

PART I

Ruptures

“Shit Wages” and Side Hustles: Ordinary Working Lives in Nairobi, London and Berlin

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As we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century, a different set of optics is required to grasp the ways in which *work* is practised and understood in wage-scarce economies across the world. The urgency of this exercise is exacerbated by the overlapping crises that have marked this young century. In 2009, a year after the global financial crisis of 2008, Keith Hart and colleagues published an edited volume entitled *The Human Economy* in response to a growing interdisciplinary thirst for other ways of thinking and doing the economy. They argued that a human economy requires four key elements: a relevance to everyday life; an application to diverse situations; a recognition of plural needs and interests (beyond income and consumption); and an expansive commitment to addressing ‘humanity as a whole’ (Hart et al, 2010a, 5). Before embarking on the intellectual exercise of imagining what the post-crisis *human* economy could look like, the authors urge us to pay attention to what already exists: ‘The human economy is already everywhere. People always insert themselves practically into economic life on their own account. What they do there is often obscured, marginalised or repressed by dominant economic institutions and ideologies’ (Hart et al, 2010a, 5). More than a decade later, the signs of a post-crisis ‘human economy’ remain elusive. Instead, protracted uncertainty and austerity have become the norm as the

world grapples with the confluence of global financial crises and global health pandemics.

This chapter examines how people *make a living* in conditions of protracted uncertainty, and the ways in which the labour involved in doing so comprises a diversity of ‘cultural logics’ (Gidwani, 2008) and social and economic forms that are too often overlooked (Hart et al, 2010a). The chapter responds to recent invitations to ‘rethink work’ and broaden debates beyond what constitutes formal or informal labour, by encouraging ‘openness to plurality of form’ itself (Hart, 2009, 158). The aim here is to offer ethnographically informed reflections that might deepen our understanding of how diverse economic activities are organized and narrated through ordinary individual working lives in different regions of the world.

The popular idiom of the ‘proper job’ dominated conceptions of industrial labour throughout the twentieth century; a relic of Fordist labour arrangements that associated secure labour with particular temporalities and spaces of work legitimized through the wage (Ferguson and Li, 2018). The wage was thus directly linked to the visible organization of productive labour, demarcating social–economic relations along spatial and temporal boundaries and rendering labour ‘legible’ to the state (Scott, 1999) in contexts where the state was a central ‘unit of organisation’ (Amin, 2011, 2). Such conceptions of the ‘proper job’ also have shaped gendered representations of productive labour, positioning the ‘male bread-winner’ as the main household provider, in spite of the fact that unpaid reproductive and care work and ‘non–market transactions’ make up 30–50 per cent of economic activity across the globe (Gibson-Graham, 2008, 615). As the 1970s cleared the ground for a new phase of capitalist development often referred to as ‘post-Fordism’ (Amin, 2011), sites of industrial production splintered across space and time through processes of offshoring and automation. And yet, mainstream conceptions of work retained a normative attachment to the wage as the primary channel through which productivity and recognition could be obtained.

At the margins of wage work, however, it has become difficult to render ‘legible’ the relationship between labour, resources and time, and on whose terms work is made and unmade. One of the dominant ways of conceptualizing non-waged work since the 1970s has been through the concept of the ‘informal economy’, coined by anthropologist Keith Hart (Hart, 1973) in recognition of the diverse livelihood activities lying outside the purview of the state that had been until then disregarded by development economists (Myers, 2011). More recent scholarship, including by Hart himself, has been critical of the term’s static and

pejorative connotations, calling for a more differentiated understanding of the social and economic forms that comprise so-called informal economies (Roitman, 1990; Hart, 2009, 4–6).

Over the past decade, a new set of social and economic forms have proliferated through digitally mediated platforms. These have been celebrated by some scholars and practitioners who hail the ‘market efficiencies’ of digitally mediated ‘peer to peer capitalism’, which was seen as an opportune antidote to the economic downturn spawned by the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2008 (Sundararajan, 2016). Such platforms have become synonymous with flexible but insecure forms of ‘gig’ work, situated within the context of continued de-industrialized economies in the global North. Sharing features with the ‘informal economies’ often contextually associated with the global South, the ‘gig’ economy reflected changes in industrialized and post-industrial economies and, as such, operates within (and arguably perpetuates) an increasingly precarious labour market which normalizes protracted austerity and the continued erosion of welfare services employment (Waite, 2009; Standing, 2011; Meagher, 2018). This raises questions about the extent to which ‘learning to labour’ has been decoupled from class and formal education (Willis, 1981), and tied to the particular structures of opportunity that are made and performed in particular urban environments (Saitta et al, 2013; Richardson, 2015).

