagination

In jazz, a breakdown reveals the individual agency of an instrument, a moment to breathe and improvise within the parameters of the [musical] set. This *breakdown* is a time and space to experiment on one’s own terms, *stretching the imagination*, but with the anticipation that it will be folded back into the composite whole. Echoing the generative possibilities of musical breakdown, Stephen Jackson’s ‘broken-world thinking’ provides an avenue for rethinking the modes of *living with* all manner of unforeseen *breakdown*. Broken world thinking is an interrogation of industrial modernity and its presumption that *things ought to work* by asking, ‘what happens when we take erosion, breakdown, and decay, rather than novelty, growth, and progress, as our starting points’ (Jackson, 2014: 221)? Broken World Thinking provides,

an appreciation of the real limits and fragility of the worlds we inhabit – natural, social, and technological – and a recognition that many of the stories and orders of modernity (or whatever else we choose to call the past two-hundred-odd years of Euro-centred human history) are in process of coming apart, perhaps to be replaced by new and better stories and orders, but perhaps not. (Jackson, 2014: 221)

The notion of ‘coming apart’ is echoed by Amin Maalouf (2009) when he writes, ‘we have entered the 21st century without a compass’ (p. 11). About a decade after Maalouf’s assertion, clearly there isn’t a compass for navigating the levels and concentrations of uncertainty and breakdown that we face in our cities. At the same time, those who navigate spaces and moments of breakdown most acutely are often situated at the interstices, the margins, the peripheries. They always have been, and thus the ‘experts’ (Mitchell, 2002) that have shaped mainstream global forces and presumed a kind of coherence and modernist trajectory are – if not defunct – at least in a crisis of legitimacy. So to seek out alternative scripts of expertise and ‘forms of living’ (Millar, 2018) opens up ways of *seeing* and *listening* to the ‘haecceities’² of breakdown.

Haraway (2016) calls upon all living beings (or ‘critters’), to learn to ‘live and die well with each other in a thick present’ (p. 1). Her provocation is this: in tumultuous times, one of the presumably productive responses is to imagine safer futures. But Haraway (2016) calls for a different kind of response: one that ‘stays with the trouble’, because it ‘requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters and meanings’ (2016: 1). This idea of ‘staying with the trouble’ is a rejection of two familiar responses to the problems of the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene: the first is grounded in techno-optimism (e.g. technology will fix our ecological problems), which too often overlooks the ‘situated technical projects’ (2016: 3) and local knowledge of people whose perspectives have been under-valued in all sorts of ways. The second response that Haraway tires of is more difficult to criticise: it is grounded in a kind of fatalism (e.g. we’re fucked). Haraway calls for a different way of thinking about being in the world, alongside all critters and matter. She offers an alternative response to the troubled

times: the *Chthulucene*, a compound of two Greek roots that refer to a ‘timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth’ (2016: 2). In this *Chthulucene*, a different understanding of *kinship* emerges: not an attachment to biological ties and a reading of responsibility that extends to one’s biological kin, but rather a forging of *oddkin*, where connections between unlikely pairs and collectives are made across diverse lines of difference to cultivate a ‘multispecies justice’ (2016: 3) and ‘thick copresence’ (2016: 4). Notably, *staying with the trouble* is a disposition that gives permission for things *not* to work (necessarily) and not to be *fixed* (right away), at least not in the way that adheres to familiar and mainstream metrics of expertise (Haraway, 2016). Here the disposition of ‘staying with’ and ‘living within’ are particularly relevant in precarious urban terrains, which have always experienced processes of socio-technical breakdown. But there are situations that allow breakdown to be *stayed with*, to be inhabited and *lived within*. In conversation with the theme of this special issue on *dwelling in liminalities*, this article explores the following questions: How can these situations be noticed and described even if they are not fully understood, and how can they feature in our writing even if we cannot be certain about what we have come to know? How do we see, sense and listen for them?

Breakdown and trouble within the negative spaces – Limits of imagining the whole

The city may be cruel, carceral, over-policed and void of support structures for marginalised communities. It can also be a humanitarian terrain of mutual aid networks and endless acts of [...] fleeting kindness and solidarity in the most unlikely moments and spaces. The city’s corners and in-between spaces are a potential dwelling place – to stand, to pause, to rest, to loiter, to hide, to wait – however insecure, cold, hot, rough, putrid and exposed. In Bourdieu et al’s (1999) edited collection ‘The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society’, the urban sociological reading of urban precarity is rooted in theories of structural deprivation and dispossession, and by extension, depicts precarious lives as inadequate versions of the more ‘modern’, ‘formal’, institutionally recognised and well-resourced counterparts. But these analyses leave little room for *seeing and listening to* what lies at the margins and the interstices (Lancione, 2016). These are negative spaces: not in the sense that they are lesser than, but as in visual art, where negative spaces take their shape around and between the subject(s) of an image. Negative spaces circulate and form *around* the focal matter, sometimes *in spite of* the ‘main(stream)’ subject. Read one way, they may be deemed disposable or excess; but seen under another light, negative spaces are in themselves the subject of an image worthy of attention, even in their potential disturbance or distortion of the more familiar focal matter.

