Mobile Humanitarians: an afterword

Till Mostowlansky
April, 2022

This webinar series set out to explore the relationship between mobility and humanitarianism, and our speakers opened up several new areas for thought and discussion. Over four episodes, we've explored multiple case studies across space and time, and examined the ethical frameworks as well as the power relationships that have underpinned humanitarianism over seven decades.

In our first episode, Kevin O'Sullivan examined proximity and distance in NGO work in Bangladesh during the 1970s. His paper explored the influx of aid workers to East Pakistan following the devastating Bhola cyclone of 1970 and Bangladeshis' (often ambivalent) response to their presence. O'Sullivan argues that the mass of Western aid workers, and the infrastructure they required—hotels, jeeps and administrative spaces—created an early iteration of the Aidlands explored by Lisa Smirl. Dhaka's Aidland grew as Western aid

workers set up regional offices in hotels in close proximity to the centres of institutional power. O'Sullivan emphasises that a sense of liminality was essential to Dhaka's Aidland: aid workers knew they were in 'the field' for only a short time, and this knowledge helped structure professional and social lives that were largely separated from Bangladeshi society, in spite of physical proximity.

This seeming contradiction, by which aid workers travel to 'the field' yet remain largely separate from it, was picked up by Chika Watanabe in Episode 2. Watanabe draws out the ethical and virtuous associations attached to humanitarian mobility, pointing out that the notion of aid workers crossing distance to place themselves in close proximity with suffering is highly valued in contemporary society. The privilege that renders aid workers into highly mobile professionals can reproduce the 'politics of inequality', but as Didier Fassin notes, it also has the potential to become a 'politics of solidarity'. However, Watanabe's paper examines the case study of OISCA, a Japanese NGO active in Myanmar, to argue that the language of solidarity and kinship can in fact reproduce the mechanisms of inequality—and are indeed essential to those mechanisms. In her case study, a shared Asian identity and language derived from religious understandings of interconnectedness fostered an institutional culture that stressed equality and "becoming one", even while retaining deeply hierarchical day-to-day practices that reproduced cultural and gender hierarchies rooted in Japan.

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In the third episode, Young-sun Hong again touched on these tensions as they played out within the overtly political setting of postwar Korea. In the context of the Cold War, the reconstruction and development of Korea became a site of competition between the Capitalist and Communist blocs. In North Korea during the 1950s, East German development experts expressed political and human

solidarity with Koreans embarking on the path towards socialism. But for many, the differences between Germans and Koreans—marked by race, language, and because most German 'experts' sent to Korean were male, gender—proved more immediate than political sympathy. A shared investment in socialism had facilitated German mobility towards close proximity with Koreans, but the lived reality of this encounter was too complex to be captured by ideology. As Hong notes, the day-to-day encounters between Germans and Koreans should not be reduced to the political and ideological framework; indeed, the East German presence in North Korea created conflict between the two socialist nations and their distinctive state ideologies, and the complex personal interactions between Germans and Koreans challenged multiple attempts at governance and state control.

In the final episode, Ann-Christin Zuntz explored the lives of Syrian refugees working as farm labourers in Turkey. Using the evocative example of a single orange, Zuntz draws our attention to global supply chains, and the necessary role that cheap and replaceable migrant labour—including refugees—play within contemporary capitalism. COVID-19 lockdowns disrupted global supply chains and had knock-on effects on labour migrants whose lives were marked by precarity. This only served to heighten the significance of labour contractors or intermediaries, whose individual personalities and varying accounting skills had a very real impact on refugees relying on deferred pay or loans to see their family through extended periods of unemployment. In this context, Zuntz found the language of kinship again performed complex work. Some refugee workers in Turkey regarded their intermediaries as benefactors or senior members of their family; and this language was often reciprocated. Yet, again, this language of kinship or solidarity masked very real discrepancies of power in a labour system in which benefits flowed upwards.

Viewing the series as a whole, the papers give us a rare opportunity to see how historians and anthropologists approach themes of mobility and humanitarianism, and personally we've learnt a great deal. All four speakers modelled the necessity of working across multiple levels. Each explored fine-grained detail at ground

level in order to build our understanding of how global systems work. Agnieszka (a historian) particularly enjoyed the encounter with anthropologists as in her work she stresses the importance of going beyond institutional archives, to trace the impact of humanitarianism and development at the level of communities and individuals. She came away with a renewed respect for anthropologists' regard for the specificity of their case studies, and the care with which they approach their subjects. Till (an anthropologist) was intrigued by how the two historian speakers dug deep into the archives of humanitarianism, but never lost sight of the geopolitical developments of their era. He thought it was truly magnificent how they analysed and presented individual biographies of mobile humanitarians alongside major ideological competition and conflict.

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We were also interested in how the four scholars in our episodes approached their positionality as academics studying humanitarianism. Scholars have critiqued the unequal power structures inherent in humanitarianism, but few have been forthcoming in reflecting that so much academic work replicates and builds upon the very same power dynamics. Western scholars are also privileged actors, flying into 'the field' for short periods to gather the raw materials—data or archival sources—before flying out again. Our mobility is but one symbol of our privilege, and scholars in the Global South have long complained of Western academics who fly in, gather the hard-won insights and intellectual labour of local scholars and aid workers, as well as community leaders and other actors, only to disappear without a trace—until their research is published under their names alone. Several of this webinar's speakers noted their own sense of liminality; they were drawn into the aid 'bubble' in the course of research, while trying to remain separate from it to retain critical distance. Perhaps Ann-Christin Zuntz addressed it most overtly, pointing to emerging models of collaborative scholarship involving long-term partnerships and co-authored outputs with scholars from the Global South. We found the generosity and sophistication with which this series'

speakers addressed these questions to be a real highlight of the discussions; and we feel privileged to have been part of these discussions.