As postcolonial and post-industrial labour markets move synchronously away from wage employment, the future of work is increasingly and globally uncertain, especially for young people (Barford and Coombe, 2019). However, therein lies a paradox: livelihood activities continue to be understood in relation to the normative ideal of formal wage employment (or the ‘proper job’). Notably, while the International Labour Organization (ILO) has moved beyond the familiar rubric of ‘informality’, it continues to categorize a broad range of livelihood activities as ‘non-standard forms of employment’, including all work that is not continuous, full time and involving a clear relationship between an employer and an employee (ILO, 2018). And yet, it is clear that in the absence of a wage, or in the case of an insecure one, forms of ‘getting by’ will continue to proliferate even (and especially) in conditions of austerity, adversity, and resource scarcity (Saitta et al, 2013; McKenzie, 2015; Barford and Coombe, 2019).

How might we then re-describe modes of work that fall outside of the confines of ‘standard’ employment because they are neither continuous nor full time, nor involve a clear contract with an employer? Modes of work that may escape state regulation, but which reflect economic

forms that have existed for millennia? Perhaps rather than seeking to classify these diverse income-generating strategies as either ‘informal’ or ‘gig work’, we might return to an older expression – ‘Système D’ – used in North and West Africa to connote systems of ‘débrouillardise’ (to find a way) (MacGaffey, 1991; Neuwirth, 2012). We might also turn to the work of feminist geographers including Gibson-Graham (2008), who deploy the concept of ‘diverse economies’ in order to draw attention to the multitude of economic forms that make up ‘real economies’ in practice (MacGaffey, 1991). These scholars call for an expansion of ‘the space of the ethical and political’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985 cited in Gibson Graham, 2008, 615), inviting us to bring an ethnographic sensibility to the norms and values that inform particular ‘cultural logics’ of work (Gidwani, 2008). These logics may involve ‘having multiple things on the go’ if economic and social terrains are persistently uncertain (Cooper and Pratten, 2015; Simone and Pieterse, 2017), including potentially engaging with forms of work that might be regarded by mainstream institutions as demeaning, hazardous or ‘illegitimate’ (Hart, 1973; Saitta et al, 2013). For example, as Millar (2018) shows in her ethnography of *catadores* (waste pickers) in Brazil, working ‘on the dump’ may be regarded as a last-resort livelihood strategy for the downtrodden, but it is also agentic work that provides forms of flexibility and ‘relational autonomy’ that are valued by those whose everyday lives are mired in emergencies and uncertainty that need tending to and who cannot afford to be constrained by inflexible waged employment. Her research thus provides an example of how suspending normative classifications of work might expand existing fields of possibility and a way of *seeing* a range of ‘other economies’ (Hart et al, 2010a, 9).

Thus, in order to reflect on the transition away from formal wage employment, we need to reconsider the relationship between people and work, and return to the foundational question of how people ‘devise their own means of survival and sometimes of prosperity’ in diverse economies (Hart, 2010, 152). Now more than ever, we need to move beyond binary classifications of work as either formal or informal, licit or illicit, waged or self-employed in order to better understand the complex realities of contemporary working lives, especially at the urban margins (Lancione, 2016). As labour uncertainty and in-work poverty expand across diverse geographies, the ‘side hustle’ becomes a pragmatic response to increased economic disenfranchisement. I argue here that side hustles operate as flexible ‘top-ups’ to insecure wages or insufficient ‘main’ streams of income. They are simultaneously

creative and ambiguous in form, often operating outside the scrutiny and legibility of institutional association.

Side hustles

What might a Kenyan woman whose place of work and belonging is known locally as an urban ‘ghetto’ have in common with a London-based prison leaver transitioning back into life and work after prison, and a Syrian refugee making his way in Berlin as a ‘new European’? In this chapter, I explore the interconnections between three ordinary ‘working lives’ at the urban margins of very different cities (McDowell, 2013). I show that in each case, the art of making a living involves the pursuit of multiple sources of income and diverse and often paradoxical forms of institutional recognition. It entails forms of unlikely accumulation and spontaneous loss; efforts to *make* work when ‘proper jobs’ are not obtainable. My aim is not to present ‘simplistic assumptions of convergence’ (see the Introduction to this volume) but rather to think across field sites and working lives that are, as Linda McDowell (2013) would say, ‘ordinary but remarkable’ in ways that trouble the presumed division between working lives in the global North and global South.