Negative spaces may be difficult to describe, measure, govern and compare, and thus they often become roped into familiar tropes – illegality, informality, underground, illicit, irregular, strange – defined by negation (Roitman, 1990). Yet, despite being potentially overlooked, these negative spaces are lifeworlds in themselves, where people, places and practices shape particular geographies of preoccupation about how ‘life’ and ‘a living’ are made when the city is the only place to be. And so unlikely resources, opportunities, and ‘oddkin’ (Haraway, 2016) may emerge, re-configuring urban life out of rubble or rubbish, decay and stigma. In these negative spaces, much of the labour involved appear as ‘fragments’, what Veena Das (2007) calls ‘a particular way of inhabiting the world, say, in a gesture of mourning’ (p. 5).³ These fragments reveal mundane but meaningful strategies to ‘pick up the pieces’ (Das, 2007: 6), a kind of labour inherent in navigating precarious urban

environments when bodies and matter deemed ‘out of place’ (Douglas, 2002) must *make place* in seemingly uninhabitable conditions (Simone, 2018). The *labour* is not merely a constellation of survivalist strategies but rather a formation of logics and practices that make something out of nothing – a mode of dwelling and hustling that form alongside and through diverse forms of breakdown.

What happens when dwelling takes place in contexts where remains and left behind traces of past *citylife* reveals paradoxical dispositions of simultaneous loss and openings? What becomes visible or knowable to a pedestrian passing by, to an observer taking notice, to an activist or volunteer trying to build ties, to an ethnographer seeking to understand the significance of ordinary moments within wider politics of precarity? Through a disposition of deep listening for the rests in sound and by squinting the eyes to see negative spaces, an ethnographer might capture fragments of social and material form. These might not be forms of ‘quiet encroachment’ that Bayat (2013) describes in his study of everyday minor political practices by ordinary citizens in informal settlements, nor ‘bold encroachments’ of street hawkers and squatters that Gillespie (2017) describes in Accra, Ghana. These fragments reveal, instead, a quiet politics of *staying with the breakdown*, for a moment, a sun-set, an afternoon, or even a night. To consider the temporal, social and material fragments of ‘broken worlds’ (Jackson, 2014) is to, in a sense, obsess over the significance of ‘ordinary affects’ (Stewart, 2007), and engage in experimental modes of ethnographic writing that leaves room for what is unfinished, and unknowable (Biel and Locke 2017).

The sensibility oriented towards *ordinary affects* offers a way of noting the significance in diverse and fleeting moments in different places that might be described as *unremarkable* or *uninhabitable* (Simone, 2018). Stewart (2007) puts the emphasis on the ‘ordinary’ as a ‘shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges, a scene of both liveness and exhaustion, a dream of escape or of the simple life’ (p. 1).⁴ Ordinary affects don’t lend themselves to linear trajectories of analysis (between ‘subject, concept and world’). This attention means considering the value of less obvious ‘empirical findings,’ ones that are not necessarily easily explained through familiar analytical frames. Vignettes that lie at the interstices of city-spaces and field-work tell different kinds of stories. These ‘ordinary affects’ are perhaps relegated to the margins of field-notes and left there to *be*, in suspension, as little levers for potential elaboration or left hanging raw. As jottings, they might become a seed of ‘evidence’ to construct an argument, or the preamble to the setting of a scene. But in this article they operate as little unfinished scenarios, beaded together to build an ‘idiosyncratic map of connections between a series of singularities’ that produce a ‘contact zone for analysis’ (Stewart, 2007: 5).

Ethnographic echoes and vulnerabilities

In my research journeys, what appear to be separate empirical contexts (for separately funded research projects) have given way to peculiar thematic and affective resonances across field-sites (Marcus, 1995). Going back to the asides – the margins on the page of field-notes about the margins of the city – has opened up modes of *seeing and listening* that make connections between ‘pressure points and forms of attention and attachment’ (Stewart, 2007: 5). I draw inspiration from aspects of Walter Benjamin’s (1999) *Arcades Project*, where his Parisian ‘fragments and snapshots’ revealed dreamscapes of lost times that had become imprinted into the bustling materiality of consumable urbanscapes. Perhaps paying attention to the fragments of dreamscapes written into different urbanscapes becomes a form of ethnographic escape (or return) that continuously ‘sends us back to rethink scenes over and over again’ (Stewart, 2007: 7).

The next section beads together a set of six seemingly disparate fragments and snapshots presented as ethnographic conjunctions. In their rendition, they may appear as stylised fragments, with the intention to ‘hit and pull’ (Stewart, 2007). They relay a kind of *anthropology of becoming* (Biel and Locke, 2017: x), with an insistence on the analytical value of the partial because ‘ethnographic creations are about the plasticity and unfinishedness of human subjects and lifeworlds’ and ethnographic writing itself presents an ‘unfinished view of people . . . in the process of becoming through things, relations, stories, survival, destruction, and reinvention in the borrowed time on an invisible present’ (Biel and Locke, 2017). My intention is to give pause and space to a set of asides that have stayed with me and might offer forms of ethnographic ‘mutual witnessing’ (Simone, 2018: 4).⁵ Setting these fragments of scenes alongside each other might offer an opportunity for sensing shared struggles along distinct material, affective and structural breaking points, while refraining from normative judgement of non-conformities. But as much as these fragments may reveal something, I am acutely aware that I took note of them from a specific epistemic and ontological vantage point. To co-exist for a window of time in the same space with an individual person or a more-than-human subject allowed me to see, hear and sense a ‘precarious present’ (Millar, 2018), but my ability to leave ultimately marks the ethnographic rupture that distinguishes *being immersed* in the field, and what one does in the aftermath of fieldwork encounters. To quote Ruth Behar (1996: 8–9),

[.] and so begins our work, our hardest work – to bring the ethnographic moment back, to resurrect it, to communicate the distance, which too quickly starts to feel like an abyss, between what we saw and heard and our inability, finally, to do justice to it in our representations.