Mobilities after Displacement

Ann-Christin Zuntz
April, 2022

In this webinar series, we explore the relationship between mobility and humanitarianism in the course of four episodes. We – this is Till Mostowlansky, an anthropologist at The Graduate Institute in Geneva and Agnieszka Sobocinska, a historian at King's College London. Based on our disciplinary pathways, we approach the topic from the vantage point of both anthropology and history. In each episode, we showcase the work of either an anthropologist or a historian of humanitarianism and discuss with them how mobility features in their work.

We conclude this webinar series with the fourth and final episode in which we discuss the work of Ann-Christin Zuntz from the University of Edinburgh. Ann-Christin talks about her research on refugee workers in agricultural businesses in the Middle East and on how their labour relates to mobility and humanitarianism. Her research has resulted in several prize-winning publications, such as the 2021 article Refugees' Transnational Livelihoods and Remittances: Syrian Mobilities in the Middle East Before and After 2011 in the *Journal of Refugee Studies*. Ann-Christin has also collaborated on the excellent graphic novel "May God Bless the Hand that Works": Stories from Displaced Syrian Farmworkers during the COVID-19 Pandemic. In the discussion, we broaden the conversation and talk about intermediaries, agency and the role of evangelical humanitarians. We hope you'll enjoy this week's episode and stay tuned for our upcoming written piece on the broader themes of the webinar!

Watch the other episodes of this series here.

A (Personal) Tale of Two Socialisms

Mariya Ivancheva
April, 2022

Note from Allegra editors:

We publish this video and transcript of EASA President Mariya Ivancheva's talk from the annual conference Why the World Needs Anthropologists of the Applied Anthropology Network (AAN) of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) in conjunction with the LeftEast collective, in which Mariya is a member. WWAN took place in Prague in September 2021, under the

topic "Mobilising the Planet." Earlier in 2021, Mariya was elected President of EASA on the PrecAnthro platform, which, like LeftEast, was also represented at the event by Matan Kaminer. PrecAnthro emerged as a result of precarious anthropologists' determination to fight for labour rights, politicize the discipline, and push EASA to become more proactive on social justice issues. In her talk, Mariya speaks of the gradual convergence of her academic and activist work in Eastern Europe, Venezuela and South Africa. We share this video with the permission of AAN and thank Matan Kaminer for his work on the transcription of the talk.

Transcript:

Thank you very much. In preparing this talk, I realized that of the speakers, I'm probably the only one who's going to speak about Eastern Europe. I'm starting this talk today, on the 11th of September, with the glasses of Salvador Allende, sculptured in Caracas' Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And in a way my talk is going to be a tale of two socialisms. We can speak of today as a meaningful coincidence of this date, with the US regime's military effort unravelling in Afghanistan; but we can also think of today as the commemoration of the 1973 coup, supported by the US, against democratic socialism in Salvador Allende's Chile.

What I'm going to talk about, which is quite autobiographical, is also a reflection on how a scholar of activism becomes more of a scholar activist through personal experience. It's also a call not to romanticize one or another socialist regime, which had their own weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but to remember the promises, intentions and movements that brought these experiments to being and the alternative routes history might have taken were they not crushed by capitalism.

So, I was born in Pleven but I was brought up on the Salvador Allende Boulevard in Sofia, which was later renamed after Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov. This monument on the road island was later overtaken by a business office and a betting shop and casino. I was educated in liberal public institutions in Bulgaria in the 1990s and 2000s, where the only way that you could speak about socialism was to call it 'totalitarian' and to deny its existence *en gros*, instead of thinking of what were the redemptive and the negative parts of it and what we could learn from this experience. But I was also, as many of us in those days, coming from a more theoretical background in the social sciences which led me to question the reasons for the presence or absence or deficit of civil society: "Why don't we have a strong civil society in Eastern Europe?". This is what later Agnes Gagyi, a Hungarian anthropologist and sociologist, and I have been speaking of in our shared and separate work about the normativity of the West in our part of the world, where this self-orientalizing view of 'permanent backwardness' and 'catching up' has also meant that we have to always think of what was lacking. This narrative still, sadly, has an aftertaste for in the West: there's always something better, bigger, faster, and more, and it's usually what's happening in Spain nowadays, or what happened with Jeremy Corbyn in the UK, or Bolivia, that's kind of more exotic and better, and very often we don't look at what's happening in our own contexts. And it is not because we can't, but because this normativity is what we have been brought up with very strongly.

So my first study was actually of Czech dissidents, like Vaclav Havel. What I was really interested in was the real-life utopias of academics and intellectuals; what were their visions of a better society? One thing that i was coming to terms with, starting to study literature on socialist utopias and socialist movements, was the question of why we always speak of moments like Paris in 1968 as a kind of promise for revolution and liberation, but we very often don't speak about Prague in '68 in the same way or of Hungary in '56 or of Poland in '81. I remember encountering, back in the days, Rudi Dutschke's words to Jacques Rupnik soon before Dutschke died. He said: "In retrospect, the great event of '68 in Europe was not Paris but Prague, but we were unable to see this at that time". Now, he

was by no stretch of imagination an anti-communist, this I can assure you. Why was it important what was happening in Eastern Europe at that time?

What came out in the literature in the early 2000s was that the greatness of this moment was connected to the grassroots practices of civil societies in kitchens, cellars, and Flying University seminars in remote locations. They were connected to a few individuals – nowadays we think of them as if they were mostly university-educated, able-bodied white males which the West called dissidents – and this term somehow stuck. Of course, they weren't only always male, mostly white, mostly university educated; still, those are the ones that we still have in our social memory. What I found out in my first engagement with their work was that a lot of the times they were using the tribune that Western NGOs left and right activists gave them to demand social change, and to say that they wanted to change the terms of dialogue, and to say that those most vulnerable were to be listened to (read, they were the most vulnerable), and that they were the ones who had to speak truth because they spoke out of 'bare existence'.