Against a global backdrop of labour uncertainty, an increasing number of working lives are characterized by occupational straddling, side hustles and back-up plans. The experiences of my three interlocutors shed light on the ways in which the practice of making a living at the urban margins is often contingent on combining low-end wage work with various forms of ‘hustling’. I refer to hustling here as an urban practice that lies outside normative social institutions, involving a constellation of deals, opportunism and unlikely accumulation in conditions of scarcity, marginality and adversity (Thieme, 2018). It is thus a form of work that emerges amid the erosion of wage employment. For example, Ned Polsky (1967) encourages us to think about the gambling practices of low-wage workers in the underworld of American pool halls as a crucial composite of their livelihood activities. Polsky (1967, 92) refers to the hustler’s search for a job that would permit him to ‘drop into the poolroom’, a kind of ‘moonlighting’ that supplements the meagre wage with an ‘extra bit on the side’ and also allows the hustler to ‘grab whatever action might present itself’.

As the stories of my interlocutors demonstrate, this ‘side hustle’ or ‘extra bit on the side’ provides a crucial mechanism of support beyond the precarious waged job or workfare subsidy. Hustling constitutes a response to circumstances in which individuals are cut off from formal institutional support in a context of labour insecurity, and experience

stigma associated with their social, economic and/or legal status. It reflects an ontological uncertainty: hustling is at once reflective of particular forms of dispossession and injustice and suggestive of openings for new ways to reimagine and remake work and livelihood. It is this paradox that positions hustling as a condition of urban life that works with, but also confronts, existing economic, political and social structures and (dis)orders.

In their work on Kinshasa, De Boeck and Baloji (2016, 16) describe the forms of ‘closure, junction and seam’ that urban inhabitants harness in order to turn otherwise ‘impossible circumstances of living’ in the city into a possibility. The metaphor of ‘suturing’ connotes a continuous process of sealing and stitching. Like hustling, suturing represents an attempt to imagine alternative futures while contending with the constant (re)opening of wounds. Suturing thus compels us to pay closer attention to the ways in which work ‘is imagined and lived’ in cities around the world (De Boeck and Baloji, 2016, 17). It points us to the diffuse forms of knowledge, barriers and dreamscapes that animate the everyday lives and imaginaries of individuals at the urban margins. In their life worlds, particular forms of ‘social navigation’ (Vigh, 2010, 420) take place where, ‘people invest a great deal of time in making sense of and predicting the movement of their social environment, in clarifying how they are able to adapt to and move in relation to oncoming change’.

The chapter challenges normative understandings of ‘productive labour’ in an effort to ‘re-describe’ actually existing practices of work in diverse urban economies (Gibson-Graham, 2008; Simone and Pieterse, 2017). It foregrounds the experimental and ordinary undertakings that ‘make’ work in potentially subversive ways in contexts where wage employment is absent, insufficient or degrading. I present the vignettes of three ordinary working lives in Nairobi, London and Berlin in order to make three key points. First, I demonstrate the entanglement of multiple economic practices and social navigation that make up a working life; practices that often *combine* formal waged labour and ad hoc hustle, challenging binary conceptualizations that reduce work to an ‘either/or’ category (formal/informal; waged/precarious). Second, I shed light on the ways in which people labouring on the margins of the urban wage economy encounter and articulate their precarious economic practices through a cultural language and ‘logic of work’ (Gidwani, 2008) that reveals agentive struggles to navigate uncertain terrains with dignity. Third, I show how these different practices and logics produce specific social and economic forms and functions (Hart, 2009); namely, accumulation, redistribution and performance.

In the next section I introduce three interlocutors, Eliza, Damien and Nafea, through vignettes of their ordinary working lives in Nairobi, London and Berlin, respectively. I present these vignettes in order to illuminate a question posed in my recent writings on the ‘hustle economy’ (Thieme, 2018): to what extent does hustling reinforce pre-existing forms of exploitation and dispossession in ‘impossible’ urban economies (De Boeck and Baloji, 2016), and/or to what extent does it constitute a generative form of work in its own right?

Hustling as place making in Nairobi

Eliza was born and raised in one of the largest and oldest informal settlements in Nairobi. When I met her in 2009, she was 24 years old. Elsewhere (Thieme, 2016), I have written about her experiences as a young working single mother navigating the largely male-dominated informal waste economy in Nairobi. Waste work was her primary source of income for many years. During the early 2000s, development actors seeking to engage the growing youth demographic in urban ‘slums’ noticed that neighbourhood-based informal waste collectors operated in groups and occupied particular territorial zones. Like many of her generation who grew up during the rise of ‘NGOisation’ in Nairobi, Eliza became a savvy navigator of the development and social business sectors seeking to harness the entrepreneurial skills of youth groups across these largely underserved urban neighbourhoods. By 2016, Eliza’s portfolio of income-generating activities included a ‘day job’ with a sanitation social enterprise, where she worked as a ‘field officer’. Here she was paid a wage and given a uniform; two markers of professionalism and formal employment in Nairobi. But through my conversations with Eliza that year, I understood that her working identity was not tied to her ‘day job’. Instead, she self-identified as a ‘hustler’, where survival and recognition were understood to be contingent upon a combination of improvised income-generating activities, unpaid social activism work, and an active presence on social media (Facebook especially), where she would often proudly sign off with the hashtag #ghettoGal. A key manoeuvre in Eliza’s everyday ‘social navigation’ was a concerted effort to ‘be seen’ in her neighbourhood when it mattered. Eliza’s hustle thus combined low-end wage employment with ad hoc self-provisioning in the neighbourhood economy and various forms of social activism and reciprocation that fed her street credibility – activities that provided a ‘back-up’ or safety net in the context of economic uncertainty.