Ethnographic representations are always curated in particular ways and for particular effects. My goal here is modest: I aim to arrange these vignettes in such a way that they might shed light on an ordinary and ephemeral encounter *in the field* that says something about what might have been going on *there* ((Geertz, 1988) , something about the relationship between ethnographer and interlocutor, between observer and object of study, and something about the expressions of breakdown in a place and time. Each vignette draws on ethnographic moments with individuals or physical environments which have experienced a fraught relationship with either the normative pathways of modernisation, the asylum system, the criminal justice system, the formal education system, or the formal labour market. They have been at one point or another classified as (or self-identify as) rubbish, rubble, refugees, migrants, prison-leavers and hustlers. Therefore, windows into precarious human lives are adjoined with snapshots of precarious material lives – empty buildings, discarded syringes, used condoms, empty single use coffee cups and tired musical instruments. Deliberately, the focal point shifts from more than human things to people and their ‘entanglements’ (Haraway, 2016), and from two cities in the global South, to three cities in the global North.

As I reflect on my positionality in these precarious urban contexts, I am drawn to Günel et al.’s (2020) notion of ‘patchwork ethnography’. Patchwork ethnography acknowledges the difficulties of undertaking long-term, intensive fieldwork alongside caring and teaching responsibilities in 21st century academia. Without losing the rigour or sensibility of ethnographic praxis, *patchwork ethnography* accepts that some fieldwork will take the form of ‘short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data’ (Günel et al., 2020: n.p.). Here I string together vignettes that reflect a particular relationship to the temporality of fieldwork I could afford to take at different intervals of my early to mid-career research journey starting from PhD student to Associate Professor.

My primary field-site, Nairobi, is where I was able to spend over a year to conduct continuous ethnographic research; my return trips since then have tended to be 2–3 weeks in duration. Since 2016, I have engaged with refugees in European cities, prison-leavers in the UK, and since 2018, I have collaborated with colleagues in Zaria, Northern Nigeria, to study the relationship between neighbourhood security providers and youth engaged in street crime. These different projects are thematically connected by a preoccupation with changing relationships to labour outside waged economies and formal institutional support in contexts of sustained uncertainty (Cooper and Pratten, 2014; Thieme, 2017; Vigh, 2006). Over the past seven years, I have tried to balance my ethnographic commitment and the need to adapt the logistical and methodological patterns of fieldwork. This has meant structuring shorter but repeated field visits to strategically more local field-sites in London and European cities in order to work around teaching and family obligations, accumulating punctuated access to a place over a period of time rather than a sustained period of time. Both the ephemeral and the long-term ethnographic relationships carry their own ethical implications on what it means to ‘leave’, ‘return to’, or ‘stay in’ the field. The key justification for reflecting on these four projects in this article is simple: each of the scenes presented has haunted me in ways that raise methodological dilemmas and ethnographic vulnerabilities (Behar, 1996; Nagar, 2019).

Deferred promise on a building site

On the campus of Ahmadu Bello University (ABU) in Zaria – Nigeria, a concrete skeletal structure of a large conference centre sits in the middle of an open field. The space seems completely unused, holding a kind of *deferred promise* for events yet to take place, as its grandiose proportions emit both a proud presence and an in-built obsolescence. It has no past, only stately paralysis, and yet the walls are already showing signs of decay given the exposure to the elements and the passing of time (DeSilvey 2017). On some days, a few labourers work on the site in slow motion. Sometimes even just one body is visible from the road, making a semblance of adjustments to the mammoth structure. The scene becomes a sort of site-specific performance of incremental progress that legitimises the building’s status as ‘in construction’. The sole labourer confirms that this is a place on its way to becoming a space of purpose. And yet for now, its use value seems like a distant asymptote, eliciting a number of speculative musings amongst pedestrians walking past, who debate in bemusement the hidden meanings behind the nodes of unfinished construction across the country. This scene is familiar to landscapes across Kaduna to Zaria, punctuated with the appearance of stalled construction projects including uninhabited dwellings that perform the intention to serve (or be imagined) as accommodation, but seem abandoned before even having been inhabited, and yet stand with a quiet persistence of hope.

During a visit to ABU in February 2019 to meet with research colleagues, we created a daily habit of ending the work day with a long walk just before dusk. As we walked past the empty conference centre as night fell and the shapes in the distance became more amorphous, the enormous structure seemed to form a sculpture in itself. As such, it could have been read as a critique of misallocated investments, quixotic plans of grandeur and future ambitions in the name of ‘modernity’ and ‘development’ that nevertheless sat empty. But in a way, this unfinished structure put in sharp relief the ordinary efforts observed in other parts of Zaria – to make do, make work and make space in settings, buildings and corners that might accommodate all manner of things but subvert the very purpose of the original intent. And so these different rhythms co-existed side by side, the unfinished plans and the

on-going subversions, converging *in place*, with pedestrians walking past, taking notice, or maybe not at all.

Rubble as repositories of possible accumulation

On 29 April 2016, an eight-storey tenement structure built along the river in one of Nairobi's most densely populated neighbourhoods collapsed. According to official reports, the accident killed 52 people, injured over 70, and for days up to 65 people remained unaccounted for.⁶ In Nairobi's low-income neighbourhoods, ironically the buildings that seem most sturdy and stable have sometimes been the first to topple over and turn into a scattered pile of rubble. In the building's collapse, the fragile infrastructure, lack of building regulation and home-grown waste economy were simultaneously made immediately (and fatally) apparent. As Kennedy lamented,

asking a landlord for a certificate of occupancy to check that the building is safe and meets proper regulation is your right, but no landlord takes you seriously if you request to see one. There will always be someone else who will be willing to rent out a flat without making any demands. (13 June 2016)

Following the collapse, the immediate reaction was two-fold: collective solidarity to help the affected families throughout the night and days that followed. But shortly after, there was also an immediate opportunism to recover reusable materials that encroached on the 'danger zone' the weeks that followed, once the dust had settled. Rubble quickly turned into revenue, ensuring that the high risks and potential loss (of life) associated with make-shift building practices at least yielded some returns. For weeks, scavenging of the debris continued, as fragments of a recent past were used for yet another cycle of tenuous (re) construction elsewhere. For a window of time, rubble was not merely debris that evoked loss of value, destruction of property and displacement. It formed a web of possible future accumulation and seeds of ideas about what could be done.