> *A lot of the times they were using the tribune that Western NGOs left and right activists gave them to demand social change.*

Of course, to do that under the pretext of 'civil society' is a bit contradictory if we go back to Marx. Because as we know, in Marxist terms, civil society is *Burgerliche Gesellschaft*, so it is first and foremost an institution enabling the protection by the state of market freedom for those who own the means of production and private property. In Eastern Europe, civil society became something else: it became society against the state, so the civility and peacefulness was linked to European civilization and modernity. As Milan Kundera said: "What is Europe if not Europe of the small nations," *ergo,* Central Europe. In the same way Havel and other Czech, Hungarian and other dissidents, wherever they were even allowed, were making this claim of life in truth. And truth meant the right to speak against state-socialist power, but not the right to speak against the market. I think we have to bear this in mind for now; we will

come back to it.

The next step in my journey through anthropology was to listen to what other authors had to say about civil society. Most importantly, what Partha Chatterjee had to say about civil society as an instrument of the upper class to secure its position and channel its interest through the state. Meanwhile, what he called political society is the ever-more eliminated surplus population, in constant severe crisis of social reproduction, abandoned, and for whom the only path to gain solutions to their immediate problems is violence and localized action.

There was another 1989. It happened in Venezuela on the 27th of February 1989, days after the new election. Then in his second term [in power], Prime Minister Carlos Andres Perez signed onto the Washington Consensus, which immediately resulted in cuts to public funding. The first utility that was affected was gasoline for public use. People were angry at this more than anything, because the social contract in a petro-country is that people don’t have to pay for oil for public consumption. But it also meant that many people who were already living under the threshold of poverty could not bear it any more; so the last straw had broken the camel’s back.

These are remembered as food riots; they usually didn’t make it downtown. There was looting of shops and burning of infrastructure, blockades of means of transport in peripheral neighborhoods and barricades. They were violently smashed by the police; the dead count is still not known because there are still bodies being found in mass graves. This was called the beginning of the Fourth World War by Venezuelan intellectual Luis Brito Garcia, with the Third being the Cold War. The Fourth World War is not fought by armies; it is the wretched of the earth against the owners of the means of production and against neoliberal governance.

However, initially I did not go to Venezuela for my fieldwork because of this last story but because of the previous one I told: I was really interested to see what happens to radical intellectuals when they come to power and use the university

to perform social change. The big contradiction there is, firstly, that people who have previously been anti-authoritarians have to take state power and gain recognition; but secondly, what happens to those who are proponents of egalitarian reform that challenges their privileges? That is what happens to intellectuals many times when they come to power and propose, for instance, massification of higher education.

Some take-home lessons would be, first, that the old guard of the left did not get rid of their privilege, but often transformed it into a revolutionary capital which was then used to push back any internal rectification. Then, there was also a first generation entering into higher education, who became the new educators. They gained social mobility but were all the time shamed as belonging to the new middle class. Many of them have nowadays emigrated to other Latin American countries. The third important finding for me there, which I'm still carrying along and for which I had to start reading more social reproduction theory, was that this everyday revolution was carried on the shoulders of women. Often adult learners and beneficiaries of social programs, often single mothers and workers, they did four shifts, also including political activism in different roles. This regime gave them a lot of political agency, but they were also still suffering the hangover of economic marginalization.

I came back home to Europe in 2018 with these lessons. I was coming and going, and found my own country in an immense crisis of social reproduction. In 2012-2013 Bulgaria was in a situation where the increase of electricity prices had produced an enormous tension in society. Over 15 men, mostly fathers of indebted families, committed suicide through self-immolation: they burned themselves. At the same time, there was a very strong liberal narrative that despite the fact that we could mobilize thousands for anti-corruption protests, we should not be against increased electricity fees. This was a 'social cause' whereas we are 'civil'. We need to fight for civil causes, and civil causes are not economic causes, so these people who went on the streets – and there were many more waves of protests that followed for economic causes – were constantly shamed.

So I and others in Bulgarian regions, as part of a small newborn left at that point, started trying to counter this narrative. We've been doing that since then, and that's why many of you know me and I know you from other activist events. But it has not been very easy, obviously. Something that comes from my previous experiences in research was that we were having to deal with a few contradictions ourselves: we were left under the shadow of a so-called totalitarian left, which had today transformed into oligarchic neo-liberal hardcore parties. We also had to be very inward-looking and to solve immense problems that were not at the scale where we were working. We had to speak about mass privatization and dismantlement of industries, agriculture and public services, and the political and economic grounds of the emerging state-capital-organized crime nexus. Then there was also mass migration of which the survival of the whole society depends, and soaring household debt and insecurity. However, a bit like the dissidents whom I discussed previously, we were having another problem in Bulgaria, while we were mourning these men who committed suicide by self-immolation.