Work that takes place outside of formal professional categories and qualifications is often characterized as ‘low skilled’. However, the work of hustling in Nairobi requires a broad range of skills and forms of tacit knowledge. Young people born and raised in Nairobi’s ‘slums’ create their own cartographies of the city, translating between different vernaculars and institutional spaces; calling themselves ‘entrepreneurs’ when it resonates with social enterprise investors, while self-identifying as ‘hustlers’ back on the stoop in order to foster a solidarity grounded in the shared experience of joblessness, opportunism and hope. In a context where opportunities are contingent on being in the right place at the right time and where ‘people are infrastructure’ (Simone, 2004), young people are at once always on the move, and yet can be found standing in place at particular times of the day, when it makes sense to be seen at the ‘baze’ (base).

Eliza’s commitment to hustling was born out of a recognition that social enterprise gigs come and go in Nairobi. Despite periodical accolades and pay raises, Eliza expressed a dislike for the lack of input she had in operational decisions. She explained:

‘You see I used to be field officer around my baze in Huruma and Mathare, where I know people and they know me. Then they said, Eliza you go to Mukuru. But you see that is a place where I am not known and it is more difficult to feel safe and get people to listen to you, you get? But me I know as long as I’m field officer, I have to go where they say I need to go, and I have targets I need to make. I have ideas, but the decisions they’re made by the sonko (boss).’¹

Eliza took her job and her perception of the organizational hierarchy very seriously. She also knew having a wage was unique for people living in her neighbourhood. But she increasingly expressed cynicism for the stalled and perhaps overly predictable trajectory of this job, where she would at best remain a foot soldier within the organization – that is, as long as she met the ‘targets’. At the same time, Eliza’s scepticism about her day job enabled her to hold on to a narrative of *hustling*, which in contemporary Nairobi meant finding a way to make a living but also being sly about your politics and your moral modes. As a woman, she also knew that talking about your hustle could be usefully ambiguous, and even a form of security, as she explained at her flat in Huruma one evening in 2017: “You see, when I see those boys who snatch [steal belongings] at night, I walk alongside them and

I say, ‘*Hey maboyz, mnafanya hustle? Mimi pia ninafanya hustle*’ [‘Hey my boys, are you guys hustling tonight?’]. Me too I’m hustling.”

Eliza explained to me that in this moment, the ‘boyz’ thought she meant that her hustle was sex work, a common form of ‘night hustle’ among some women who are still out after dark. Identifying as a fellow ‘night hustler’ was a form of ‘bluffing’ (Newell, 2012) that afforded her an ephemeral sense of safety through performed camaraderie and shared struggle. It was in recounting this story to me that I also sensed in Eliza’s storytelling that this bluff was more than mere deceit: it was a way of forging a connection and affinity with the “bag snatching boys” in the after-hours, because as she put it, “you know it’s a real struggle right now, and when the day hustle goes down, the night hustle goes up.” Her story also underlined the moral codes of the night time economy, where nocturnal hustlers operate side by side, respecting each other’s craft. And it was not until later that I realized her story refrained from judgemental remarks on the economic form that is sex work or even bag snatching. These were understood as viable modes of getting by under the circumstances. “Even *matatus* let sex workers take a ride for free, because they know she is at work so they give her a break.”

By day, Eliza straddled these different life worlds, her uniformed self hopping on a *matatu* to ‘go to work’ but knowing that the duration of the job was always uncertain. But Eliza also recognized the ‘social thickness’ (Ferguson, 2006, 198) of the hustle as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, she explained, “For us youth, opportunity is [the place] where you stay ... you can hustle in a place where you stamp your authority.” Here, place-based recognition – or street credibility – was key to being able to ‘make things happen’ through hustling. On the other hand, Eliza invoked a kind of success penalty when someone is perceived to be ‘doing too well’, explaining that people are expected to redistribute what they make to others whose hustle “is down”. Eliza thus managed her income very carefully; paying for her children’s school fees, starting small businesses on the side, upgrading her living situation one moment, but being ready to downgrade as soon as money was tight. As she put it, “It is best that people don’t know where I stay exactly.” In 2017 Eliza was staying on the top floor of an eight-storey tenement walk-up in one of Nairobi’s densest low-income neighbourhoods. She joked that it was the “penthouse”, with perks including anonymity and no one’s wet laundry dripping on hers. However, hers was always the first floor to run out of water.