Kennedy and Lamb, who live nearby, showed me the area in June 2016. That morning, Kennedy had invited me to join his crew on their bi-weekly garbage collection rounds, an ethnographic privilege that had taken me five years to earn. During those early morning hours, I accompanied Kennedy and his team through the alleyways in Huruma, running up and down the eight-storey walk-up buildings to collect the burlap sacks full of household post-consumer refuse and replacing them with clean empty ones. Later that day, Kennedy and Lamb showed me the site of that infamous collapse. They narrated their plans to build a green urban farm along the river, something that could benefit local residents while providing an additional source of income for local youth groups involved in the homegrown waste and circular economy. In that moment, standing amidst the rubble, Kennedy and Lamb dreamt up a host of plans, which involved reading this rubble-scape with a double register: Both Kennedy and Lamb knew full well what it had destroyed (they were some of the first responders the night the tragic collapse happened). But they also saw what this space could become otherwise. Before rogue landlords with connections would rebuild another unregulated housing block, these Huruma youth, whose core livelihood depended on seeing the value of waste, imagined setting up a green farm along the riparian land, run by local youth groups as a form of shared self-provisioning (Kinder, 2016). Meanwhile, politicians, news anchors and concerned NGOs had come and gone, and the 'X' marks on the doors of buildings deemed 'unfit for habitation' and ready for demolition quickly got painted over as the buildings too close to the river continued to precariously house tenants

for whom frequent black-outs, broken water taps and unsafe tenement structures are always the price one pays for the proximity to the main city. As we left the site, the silence of the rubble transitioned into a crescendo of soundscapes coming from the main paths connecting the narrow labyrinthian alleyways to commercial activity. Life went on around the corner, and there was little time for commiseration.

Remains and echoes of temporary refuge

Outside the Porte de la Chapelle metro station in Northern Paris, a temporary humanitarian centre set up by Mayor Anne Hidalgo in 2016 known amongst migrants as ‘the Bubble,’ closed down in March 2018. This closure followed two years of chaotic, fragmented, but passionate humanitarian (and counter-humanitarian) activity responding to the rise of migrants coming into the city during the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe (Thieme et al., 2020). For over a year, this part of Paris had become a familiar field-site. Every few weeks, I took the earliest Eurostar possible and from the Gare du Nord train station take the metro to the Porte de la Chapelle Metro stop. My first port of call for each of those visits was the breakfast distribution station set up outside the Bubble, where an informal and ‘open to all’ volunteer-based collective was always willing to take any extra pair of hands. Buttering roles and serving coffees in flimsy plastic cups to migrants sleeping rough in the area, and catching up with familiar and new acquaintances who would form the volunteer crew that morning was a way to understand what was going on. The very rainy and bitterly cold mornings stick in my mind especially, as so many of the young men I served a coffee to didn’t have a warm jacket – shoulders raised and upper backs curved over, they would take the small cups into both hands for a moment of relief from the elements.

A year after the Bubble closed, I returned to this neighbourhood. Coming out of the metro station, it felt like a surreal archaeological dig through time. Walking from the metro station towards the repurposed warehouse where the Bubble once stood, I could still feel the police presence that used to stand a block away from the daily queues that would form at 56 Boulevard Ney, where the breakfasts and blanket distributions had become a well-known feature of this popular working class Paris neighbourhood. Over these last three years, Porte de la Chapelle had become infamous for parallel and intersecting precarious lives amongst both mushrooming makeshift migrant tent settlements and clusters of crack users and dealers. Without the Bubble, or the distributions, young tired bodies still slept rough under the bridges, but only to sleep 2 to 3 hours at a time, before needing to wake up so as not to freeze. ‘You finally fall asleep around 5 or 6am’, said Rahmani, an Afghan man in his early 30s who arrived in 2017. That’s when the cold is less bitter, and day breaks so it’s less dangerous to fall asleep, he explained.

A year prior, the makeshift camps in Canal Saint Denis, Rue Poissonniers and Jaurès had elicited alarm from all sides. The Paris pedestrians intolerant of seeing Decathlon tents sprawled across the pavements and idling young men sitting, standing, waiting and carving out improvised hang out spots disturbed both the bourgeois and humanitarian sensibilities of residents who found it upsetting to see so many young men having nowhere to go and nothing to do. The grassroots collectives were outraged too, trying to fill the gap left by what they perceived to be an increasingly malevolent state and an under-resourced municipality. These civil society groups working on behalf of precarious migrants were engaged in daily rants against the municipality, against the government, against the new immigration laws. Trying to combat what they saw as revanchist urbanism and the neoliberalisation of the welfare state, their daily operations inhabited a protracted sense of emergency care, head-quartered in their gritty squatted warehouses, mobilising via Facebook groups,

where they exchanged logistical information and made plans at speed to deal with the newcomers. Nocturnal marauders to seek out the most vulnerable rough-sleepers were followed by morning venting sessions online in humanitarian argot, punctuated with exclamation points and sad or angry emojis, and cigarette break rants on the street corners, where migrants and humanitarians shared a light.