> *We were facing a shortage of time between contracts, shortage of space and belonging, and lack of ability to plan ahead and think in the mid- and the long-term.*

At this time many of us were not in Bulgaria, because we were caught by the western left, which for the first time recognized that we could speak at big conferences where people could recognize us as 'really radical'. A lot of this meant reproducing the narrative of the dissidents who should be recognized by the west for whatever they were doing, and looking for recognition there as if it were going to solve some problems at home. But in the meantime, for me and for many of us, this crisis of social reproduction was coming ever closer. It was hitting closer to home, getting closer to the bone. I was finishing a PhD and beginning a precarious career in academia – which some of us [activists in the region] do in academia, others in NGO activism and so forth – and it was pushing me further afield, because there were no jobs where I [and we] wanted to be. It was also creating this difficulty to connect to others, because we were always

moving around. So, I ended up, by irony of fate, at that moment in Ireland where I studied precarity in academia. I was finding out that beyond the crisis of, let's say, representation, redistribution and recognition or respect that precarious academics were facing, we were facing a shortage of time between contracts, always trying to get into new applications; shortage of space and belonging due to the constant moving and the impossibility to mobilize ourselves, and lack of ability to plan ahead and think in the mid- and the long-term. There was a similarity to the peripherality of the Caracas riots, where you know you can't make it to the center of power, but you try to do something locally and you burn out very quickly – and then you're on the next contract. Of course, it's not quite so visceral, but it was very much felt so by many of us. That is how PrecAnthro was established and here I am, brought from the periphery to the center of the European Association of Social Anthropology, of which I was just a member until recently. One thing we found through much work including a survey that we did with Martin Fotta and Raluca Pernes, was that 49 percent of EASA members are precarious anthropologists. These are the people who could pay the membership fee, so imagine the rest.

But then I was also carrying out work, you know, having to find another contract. So my next contract brought me to South Africa and the UK. I was hired – on a [fixed-term] contract again – by the University of Leeds, where I was studying the digitalization and digital disruption of higher education in South Africa and the UK. There I found a different constellation of power, different actors: there are big corporations with billion-dollar incomes that hide behind established university brands to rip off 60 to 95 percent of all profit from student fees, shaved from aspiring middle classes in the Global South while corporations in the Global North harvest and sell big data from students. There were university senior managers who gained places on advisory boards and bonuses and patted themselves on the back for being innovative, up-to-speed, and employability-driven. Then there were university-hired faculty who even before the pandemic were working under intensifying and extensifying workloads, teaching in three shifts sometimes; [they would be] doing one class online, one hybrid, and one

offline, while at the same time doing some courses for university and public-private partnerships that they didn't even know were being sold by the private company for money that the private company gets back. At the same time, having to chase research income and publications to keep up the prestige that attracts fee-paying students; increasingly, many were hired sessionally under always more unbundled and obscure contract names like "digital content curator," "digital curriculum developer," or "MOOC forum moderator."

> *This is a class war, and this is a war that we have to fight together; we're not in a golden cage that is just based on merit, where we can proceed into an academic career without having to not just face this reality but live it with our own skin.*

That's not even the worst part for us faculty, because there is also a reserve army of faculty who are not even hired by universities but by the same private companies. I worked for two years at the University of Liverpool, and 80 percent of my colleagues were hired by Laureate, a private corporation, on zero-hour flat rates, to supervise PhDs who get a degree from the University of Liverpool. So this is a reserve army who are not protected by the same labor legislation as their university hire colleagues, and are not unionized under the same trade unions. They're invisible, working from their bedrooms, already since before the pandemic. They are not encouraged or supported to do research and publish, but they do the research-led teaching for research-intensive universities. The worst off were the students, again; students weren't in the same position within the UK as in South Africa. Students at top universities are very much aware, or made aware, that the value of their degrees is not just the certificate or their employability skills, but the contact made with faculty and classmates and the added value of a network and community. Yet to enjoy that privilege in face-to-face degrees, they are increasingly indebted and pushed into what David Graeber called bullshit jobs to pay their debt off.

But what's worse – and I know you have been waiting to understand what the hell

this is – this is a burnt auditorium in South Africa, at the University of Johannesburg. When I went there for two fieldwork trips, students were in their "Rhodes Must Fall" stage of contestation, which was not just against fees. It was especially for black and colored students to feel citizens at the university where they never felt they belonged. Some of these buildings were burned at a time when students who are on the national funding scheme NSFAS had not received their scholarship because it was outsourced to a private company. They had not received their scholarship for months and they were sleeping rough and they were hungry or they had gone back to their villages; and they were angry. This is the type of students that these digitalized degrees are trying to target. So, just as an aside, and I'll come back to my main point – we were seeing with my colleagues that this Rhodes Must Fall protest cycle was really bringing back into the university this kind of political society. They are our students and our colleagues, and we can't pretend that these things don't affect us as well. I think this is a really opportune moment for anthropology, for academia, to finally get a handle on its privilege and understand that we're fighting a war. This is a class war, and this is a war that we have to fight together; we're not in a golden cage that is just based on merit, where we can proceed into an academic career without having to not just face this reality but live it with our own skin.

Just two more remarks. In the meantime, the pandemic happened. Since the the mid-2010s I have been part of a few collectives in Bulgaria or transnationally. Matan Kaminer spoke earlier [at the conference workshops] about LeftEast. But during the pandemic we also established another interesting network, called Essential Autonomous Struggles Transnational or E.A.S.T. This was our attempt, as collectives based in Eastern Europe or working with migrants from Eastern Europe and beyond, to actually collect our knowledge because many of us had started doing, not just activist research 'on people' but rather working with people from marginalized groups, with many of whom we shared the same predicaments. So this was also gradually a safe space for all of us to meet and discuss ruptures that dismantled the social fabric of our societies and our communities ever more, and that continually threaten our activism in the guise of

conflicts and scandals between us.

These are baby steps that we've been taking; but it feels like a lot of these smaller initiatives have gradually started speaking, mostly to ourselves and among ourselves, and then to the West, and then to whoever there is beyond the region. What's more, and this was part of the 1st of July mobilization that we initiated as a network, this is the Chilean part of it, where they say *tocan a una, tocan a todas: fuera Erdogan, fuera Piñera*. So, if they hurt one, they hurt everyone, down with Erdogan, down with Pinera. There's an interesting moment where the connection between Eastern Europe, Turkey, the "East" and Latin America was made. It was strong and for me it was a kind of homecoming, bringing some of this context that I have been studying and working with this one image.