Today, Eliza’s hustle continues in different forms: she lost the waged job in 2019 because targets were not met that year. But through the

connections she made with various NGOs and social enterprises in the last few years, she has been able to get contract work for shorter periods. She has also moved out of the “penthouse” and now resides in a flat on the ground floor of one of Huruma’s tenement buildings, able to point out the perks of living “near the action” of the street. All the while, on Facebook, Eliza uploads selfies of prosaic moments “at work” in all its different iterations – from the office to the street – still signing off as ‘Ghetto Gal’.

Side hustling in London

Damien² is a prison leaver whom I met in London in 2016 while conducting fieldwork on the journeys of prisoners nearing the end of their sentences (Richardson and Thieme, 2020). Over 60 per cent of prisoners in the UK are under the age of 40 (Sturge, 2019, 9). Like many other young male prison leavers in London, Damien took up a job in the construction industry. As another prison-leaver once explained to me: “Construction companies don’t care what your past is. As long as you can graft, they’ll give you a chance.” At first I was pleased to hear that Damien had found a job so soon after his release. But upon meeting Damien for the first time outside of prison in 2018, I learned that this job was contracted through a temp agency which took 40 per cent of his wages. Damien was initially housed in temporary hostel accommodation; a post-release ‘get back on your feet’ housing scheme that typically lasts six weeks. However, he subsequently struggled to find a stable place to live and did not qualify for council housing as an ‘able bodied adult male’ in the eyes of the austere state (Dowling and Harvie, 2014; McKenzie, 2015). Paradoxically, he was told by his probation officer that the only way he would qualify for subsidized housing was if he gave up his job, which Damien was not prepared to do. Instead, he told me of his plans to earn additional money ‘on the side’ of the construction job. All of his ideas for how to ‘top up’ his meagre earnings to cope with the financial demands of life in London and provide for his dependants transcended conventional normative and legal boundaries, reproducing a cycle of reconviction. At the time of his release, Damien’s dependents included a one-year-old son and his ‘baby mama’, a 12-year-old son from a previous partnership, and his current girlfriend.

Tatiana: Do you know of anyone who did time, got out and struggled like you now to find decent paying work, and eventually [went] ‘straight’?

- Damien: Yes, but they didn't go straight the whole time.
- Tatiana: So you mean you get out, realize you can't get make enough money with the shit job, get back into some crime to get a bit of extra cash or whatever, and then you go back 'straight'?
- Damien: Exactly. And you make sure that the bit where you went back into criminality, you just don't get caught.
- Tatiana: Are there any programmes that help guys like you who are business minded and could use support for starting a business or whatever?
- Damien: Yeah, but they only target 19–25 year olds. If you're older like me (30), no one gives a shit. You're on your own.

Damien was caught in a grey zone. He did not qualify for any support for housing or entrepreneurship. So he decided to go it alone.

When I met Damien six months later, he was still in construction. He had been promoted, but he said he was still making 'shit money' that barely exceeded minimum wage (£7.50 per hour). He then introduced his 'side hustle': "You see this is the thing. I work over 65 hours a week in construction. It's a legit job, right? But I work my ass off to basically just survive and exist. And I'm not interested in just existing. I want to live too. So I do other stuff on the side ..."

Damien explained that he had started to rent out the council flat of a friend who was still in prison and who would stand to lose the flat if he defaulted on payment. Damien paid the landlord directly and sent his friend an extra £100 each month. In the meantime, he received a daily rental fee from a self-employed sex worker from Eastern Europe,³ Zofia, who ran her business out of the flat. Damien explained that because this was a one-person business operating out of a private flat, it was not considered a brothel. He thus did not consider his role to be that of a pimp. He collected four times as much rent as he paid to the landlord. Meanwhile, Zofia covered the daily rent through a single hour of sex work and retained the rest of her earnings. She went back to her home country every month, where her income helped to support her family. Damien explained: "These [Eastern European] girls choose to come 'cause they know they can make good money here. They come and work for a few weeks at a time, then go back. They don't have pimps, they look for safe places to rent a room or a flat, asking around who they can trust ..."