Early 2018, leading up to the closure of the Bubble, was a mess, but it was vibrant, with everything coming to a kind of boil from all sides. A year later, the cityscape of Porte de la Chapelle had palimpsests of that recent past, but the silence and vacant spaces where the mess had taken place left an unsettled and unsettling kind of erosion. What remained put in sharp relief the left-behind traces of a shared precarity and solidarity, and the material and human left behinds now lingered with no sense that waiting until morning would provide a measure of (albeit palliative) respite from the cold. As I walked past the ‘little green door with the red heart’, as the founder of Migrants Solidarité Wilson used to describe the meeting place for volunteers, the space on the sidewalk that accommodated these daily breakfast distributions, ad hoc information outpost and free Wi-Fi hot spot and charging station was now empty, with only a few graffiti tags left on the wall reminding whomever cared to pay attention that there was something here once. As imperfect as it was, it was an attempt to ‘welcome’ those who had just had a horrible night’s sleep following a likely traumatic and exhausting journey. Now, a few meters away, a cluster of bodies moving in slow motion shared a crack pipe, huddled in the cold and passing the time. While I’ve stayed in contact with Rahmani and know he finally got his papers and has now found accommodation, work, and friends, I couldn’t help but wonder how many of the tired bodies sleeping rough were once part of the queue for the daily breakfast. The rumour amongst the volunteer collectives was that some of the vulnerable asylum seekers eventually turned to drug use, because it was common street knowledge that the first two hits were free. The pipe was a near-by alternative to what could feel like endless waiting for the chance to stay. The pipe, and that deep inhale, was a pull towards the life world of ephemeral escape from protracted displacement. Passing the pipe around was perhaps its own form of distribution and shared self-provision, as ephemeral as that was.

Nocturnal encounters in Paris

There is a night in Paris that has stuck in my mind. Close to the distribution station where I had volunteered that morning, around midnight I met and spent time with a middle-aged man in a wheelchair who lived in Porte d’Italie but came three times a week to Porte de la Chapelle to buy and smoke crack. Ceder came from Algeria in the 1990s, and ended up in a wheelchair following an altercation with police when he was chased down for stealing. That night I also spent time under the bridge of Porte de la Villette, where a community of Eritrean and Afghan migrants had set up tents along the canal. I met Honi and his brother, who had both fled Eritria but got separated en route, and had serendipitously found each other in Paris, under this very bridge. When I met them, their joyous and boisterous retelling of how they found each other seemed to momentarily counter the reputation of this makeshift tent encampment as a place of squalor, desperation and violence. After a while, they said they wanted so much to call home. They had had a difficult time finding a phone sim card that would work. I then remembered that I had a little skype credit left, and offered to make the call on my phone. As I held my phone with the speaker on, four of us huddled over the phone as Honi and his brother listened to the ring, and finally heard their mum answer, ‘halo?’. For a few moments, despite their tenuous dwelling under the bridge, they made their mother feel that they were completely safe, together. Later, I ran into Samia,⁶ who was

enraged at other humanitarian workers out on nocturnal maraudes trying to deliver blankets and other supplies. Samia warned me that they were ‘all gangsters taking advantage of refugees’, not giving them shelter and letting them die in the cold.

That night was a rife constellation of human travails and efforts to get through the night. There were tensions and disagreements, some that I could make out and others that I couldn’t. All the while, bodies huddled together under the bridge, around a small fire or near tents, and it was difficult to grasp what forms of kinship or *oddkin* were new and ephemeral, and which ones would endure, or who was willing to huddle together for warmth by night even if you couldn’t stand each other by day.

Amidst this drama, sex workers stood waiting for their jobs along the sidewalk with combined boredom and aplomb between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m., with puffy coats and bare legs in high heels. Around 2 a.m., near the underpass at Boulevard Ney, across the spot where a group of migrants slept rough (and were evicted by morning), I met Ceci, a Cuban born, Spanish sex worker. Our exchange started when I said ‘Bonjour’ walking past the bus stop where she was sat alone. When she replied, ‘Bonjour! ? C’est pas un bon jour. C’est un jour de mierda!’ (Good day!? It is not a good day. It is a shit day), I couldn’t help but stop, laugh and ask her if I could take a seat next to her. My feet were tired, and in that moment I was also grateful to be in the company of a woman, and she seemed happy to have mine as she waited. When I asked her name, as if letting me in on an incredible secret, she said, ‘a ti te voy a decir mi nombre verdadero . . . Es Cecilia Gloria de las Flores . . . Pero a los demas, les digo que soy la Condesa de la Mamada!’ (to you I will tell you my name, it’s Cecilia Gloria de las Flores. But to everyone else, I tell them I am the Countess of the blowjob).

Ceci was in her 50s, petite and fierce. As we talked, Ceci encapsulated a kind of tragicomic delivery that reminded me of scenes in an Almodovar film, where sex workers are often the wisest protagonists of the story – using dark humour and their own layered lived experience to make unapologetically blunt remarks that defy all sorts of conformities. We sat there together, as if both waiting for a bus that we knew wouldn’t come for another four hours, aware but ignoring the collective puzzled gaze of the male migrants and crack users across the street and down the block. Our banter felt like a shield against the dominant male nocturnal presence. In that moment, I wanted to listen, and she wanted to talk. She told me about her life, which was an amalgam of survivalism, resilience, abuse and pride in her ability to traverse the shit that was Paris for a precarious sex worker. She spoke of her Algerian partner she was in love with but who didn’t care about her, the fact that ‘these migrants are fucking up my business’, and why she was the smartest prostitute there was. ‘I’ve been beaten so many times I can’t even count . . . But I am a survivor, and I am the best “puta” you’ll ever meet.’ I asked her what a good night represents in her business. Without hesitation, she replied, ‘20 euros for a quick fuck around the corner, 50 if it’s in the guy’s car, and 100 if they want me to go to their place’. But she increasingly hated going to someone’s apartment, because it was getting too dangerous.