But then there's Anthropology. And so, as Marie Hermanova [chair of the session] said earlier, I did become the President of EASA. To my surprise, I was voted in with the most votes; that's how you become the President. I should not have been surprised, as 49 percent of our anthropologists are precarious and I was one of the people running on the anti-precarity platform PrecAnthro. But I think – and initially this talk was announced as a presidential address – the way that I can see a learned society as EASA active is that – especially within anthropology – we now really need to use this power structure, that is marginal but still has some gravity, to expose power structures and oppression at home in our institutions, at the university, in academia – and not just abroad. To put an end to the invisibility and silence of individual suffering; to fight for our rights as collectives of workers sharing vulnerabilities and strengths. I think it is high time that learned societies take an active political stance, not just as a possibility but as a demand and necessity from our disciplines. That is something that the Applied Anthropology Network has taken up seriously this year, and we are all here to celebrate their effort.

Race, Security, and the Contradictions of Humanitarianism

Young-sun Hong
April, 2022

In this webinar series, we explore the relationship between mobility and humanitarianism in the course of four episodes. We – this is Till Mostowlansky, an anthropologist at The Graduate Institute in Geneva and Agnieszka Sobocinska, a historian at King's College London. Based on our disciplinary pathways, we approach the topic from the vantage point of both anthropology and history. In each episode, we showcase the work of either an anthropologist or a historian of humanitarianism and discuss with them how mobility features in their work.

This week, we talk to Young-Sun Hong from Stony Brook University about her long-standing work on German aid to Korea in the Cold War. Her presentation "Solidarity is Might: The World Community of Fraternal Peoples Builds a New Korea" is followed by a discussion of the various mobilities that shaped flows of aid and people in and out of the Korean peninsula in the second half of the twentieth century. We touch upon themes such as socialist aid, race, conviviality,

gender and humanitarian travel many of which run through Young-Sun's excellent book Cold War Germany, the Third World, and the Global Humanitarian Regime. We hope you'll enjoy the episode!

Watch the other webinars in this series here.

Dear Allies, meet Jas.

Allegra
April, 2022

As a rule, here at Allegra, we as editors emphasise our collectiveness. Rightly so: There is very soft division of labour, there is no hierarchy, and we strive for

consensus in all matters. We have nominal editors-in-chief, but that effectively only means that these are the people currently reading the emails accumulating at the submissions@allegralaboratory.net account (keep 'em coming!).

Still, we are individuals who have signed up for this, and some eventually move on, and some eventually join. It is *not* in fact the case that we are massively underworked and couldn't do with support and fresh blood. (Shoutout to our editorial assistants at this point who go above and beyond the call of duty every bloody week.) It's in that spirit that we want to open a window onto the collective by introducing our newest-most member, Jastinder Kaur!

Some of you will know her from elsewhere and some from the awesome resonance cast on coups that she participated in here on Allegra a little while ago. She has for a while already been increasingly involved in our activities, including collectively written posts, and we are all looking forward to how Jas will fill in her role and shape our collective in the future. Say "Hi, Jas" if you get the chance!

Self-introductions are tricky, but here we go – Jas in her own words:

> *I am a second generation working-class British Indian woman. These perspectives, experiences, and positionalities frame much of my work as a political anthropologist, bringing into ethnographic focus the dynamic and fraught interplay of identity, culture, conflict, conviviality, belonging, and exclusion at the intersection of individual, group, and state; and especially in post-colonial multi-ethnic societies.*
>
> *I do revel in being a bit of an anthropological interloper and occupying intellectual and research spaces often traditionally closed to the discipline, such as the study of coups d'etat and parliaments. But I do so from a position of radical optimism about the possibilities that open up when we push boundaries and collaborate across them, even (perhaps most critically) in the midst of critical events and despite our differences – but I also carry with me a large dose of pessimism about how we change the structures that oppress and silence us.*

Trying to be part of a movement to overcome this tension has led me to help create international research coalitions with colleagues across Ethiopia, Myanmar, and the UK. It's the same spirit of collective critical thinking and action – and the hope implied in that – that has led me to Allegra. What I find here that excites me is a space and a set of allies that challenge me to imagine and pursue hopeful futures in the present while speaking truth to power. If I were a cartoon character, I'd be Scrappy from Scooby Doo – small but always up for fighting the bad guys! Oh, and if you hadn't guessed already…. I write incredibly loooong sentences, so keep pushing back on that, and I'll keep learning!

But wait, there is more!