He noted that while hotels were exposed and risky, private rental flats provided a safer and potentially lucrative environment for all parties. If all went to plan, Damien emphasized, everyone made money. The landlord received a 'bit extra' on top of

their standard rent, the middleman (Damien) extracted a surplus rent, which enabled him to send his friend £100 and still have a nice sum left, and Zofia made a profit after her first hour of work.

As I listened to Damien's story, I tried to suspend my own preconceived ideas about the kinds of transactions he was describing. I wanted to understand the moral and economic logics that underpinned the claim that his side hustle was fair because everyone was able to make their share, and thus retain a sense of agency within a broader context of austerity and insecurity. In the absence of Zofia's testimony, it is difficult to make any assertions about her agency in this arrangement. And certainly, this example could be portrayed as a straightforward story of exploitation in the unregulated economy involving a shady landlord, a male British prison leaver, and a precarious migrant sex worker. But it is worth noting that like Eliza, Damien made no judgement of Zofia's line of work; rather, he expressed concern for sex workers operating 'without protection' and at the mercy of trafficking rings or exposed to the risk of street violence. His account thus sheds light on the forms of 'social thickness' (Ferguson, 2006) and mutual understanding born out of shared experiences of in-work poverty that have consigned people such as Damien to merely 'existing'. His account revealed that money was accrued by each participant at each stage of this 'value chain' without necessarily dispossessing another. It was all legally and normatively questionable, and yet the logic that transpired was one of reciprocity and 'shared self-provisioning' (Kinder, 2016, 11).

Much like Polsky's (1967) description of moonlighting, Damien's 'hustle' served as a form of self-provisioning that 'topped up' his income from low-end wage labour and provided him with a safeguard against in-work poverty. At the same time, there was clearly some value in continuing his 'day job' insofar as it sustained the narrative of 'going straight' propagated by the criminal justice system, and thus reduced his chances of going back to prison. Despite the increasing difficulty of securing a 'proper' wage-earning job, the UK criminal justice system continues to associate the wage with a commitment to 'staying straight', thus ironically compelling prison leavers like Damien to 'top up' their low wages with other (illicit) activities.

Damien spent much of his 20s in and out of prison. During one of our conversations, he remarked, "I don't mind prison. I know how to do prison. But it's just a fucking waste of time." Well versed in how prison 'works' and convinced that it was 'a waste of time', he was determined to stay out this time, albeit on his own terms. Navigating the criminal justice system in the tenuous post-release period meant a double performance of sorts. He adhered to a particular institutional

performance of ‘going straight’, which (as for so many prison leavers) involved engaging in low-end wage work that limits one’s ‘existence’, in Damien’s words, to mere ‘survival’. In the meantime, the side hustle became a crucial form of self-provision and affirmation, rooted in the familiar terrain of what he called ‘doing road’, which had become his life world since the age of 12 when he left school. ‘Road life’ is an emic term deployed by Black British youth in inner cities which refers to particular forms of ‘street culture’. It is an amalgam of social and cultural repertoires as well as various ‘underground economies’ in the absence of mainstream economic opportunities (Venkatesh, 2008). ‘Road life’ is associated with youth living on council estates, where they might be both perpetrators and victims of crime, often in response to structural forms of exclusion and precarity in relation to mainstream education, housing and employment (Bakkali, 2019; White, 2020). Navigating ‘road life’ and ‘straight life’ for Damien involved a constant calculated performance to different audiences and at different moments in his life. During the week, from 7am to 7pm, he had to appear a serious ‘grafter’. On the street, he pretended he was broke to avoid excessive attention, especially from police who are known to over-police young Black men on probation. In the clubs on Saturday night, he wanted to look good and make sure the right people (potential customers) knew where to find him. But he was also a man in his early 30s who just wanted to enjoy the urban night life and the ephemeral, performative conspicuous consumption that went along with it (Newell, 2012); the freedom of moving around the city after conventionally marked ‘working hours’ after years in prison where all night hours were unequivocally bounded to the cell.

Hustling for papers in Berlin

Nafea arrived in Berlin in 2011 as a 28-year-old Syrian political refugee. When we first met in June 2018, he explained the graft involved in navigating the ‘integration system’ for refugees in Berlin. Like other refugees making their way to Europe during the Syrian conflict, experiencing borders took on several temporal and spatial registers (Darling, 2017), from the challenges of moving from the ‘camps’ where refugees wait in ‘protracted displacement’, to navigating the city where getting by combines moments and dispositions of waiting, imagining futures, and ‘urban negotiations’ of various kinds (Darling, 2017). He recalled making use of the refugee camps on the outskirts of Berlin during the first few months following arrival. Though carceral in several ways, the camps provided a source of basic security

and sustenance in addition to introducing him to “so many different people”. He explained: “I had nice relations with all, I wanted to understand them.” But there were no livelihood opportunities in the camp, and Nafea could not stand “being there without action”. He came to see the weekly *Taschengelt* (pocket money) provided by the German government as a trap that rendered life in the camp a kind of Sartrean ‘No Exit’. This weekly allowance – a kind of state-sponsored subsidy that required recipients to return to the camp every three days – was not sufficient to cover the costs of living independently in Berlin and thus consigned refugees to a state of suspended dependency.