Timidly interrupting our conversation, a man from across the street who I recognise from that morning’s breakfast distribution came up towards us and asked, ‘Excusez-moi? Combien pour une pipe?’ (Excuse me? How much for a blow-job?). His query combined hesitant and broken French, polite phrasing, and knowledge of the argot term for oral sex. Ceci replied, with non-chalance, ‘20 euros’. He hesitated for a moment, before proposing his counter-offer, ‘Je peux te payer 5 euros’ (I can pay you 5 euros). Ceci retorted immediately: ‘20 euros, ou 50 sans preservatif’. The man walked off. I turned to Ceci impulsively expressing concern but also quickly tried to catch myself for sounding judgemental (who the fuck was I to judge?), ‘Ceci, me dijiste que te cuidabas y siempre te pretejes. No lo hagas sin preservativo.’ (Ceci, you told me you protect yourself. Don’t do it without a condom.) She

laughed at my naivety and said, ‘don’t worry, he can’t pay that much. I tell him without a condom and hike up the price, but I know he can’t pay.’ As we resumed our conversation about her business, she explained that she made up 600–700 euros on a good night. But she owed her landlord 750 euros by that Monday, and had two nights to make her rent.

Doing fieldwork at night amidst the ‘affective atmospheres’ (Shaw, 2014) of nocturnal spaces that were so transient, so palpably tense but also dense with solidarities and shared struggles, meant having questions that would remain unanswered, fleeting encounters that I wish could have been sustained, and impressions that have lingered and haunted my ethnographic mind, heart and page. I returned to that bus stop on my nocturnal walk-about in Porte de la Chapelle the following night and during my subsequent visits the months that followed. I always hoped to see Ceder, Honi and Ceci again, retracing my steps from that night. But I never saw them again. I hoped that was a good sign, but feared otherwise.

Musical breakdowns from camps to the city

Alongside my field trips to Paris between 2017 and 2019, I also spent time in Berlin, where a much larger group of refugees, especially from Syria, had been granted asylum and the right to stay (Thieme et al., 2020). During my trips to Berlin, I stayed with my brother, who happens to be a musician. He played in multiple bands, including a band called Orphé, a music ensemble fusing oriental and Balkan folk with contemporary tango and jazz. Orphé was made up of musicians with Syrian, Palestinian, German, Scottish and French heritage, and brought together diverse musical genres and associations with the notion of ‘home’, and what it meant to be ‘here’ or from ‘there’. Their musical assemblage was a metaphor for everyday negotiations of place in Berlin: where often mundane experiments evoked multiple elsewheres, where melancholy and nostalgia were laced with playfulness and hybrid musical sounds during rehearsals, and both small and big talk during the smoking breaks between sets. Inside jokes and complicities were shared in Arabic amongst some of the members, respectful inter-cultural curiosities and slices of biographical information were exchanged in English amongst the whole group. As I sat in on rehearsals and smoking breaks during my visits, I observed the dynamics amongst these age-mates in their mid-30s whose journeys defied the tropes of familiar ‘refugee crisis’ narratives. I sensed the different friendship formations in the room expressed through various moments of musical complicity and eye contact, punctuated nods and smiles as the harmonies either came together or didn’t. When gazes were turned to the floor, or the playfulness turned to pathos in minor keys, it felt like individually felt (and privately lived) precarities formed a shared solidarity and purpose: to make good music together, in the practice room or on the stage, and leave everything else behind for a moment.

All these relatively ‘new Berliners’ were making their place in this eclectic city. They each had experience with the infamous job centre where queueing and explaining felt like a monthly source of humiliation but obligation to the workfare state. They had each attended language training courses, with ambivalent states of simultaneous gratefulness and frustration. They all found their second-hand clothes on the streets or consignment shops. Each carried their musical instruments with care across the city, into the metro, up and down stairs, and draped themselves over their instrument when they played, like Salvador Dali watches over dried branches, in a collective moment of musical meditation. They brought with them their own affective sensibilities and shaped an atmospheric whole that defied the platitudes of those who would introduce Orphé as a kind of ‘oriental-western fusion’.

As Nafea explained during one rehearsal break, ‘Orphé reminds us of our homeland. But you see, four of us are refugees, but in music we are all the same.’ Eiman interjects, ‘But to be honest, if our music teachers back home at the conservatory knew what musical arrangements we were experimenting with, mixing oriental, tango and jazz influences, they would really disapprove! (he laughs) . . . For example, take tango. It’s close to our ears, the minor keys. But it’s not traditional in Syria. But Berlin is a good place for this kind of music. Maybe young people in other parts of Germany like techno or others like Western classical music. But here in Berlin, “*es gibt ein publikum für alles*” (*there is a public for everything*). And each of us in this band, we found each other. We had the same approach to music. The ideas are always meeting.’ For each band member, the sound of Orphé offered a kind of place-making, where a sense of home was relayed through evocations of particular melodies, but where experiences of nomadism were reflected in the multiple musical genres at play. The notion of home seemed far away and perhaps increasingly unfamiliar, but a sense of belonging was shaped through the ensemble at work. The sound was both intensely emotive, and deliberately unsentimental.⁷

Nafea arrived in 2012, and as he was slightly more settled than others who came later, he became an arrival node to his musician friends. Two of them stayed in his flat for a while.

Camps are harder than war, and I went out of the system as soon as I could, so I made sure that my friends also left the camps as soon as possible. The problem is you can’t do anything there. No study no work, no action.