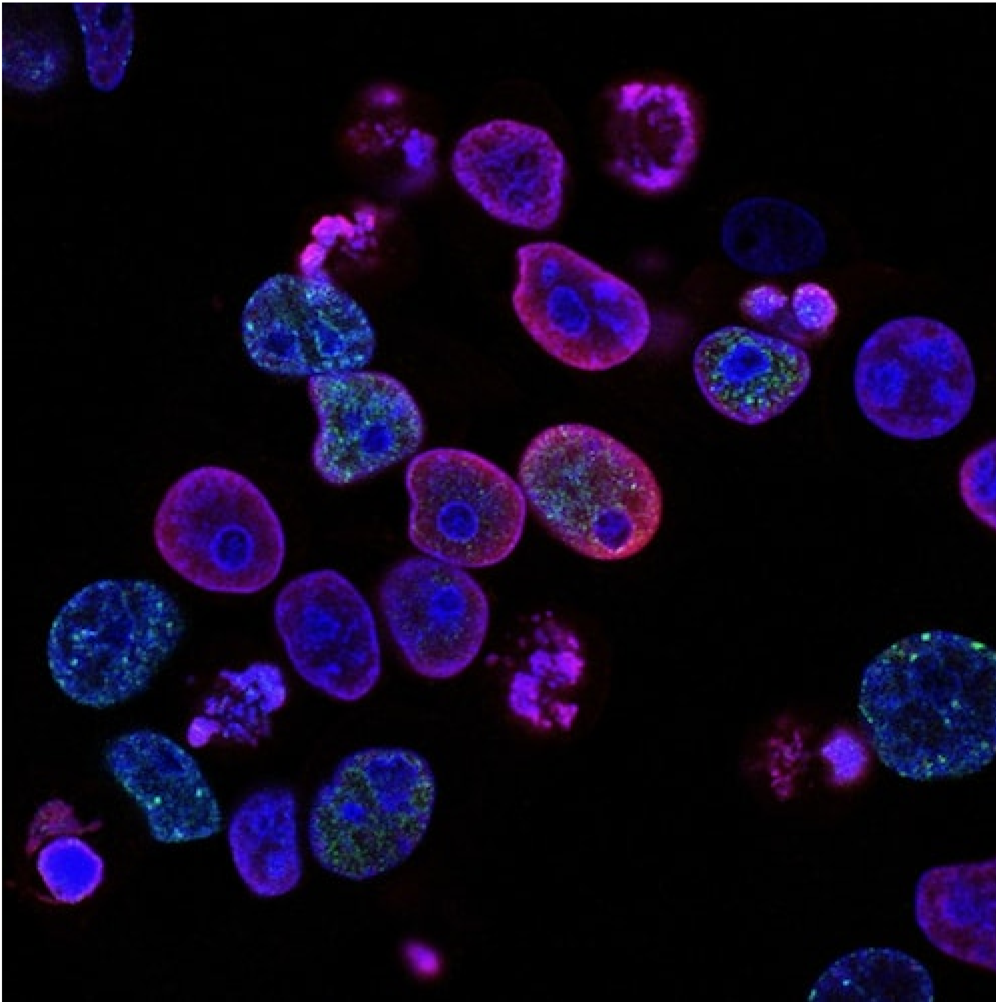
1. **What kind of anthropologist are you?**
   The kind that, following Tim Ingold, is immersed in philosophy with people in it. Also the kind that people outside or academia think makes me an archaeologist, which to be fair isn't far off. So, for example, studying lived experiences and meaning-making around coups in Fiji took me (inevitably as I see it now) into both the past and the future.
2. **What keeps you up at night?**
   During the pandemic era moratorium on older ways of doing fieldwork, what's kept me up at night has been my postdoctoral research tracing the entanglements between Parliament, politicians, and people in Fiji as they occur in real time, i.e., across a 12hr timezone difference. Other than that, complete and utter silence at night bewilders me – how does anyone sleep surrounded by the sound of silence?! So thank goodness for the foxes and their midnight antics! Also, thinking about jumping in my (non-existent) MG or Ford Mustang Fastback and driving through the night to meet the sun!
3. **What makes you hopeful?**

It has been a long time coming but I'm finally working on my relationship to hope. And being invited to join the Allegra editorial collective has been a serendipitous moment in that process. It helps when you're amongst Allies who are weird and wonderful, and with whom you feel kinship – the kind where it's possible (along with the lovely aspects we associate with kinship) to be robust, be a little discomfited and discomfiting, and not take yourself too seriously or feel pressured to self-represent in certain ways. Some of the international research coalitions I've been part of with colleagues in Ethiopia and Myanmar, prior to my postdoc, have also given me hope that issues around who can do research, who gets access to vital resources and funding to do research, and who gets to represent whom, can be radically reoriented and made more inclusive. So I guess what makes me hopeful is being able to imagine the world and my part in it differently – and to approach this through relations of care and optimism. Also, that my beloved team won the league for the first time in decades made me hopeful that good stuff can happen… you just have to wait a little life-time sometimes. And then suddenly you're champions of the world.

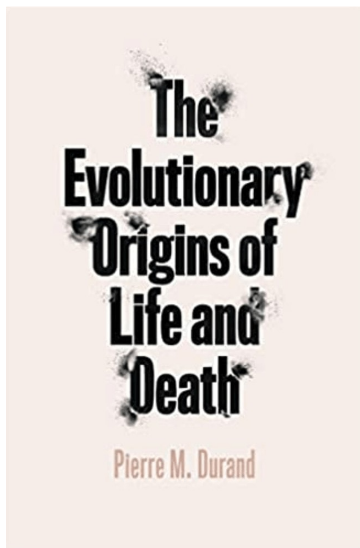
4. **What was your most memorable cup of tea?**
   I once invited the Fiji secret branch personnel who were put onto me as a British spy in for tea; it was 4pm after all. I can be incredibly cool under pressure – but only when life and liberty are at stake.

The Evolutionary Origins of Life and Death

Mélissa Bernard
April, 2022



Durand, P. (2020). *The Evolutionary Origins of Life and Death*. University of Chicago Press.



All bolded terms are defined at the bottom of this post.

Durand is an evolutionary biologist and clinical doctor. His research interests led him to study the processes of programmed cell death (PCD) over the last five years. In *Evolutionary Origins of Life and Death*, he presents discussions on the origin of life and death for unicellular organisms, different findings in the biology of life and processes of death, as well as his interpretations of their intertwined evolution. As a biological anthropologist and thanatologist, I have mostly approached the biological and conceptual aspects of life and death of multicellular organisms (humans) from a perspective of duality and opposition. Durand's narrative was an eye-opener on their complementarity.

Evolutionary Origins of Life and Death is well organised, concise, and easy to navigate. It is divided into three parts: the first introduces and discusses the evolutionary origin and biology of life, the second discusses these aspects of death, while the third integrates the different concepts and theories necessary to grasp their putative co-evolution. Durand presents the concepts, theories and ideas in a concise manner, drawing examples from fungi, bacteria and algae. As suggested in the preface, *Evolutionary Origins of Life and Death* is intended for the general audience with basic biology and natural history knowledge, and Durand ensures the reader has access to the information necessary to understand his theory throughout the book. That being said, the concepts and ideas presented should also appeal to the expert in evolutionary biology interested in the possible

co-evolution of life and death. Since the chapters are well organised and clearly defined, readers can easily skim over their area of expertise and continue without compromising their understanding of the underlying rationale presented.