Nafea explained how he sought to acquire economic independence by moving between the camp and what he called Berlin’s “black employment market”, finding work first as a cleaner, then as a cook. Through these jobs, Nafea began to build up his ‘Vitamin B’; a colloquial expression referring to the various ways in which individuals can benefit from mutual cooperation, contacts and support (*Beziehungen*). The forms of income and social connection provided by the jobs enabled him to gradually detach himself from the camp and the *Taschengelt* it provided. He cycled between different jobs and temporary accommodation, and soon became entangled in Germany’s ‘workfare system’, which requires refugees to take part in a series of labour arrangements with local municipalities and companies who offer ‘*Ausbildung* (apprenticeship) schemes’ in exchange for the right to stay.

Professional training has long been central to the celebrated *Ausbildung* model in Germany, but a combination of increased numbers and austerity measures since 2015 have conspired to create the *semblance* of work, while often compelling refugees to participate in unwaged and/or part-time, low-skilled work, similar to that experienced by Damien in London. Some of these casualized forms of work were cynically referred to as ‘mini jobs’ that paid as little as €1 an hour, often for no more than five hours per week. These mini jobs were allowed to persist because government subsidies effectively incentivized unliveable wages. As one social worker put it, it became a form of ‘structural demotivation’ for many refugees, who expected or hoped for eventual waged work. For Nafea, the *Ausbildung* programme was important not for its provision of decent work, but for its promise of legal rights and social welfare. Indeed, the contract that underpins recent integration policies in Germany requires refugees to demonstrate economic independence through participation in the labour market in exchange for welfare benefits that eventually might lead to legal rights, what Nafea referred to as ‘papers’. As such, ‘new Berliners’ must somehow demonstrate that they can be aspiring wage-earning

subjects, rendering them economically ‘productive’ and ‘legible’ vis-à-vis the state.

Nafea moved between black market jobs and mini jobs every few weeks, but the ‘work’ that was most meaningful to him was a combination of his music and the social work he did with at-risk refugee youth. He became a member of a band that included four Syrian friends who had all studied in the music conservatoire in Syria, whom Nafea helped settle in Berlin. The labour involved in busking, chasing gigs and finding space to rehearse is familiar to any musician living in a creative and bohemian city – for most this labour also involves ‘extra bits on the side’, to subsidize one’s musical vocation. Nafea combined this with social work, mentoring Syrian and other immigrant youth who moved between school, petty street crime, and special ‘camp flats’ where they lived with over-worked social workers. As Nafea put it:

‘They are not afraid of police, because the police is less strict than their family culture back home. But here they don’t have the family culture – where your neighbourhood all know your family and everyone knows you and your father. It keeps you in line. Here they don’t have that. So because I passed all their problems when I first arrived here in Germany, one by one, I know. So I sometimes use that family culture, but mostly I try to put them in a winner situation.’

By ‘winner situation’ Nafea meant that he taught these youth how to ‘play with the rules’ of the German bureaucratic system. The ‘job centre’, for example, offered a form of housing, work and family subsidy, but navigating ‘the system’ was cryptic if you did not speak German, if you did not understand the legal requirements and/or if you did not know how to find out what forms of support you were eligible for. Once you were in the system, the paper work, the queues, the forms ... “they are shitty but it’s better than the street.”

Thus, for Nafea, *hustling* involved keeping one foot in the *job centre* (and the exploitative mini-jobs it promoted) and one foot in the informal employment market, all the while seeking out opportunities for more meaningful work that mobilized his musical passion and social activism. For Nafea, music was one among multiple other means to connect with people, to help them find their way as ‘new Berliners’, to defy the tropes of the refugee label and blend in with other musical artists in a creative makeshift city. Nafea’s life in Berlin thus

required the simultaneous navigation of welfare subsidies, *Ausbildung* opportunities, and meaningful (though not always remunerated) forms of creative work.

Conclusion

The labour required to make a living in ‘impossible’ urban landscapes (De Boeck and Baloji, 2016) poses a challenge to dominant normative and institutional understandings of work, existing at the interstices between mainstream and marginal forms of labour, legality and legitimacy. Here, diverse forms of labour coexist, associated with the making of urban life when returns are highly uncertain, and when the nature of work can involve forms of unlikely accumulation, spontaneous loss, efforts to keep trying, and the hunt to find ‘extra bits on the side’. The three vignettes presented here shed light on the ‘productive potentials of uncertainty’ (Cooper and Pratten, 2015, 1) and associated economic experiments across three ethnographic contexts.