Eiman had studied in Homs, but had to stop because of the war. He didn’t want to get pulled into the army, so he left. ‘The only people who can survive in Syria right now are either good at stealing or killing,’ he explained. He arrived in Berlin in August 2015. ‘Now this would not be possible. People who want to leave now can’t.’ Eiman spent a few days in Jordan, a few days in Turkey. But when Ramadan started and it wasn’t possible to make any money, ‘we had to leave. Walking, boat, sleeping in the streets . . .’ He arrived in Vienna, and worked as a composer and musician, but couldn’t stay. So he made his way to Berlin, and arrived as an asylum seeker.

It took me a year and a half to have my papers! I first spent 21 days in a shelter, and had a negative experience. My things got stolen, there was no privacy. Living in close quarters with people you don’t know . . . It was so hard. Plus you don’t just tell people about your problems even if you’re depressed or having a hard time. Because they also have had a very difficult time.

In 2019, Nafea and Eiman started working as social workers helping at risk youth get off the streets and out of trouble. During my last visit, Nafea told me of a group of local government officials who had been paying attention, convened a meeting with a few of the social workers, asking them for their advice concerning the growing number of vulnerable young refugees who seemed to be engaging in ‘anti-social behaviour’ and dropping out of the ‘ausbildung’ (apprenticeship) system that has attempted to embed refugees into the ‘productive’ workforce. These at-risk and hard to manage youth were caught between the gangs (known as Clans) of Berlin, and police quick to arrest them for petty street crimes. The Syrian social workers who ‘know their culture and what they’ve been through’ urged this group of politicians to listen and entertain alternative approaches to engaging young people in need of extra support to find work, find their way and feel like they belonged. An alternative experiment started that year, using creative methods to engage at-risk young refugees to co-design and build physical spaces that would become support networks,

offering housing options and mentorship for other vulnerable young people like them. One evening, Nafea explained this plan to me in detail. I started to understand that this was meant to be an alternative to the under-resourced and often dangerous youth hostels that currently existed, but it was also meant to be an alternative pathway, away from ‘Clan’ street life. Just before leaving Nafea’s flat that night, I asked him if the project had a name. He smiled, and to test whether I had paid attention and would get the irony, he said, ‘of course. It’s called Clan B’.

The delicate dance

In London, a prison-leaver speaks not of the place where he stays, but of the zone he is tied to. ‘I have a zone 2–3 budget but I need to stay in zone 1 so I can be close to my aging mother and my son,’ I was told in 2019. Prison-leavers’ movements across the city, and their life after prison involves a careful calculation, managing their license through their weekly meetings with their parole officer and performing a commitment to what has been termed in criminological speak ‘going straight’. All the while, they have to manage expectations and social ties with family and friends, figuring out which former social and kin relations now pose a risk of getting pulled into doing something that could get them recalled. Learning how to live *in the city* but outside of prison requires knowing how to make a living in such a way that appears legitimate even if it flirts with one underground economy or another. Whether explicitly illicit or slightly rogue, to make work after prison can involve a creative constellation of trials and errors, entrepreneurial ventures and side hustles.

I met Damien in January 2016 on the D-Cat wing of an inner-city London prison.⁸ Nearing the end of his sentence, I told him to contact me if he wanted to once he was out – pointing to my full name on my ID card hanging around my neck, knowing he would know how to find my contact information with a quick google search. In April 2017, he emailed me with a one-liner, ‘I’m out.’ We met up soon after, and every few months from then on. On one of these occasions, I gave him a book for his birthday, and during our following meeting asked him if he ever got around to reading it. I had come across it during that year of weekly Monday visits on the prison wing, a New York Times Bestseller called ‘The Other Wes Moore’. The book is a true story, about two boys with the same name who grew up blocks apart in the same low-income Baltimore neighbourhood. One grew up to be a Rhodes Scholar, army officer, White House Fellow, working in finance. The other is serving a life sentence in prison. The book draws a troubling parallel between these two biographies, told from the perspective of the Wes Moore who ‘made it (out)’, but it’s also pitched as a story about a generation of young Black men in the US, and what enables opportunity, choice and hope in the face of long-standing structural racism and inequality most severely pronounced in post-industrial inner-cities like Baltimore. I recalled reading the book at the early stages of my fieldwork on that prison wing, finding the book both profoundly moving and instructive for my reflections about the back-stories of the men I was meeting on the wing, and the relative arbitrariness of who ‘does time’ and who gets a lucky break. I assumed somewhat naively that the book might be inspirational to someone leaving prison and facing ‘another chance’ to make a life outside of prison. I thought that Damien had a choice, still, to be the ‘other Wes Moore’ – he was in his early 30s, he had been a school leaver but was smarter than most people with higher education degrees, and could debate his way out of anything. I thought he would like the book. But over time and through his stories, I started to understand the complications involved in managing life and parole outside of prison, and I started second guessing my enthusiasm and its relevance to Damien. The book’s *leit motif* was that, ‘you are not a product of your environment but

rather of your expectations.’ During one of our conversations, Damien nuanced Wes Moore’s refrain by saying, ‘the challenge is meeting the expectations others have of you, those you have of yourself, combined with what you think you would like to achieve and what you actually can achieve.’

Damien admitted that he didn’t have enough time to read anymore (‘I leave for work when it’s dark, come back home after dark’) and that he had started the book and read parts but not finished it. I guessed at that moment that the book hadn’t grabbed him, and as a kind of apology I confessed to him, ‘speaking with you has changed my reading of the book to be honest...’ Before I could elaborate, Damien smiled and interjected, ‘because you realised it’s not such a polar, like, polarised situation?’ Relieved and grateful that we could turn my clumsy book choice into a conversation, I exclaimed,

yes! Exactly. The book presents this story about being either in for life or out with opportunities to do anything if you get the right access or do the right thing... but I realise with your story that it’s more complicated. There is this in between world...