In part one, Durand beautifully integrates philosophy and empirical science to describe and define life and uses a holistic approach to present theories of its origin. Taking into account theories of evolution, the origin of life is either studied as a **biogenesis** from abiotic material (**transition from abiotic to biotic)** or as a transition from a reproducible individual to a more complex and stable living organism (**Evolutionary Transition in Individuality – ETI**). Durand explores the concepts of ET – ETI and postulates that the boundary between abiotic-biotic «is an artificial construct; the origin of life was not a binary, before-after, phenomenon» (Durand 2020:53) by contrasting different elements of the abiotic and biotic worlds, as well as elements of lower-level and higher-level replicating units (simple, non-individual replicators to more complex living organism). He also discusses LUCA (Last Unknown Common Ancestor) and the **RNA world hypothesis**, discussing the possibility that there might be several sources of life. This is one of the ideas that really struck me since, as an anthropologist, I intuitively think of LUCA as a multicellular DNA-based organism when considering our human lineage (hominins, primates, mammals, etc.) and **DNA-based genome**. Other topics addressed in this section include mobile genome elements, individualism and selfishness vs groups and altruism, concepts of fitness and the **life history fitness components**, with a focus on reproduction and viability, and investment trade-offs. The synthesis (chapter 7) presents the evolution of life in eight steps accompanied by figures, based on the theoretical, philosophical, empirical and genomic data presented in the previous chapters. The steps are a good and concise representation of the ideas and concepts discussed thus far, and comprise of:

1) Emergence of biologically relevant molecules;

2) Passive replicators (molecule or group of molecules replicating as a unit);

3) Enzyme-mediated replication;

4) Compartmentalization;

5) Lower-level replicating units (LRUS);

6) Functional and structural integration of the components making up LRUS;

7) Evolutionary transition to higher-level replicating units;

8) Protocells

Part two presents different types of cell death and distinguishes between death as a result of extraneous factors (incidental death), programmed cell death as a by-product of other selected traits (Ersatz PCD) and programmed cell death as an evolutionary adaptation (true PCD). Durand focuses on true PCD of single-celled organisms to explore the evolutionary origin of death. **He highlights the paradox of true PCD in single-celled organisms: if death is detrimental to the single-cell by marking the end of its individual life (as opposed to multicellular organisms), how could PCD be an advantageous trait selected for in unicellular organisms?** He proposes that «death can enhance life by increasing **inclusive fitness** in a clonal population and some forms of death played a role in the evolution of more complex life» (Durand 2020:75). Although PCD marks the end of the cell, it can be altruistic and can provide advantages at different units or levels of selection (individual, group, kinship, etc.), which are explored in this section. For instance, the selective death of a unicellular organism can increase the viability of other surrounding unicellular organisms by increasing the ratio of available resources and reducing competition amongst them. Just like menopause is a counterintuitive evolutionary advantage in women by limiting the number of children they can have, it also increases the chance of their children and their children's children to survive (by increasing the available resources and parental investment) hence providing an evolutionary advantage for the mother's DNA to survive in her offspring. In this case, however, the surviving unicellular organisms would not be bearing the same RNA-DNA as

the dead cell, which renders this concept of altruistic death even more intriguing to me, a biological anthropologist. Once again, the last chapter is dedicated to a synthesis of the eight steps of the origin of death presented in part two.

Saving the best for last, the third part is dedicated to the culmination of the interpretations of the origins of life and death and Durand's view of their co-evolution. His discussion of the origin and evolution of life and death touches upon topics such as **stress-induced innovation**, chimeric groups and the evolution of individuality, conflict resolutions or self-sacrifice, etc. He claims that group selection is important for both life and death to emerge, such that natural selection acted on the properties of a group as a whole (chimeric groups – composed of different cells) rather than the individual**. His position is that life and death are not oppositional; death rather augments «life in more fundamental ways than previously imagined» (Durand 2020: 155).** As he suggests, cell death has the potential to provide support and resources for the surrounding organisms, increase the fitness of surviving cells, reduce competition between cells, resolve potential DNA-RNA conflicts in the evolution towards multicellular organisms, etc., consequently augmenting life itself. His rationale is well laid out, straightforward and insightful.

I particularly appreciated the idea that PCD «presented new ways for individuals to communicate and share resources» (Durand 2020:141) amongst single-celled organisms, which reminded me of the concept of panpsychism, the consciousness as a property of matter beyond the consciousness generated by the brain of multicellular organisms. Perhaps the consciousness of death and the origin of grief goes further than previously imagined? Grief is a behaviour shared between humans and other species (great apes, dolphins, orcas, elephants), however, its origin or the consciousness of death itself has not been established yet. Although proof can date back to early *Homo* with evidence of intentional burials from Neandertals, the consciousness of death is a cognitive ability that is difficult to investigate or perhaps imagine in other species, whether them being in our human lineage or other evolutionary trees. **If PCD presents ways to communicate altruistic behaviours and share resources, are the**

surrounding cells aware of its passing when collecting these new resources? And if so, can we use this premise to investigate the death consciousness in complex multicellular organisms?

Overall, as Durand's first book, *Evolutionary Origins of Life and Death* is beautifully written and thoughtfully presented. I strongly recommend it to any biological anthropologist or evolutionary biologist interested in studying the topic of the origins of life or death and I will be looking forward to his next work.

Lexicon

Biogenesis: Origin of living organisms.

DNA-based genome: The genome is the entirety of the genetic material of an organism.