Moonlighting has long been an essential strategy of the entrepreneurial poor in their attempts to supplement the meagre income provided by low-end wage employment (Polsky, 1967). But how are we to make sense of cases in which moonlighting becomes more secure and more meaningful than the wage (or subsidy) itself? Hustling in all of the three cases described earlier involved moonlighting as a form of self-provisioning alongside the semblance of a wage. At the same time, each of my interlocutors saw some value in persisting with the ‘day job’ insofar as this job afforded them a certain legibility and legitimacy vis-à-vis the probation officer, the social enterprise or the asylum system, conferring access to particular resources and rights. Rather than replacing the wage, the hustle operates strategically alongside it, to the extent that the two become relationally contingent. In a world of ‘shit wages’, the side hustle has become a key strategy for staving off destitution and helplessness, enabling a kind of precarious endurance. However, rather than challenging racialised, classed and gendered inequalities and vulnerabilities, it may serve to deepen them, as Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020) has recently cautioned in the case of the tech industry.

The experiences of Eliza, Damien and Nafea point to particular subjectivities and social relations that position the side hustle as a subversive response to persistent legacies of uneven development and socio-economic injustice. Read together, these portraits explore the hustle as an economy in action and a mode of social life that reach across contexts of postcolonial and austerity urbanism (Simone, 2004;

Tonkiss, 2013; Vasudevan, 2014) where social and economic relations are continuously reconfigured. For all three of my interlocutors, the posture and practice of hustling justifies both constantly being on the move, while assuming a certain discretion about *where* one is moving. Each of their side hustles is difficult to pin down, even by friends and close peers (let alone the elder, the probation officer, the job centre or the prefecture). And while plans can be made, and futures imagined, plans are expected to be altered at best, and broken most of the time, so in practice what ‘gets done’ is never *what was planned* but rather what was *put in place* given the structures of opportunity at hand.

I wish to end by outlining three ways in which the experiences of Eliza, Damien and Nafea might contribute to recent debates on (the future of) work. First, in spite of the global decline of formal wage employment and proliferation of ‘shit wages’, mainstream institutions including governments persist in positioning wage labour as an essential vehicle of citizenship, inclusion and recognition. The experiences of my three interlocutors demonstrate how particular welfare conditionalities on the one hand and ‘targets’ on the other seek to turn informal workers, refugees and prison leavers into disciplined, ‘economically productive’ wage-earning subjects. And yet, the types of wage employment that these policies valorize are in sharp decline, replaced instead with a constellation of precarious low-end jobs with ‘shit’ or ‘mini’ wages. In this context, the continued valorization of wage employment serves to perpetuate a mirage of the ‘proper job’ (Ferguson and Li, 2018), conferring a sort of ‘cruel optimism’ (Berlant, 2011).

Second, the three vignettes presented here challenge the presumption that those consigned to ‘shit wages’ might resign themselves to in-work poverty. Confounding legalistic and economic approaches which seek to classify work through the binaries of formal/informal, waged/unwaged, licit/illicit, the experiences of Eliza, Damien and Nafea demonstrate the ways in which ordinary working lives at the urban margins are increasingly dependent on straddling these divides, creatively combining different forms of work and suspending their legal, moral and economic parameters. Rather than an *alternative* to wage labour then, the side hustle might be read as an essential composite in the face of declining wages and increasing austerity.

Third, this chapter contributes to the collective retheorization of work by re-centring the form of work that takes place ‘on the side’, and its entanglement with ‘social thickness’, which differs from that of the unionized wage earner so often centred in the literature on work. Rather than professional skills and formal qualifications, the working lives of my three interlocutors are propelled forward by social relationships – or

‘vitamin B’. It is through a focus on these relationships – and the various forms of support and reciprocation and moments of micro-exploitation they entail – that we might move towards a different understanding of ordinary working life. This approach draws parallels with Ferguson’s (2015, 94) argument that for an increasing number of people around the world, the work of ‘surviving’ is ‘less about producing goods and services than it is about securing distributive outcomes’. However, as Damien reminds us, and Eliza and Nafea show, these relationships also open up possibilities – however fleeting – to aspire to a life beyond mere survival.

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Notes

- ¹ Informal conversation, April 2017, Huruma.
- ² A pseudonym is used here to protect his identity.
- ³ Again, to protect her identity, I avoid specifying which Eastern European country.

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