Using hand movements to connote the constant shift from one life world to another, Damien replied, ‘Yup. And I am always in between those two worlds...’ intimating that the in between state is partly about being stuck and partly about the inability (and dangers) of staying in place. Looking partly pensive and partly nonchalant, Damien downed his last sip of coffee, and as he set down the disposable cup, marking the end of his lunch break and the conclusion of our catch up, he cracked a cheeky smile and said, ‘It’s a delicate dance, T.’

Conclusion: Fragments in reach

As a kaleidoscopic ethnographic arrangement, these multi-situated vignettes have each played with different registers of the imagination – threatening the *end of imagination* (waste as the end of possibility), pushing to *stretch the imagination* (to stay with breakdown and resist the imperative to fix), and exposing the *impossibility of imagining a whole* (sensing through fragments). The order in which they are presented offers a kind of ethnographic cross-pollination.⁹

The first three vignettes recall walk-about with key interlocutors or on my own, set in particular landscapes of decay and destructions: the stalled construction and decay of a building that never was in Zaria, rubble following a building collapse in Nairobi, and the remains of what was for a time an outpost for daily DIY distributions to precarious migrants in Paris. But something lies amidst and under the decay, rubble and remains, for as DeSilvey (2017: 151) writes, ‘dereliction and abandonment are not unfortunate end points [...] but rather transitional states’. The next three vignettes recall particular conversations with individuals who defied, in that moment, their classification as precarious or peripheral to the mainstream urban economy. While the first three vignettes evoke situations and atmospheres on the move, the second three vignettes are pulled from fieldwork encounters that stood in place – under a bridge, on a bench at the bus stop, during the smoking break in between rehearsal time, over a squeezed lunch during a work day. Without intending to give centrality to my presence in the field, I have chosen not to write myself out of these stories as a kind of ‘elusive ethnographer’ (Hitchings and Latham, 2020), as these encounters were relationally constituted, both personally moving and methodologically provocative.

These six situational *fragments* compose a set of ‘singularities’ (Jazeel, 2019; Stewart, 2007) that are brought in alignment with one another to emphasise the relational, vulnerable

and situated modes of ‘patchwork’ ethnographic fieldwork (Behar, 1996; Günel et al., 2020), where fragments exemplify moments and states of breakdown that merit pause and even a resistance to over-theorising or comparing lifeworlds and conditions of precarious and peripheralised life and labour (Nagar, 2019). I hope that by letting these empirical patches breathe, as intimate ethnographic fragments that focus on different angles to more familiar stories, different kinds of conceptual openings might emerge. These fragments are quilted together with their jagged edges into a kind of ethnographic mosaic that tell multiple unfinished singular stories when read up close, but form a wider web of meaning when viewed as a whole. Read together, these vignettes say something about how to *see* what is going on in the negative spaces, suspending normative categories that might re-consider and re-describe what is too often depicted as merely informal, illegal, unwaged, unhinged, deceitful, dirty and shameful. Instead, these scenes form a kaleidoscopic breakdown, offering a different way of *seeing*. They emerged from the situated and relational intimacies of ethnographic encounters, bound together by their shared propensity to turn breakdown into ‘new sites of transformations’ (DeBoeck and Plissart, 2004: 230–231) that are simultaneously entangled in protracted trouble, pinches of hope and an array of dispositions too often eclipsed by a ‘single story’ (Adichie, 2009). Breakdown produces cuts and bruises on the body and on the material world. But it also gives way to new spaces for rethinking the unfinished, not as an opportunity for repair and nostalgia about the past, but rather an insistence on the mechanics and poetics of dwelling in the present, at the interstices, where one can stay for a little while and just be.

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Notes

1. Here I refer to the ‘end of imagination’ differently from the way Arundhati Roy uses it in her 2016 book (by the same title), where the ‘end of the imagination’ is associated with what Roy calls India’s “indefensible” nuclear tests.
2. Haecceity refers to the attributes that grant a thing or a situation its singularity. Gilles Deleuze uses the term to evoke immanence in relation to his conceptualisation of difference.
3. Veena Das (2007) conceptualises *fragments* not as a sketch ‘that may be executed on a different scale from the final picture one draws, or that may lack all the details of the picture but still contain the imagination of the whole, the *fragment* marks the impossibility of such an imagination.’
4. Similarly, Lauren Berlant’s work on *Cruel Optimism* talks of the (false) promise encapsulated in the justifications for grand narratives of progress (e.g. the American Dream in the US).
5. Simone (2018) writes about ‘an atmosphere of mutual witnessing’ amongst residents in popular neighbourhoods in *Improvised Lives* (p. 4). I found this notion of ‘mutual witnessing’ compelling for thinking through how fragments of scenes in one’s fieldwork could also engage in a kind of ‘mutual witnessing’ when set in conjunction with one another, tied by a common if contextually separate thread of shared *break-down*. . . 5. Nairobi building collapse: Samuel Karanja Kamau charged with manslaughter", BBC Africa, June 7th, 2016. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-36471295>
6. I am using a pseudonym here to protect her identity.
7. The piece called ‘Hanna Al-Sekrann’ can be heard online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pl-ifZSySK4>
8. I am using a pseudonym to protect his identity.
9. In George The Poet’s spoken word and social commentary, he speaks of *cross-pollination*, drawing from his experiences as a Londoner with Ugandan heritage who grew up on a council estate and studied Sociology at the University of Cambridge. I draw on his notion of cross-pollination, as a way of thinking across disparate field-sites to produce novel insights.

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