Evolutionary Transition in Individuality – ETI: «ETI theory explains the process by which HRUs – Higher-Level Replicating Units – emerged from populations of LRUs – lower-Level Replicating Units – via group selection» (Durand 2020:54).

Inclusive fitness: Inclusive fitness suggests that an organism's fitness isn't limited to the individual organism but is rather dependent on cooperation with other organisms in the population. An increased fitness means more genes can be passed down to the next generation. Thus, increasing inclusive fitness means that the cooperation and fitness of the population increase.

Life history fitness: In its general sense, fitness is a principle used in evolutionary theory to measure the ability (success) of an organism to pass its genes (hereditary traits) to the next generation. It includes its ability to survive long enough to be able to replicate/reproduce and thus pass its genes to the next generation (new cells/offspring). Here, life history is a concept that takes into account all factors (intrinsic or extrinsic) that could impact fitness.

RNA world hypothesis: RNA World Hypothesis is the assumption that RNA, or a similar molecule, «was the first molecule that included hereditary genotypic information and due to its enzymatic activity could catalyze its own or others' replication» (Durand 2020:35).

Stress-induced innovation: Evolutionary innovation as a response to a stressor.

Transition from abiotic to biotic: Transition from non-living to living organism, the general concept of Evolutionary Transition – ET.

IMAGE: Photo by National Cancer Institute on Unsplash.

This review is part of our 'Death and Mourning' call for reviews.

"We don't have to whisper": Fieldnotes from Odesa

Adrienne Mannov
April, 2022

I met Engineer Yakiv[1] on board a merchant ship I had joined just south of Sri Lanka in early 2013. I was there to study seafarers' perceptions of contemporary maritime piracy. Yakiv seemed to live off coffee and, in Captain Michael's words, he "breathed through a cigarette." Shortly after I arrived on board, he had agreed to give me a tour of the ship. As we climbed around the various decks, in the accommodation, the engine control room, the engine room and the bridge, the conversation turned to life in Ukraine, and in particular, to corruption and the financial viability of life there. I noted:

We talk about financial need and being away from family – he says that countries like the Philippines and Ukraine have nothing. I compare to the years when [my husband] travelled so much and how we sometimes considered if he needed to take on extra jobs [in order to make ends meet]. Yakiv replies sharply "No!

Because you have hope in your country that there is future. That your children will have schooling and healthcare. That the police will come when you call them.

He was right. As a white woman, living in a Nordic country, I did not worry about these things. I took them for granted. Yakiv had a gruff exterior. One of the electricians wanted to high five with him after a meeting. He complied reluctantly. He's not a high-five kind of guy. Some of the ratings[2] seemed intimidated by him. I was at first, too.

But he thawed. As my time to sign off neared, the captain kept talking about how dangerous descending the pilot ladder was. People fell, hit their head, and drowned. That was it. But Yakiv admonished him: "Stop saying that! You'll scare her! She won't sleep tonight!" I *was* scared and I mentioned it to him again later. He got a twinkle in his eye and drawing out the vowel, teased me: "Are you scaaaared??" Some days later he explained that the captain was afraid, but he assured me:

There's no reason to be worried. It will be ok. We will turn the ship to protect you from the waves. We will use bow thruster and stern thruster[3] to turn the ship. See, if you look out, the waves are coming from the starboard side, and if you look out the port side, you will see it is calmer. There is no reason to be a-scared.

Later, I was sitting in my cabin writing up notes with the door open. Yakiv popped in *again* saying, "Everything is going to be ok. Everybody is aware, safety is ok, nothing is going to happen. I just talked to chief officer and it is final – everybody knows what to do." I thanked him and he barked back, "Sleep well!"

"You will become brilliant"

It was comforting that Yakiv took my worries seriously and made an effort to help me feel confident and safe. And I made it down the pilot ladder safely. Before I signed off, Yakiv agreed that I could visit him later that year in Odesa. I arrived in

April:

I got here on Sunday and Yakiv picked me up. He took me to my hotel, then we went for a little walk around the neighborhood, just to give me a sense of where I am. Lots of the stories he told about the area were about poverty, mismanagement and governmental corruption. Then we came back to my hotel and he decided I needed a local phone. He insisted on buying my prepaid sim card. He said he had an extra phone at his place that I could just use. So, we went back to his place and while he set a pot of coffee on the stove, he found the phone and changed the settings from Russian to English.

About a week later, Yakiv and his wife, Galina, invited some of their friends and me back to their place for a *mangal* – a barbecue. The guests were Konstantin, an old friend and teacher at the Maritime Academy in Odesa, his wife, Ekaterina, who also teaches at the maritime academy and Lyudmila, who works as a crewing agent. We talked about how Odesa had a long history of regional influence due to its position along the Black Sea, and how it had been the site of war and political struggle for centuries. I noted:

We speak about the history of a city with great cosmopolitan history – very heterogeneous. Konstantin told a story about the kids in the yard learning the languages of their playmates: Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Romanian and Polish. There is lots of talk of all the famous people who have been here and the developments in science and art before the Soviet era. Ekaterina joked that if I stay here a while and just breathe the air, I will become brilliant.

But this grand history was punctured by stories of disappointment and frustration as Ekaterina, Yakiv, Galina and Konstantin described their lives in Odesa. Yakiv worked for a well-established shipping company and earned well. His home was not opulent, but it was comfortable and in the city center. While we sat in their yard, he produced massive amounts of meat from the *mangal,* and as the evening progressed, we drank schnapps and vodka. Konstantin got kind of drunk and he read some of his poems for us. It was awkward but also sweet. His friends know

him and love him. They were familiar with the poems.

“We don’t have to whisper, but we saw our parents doing it”

It was a fun get-together, but there was also a sad and urgent feel to it. Together they explained to me how the people in Ukraine had to be

tough, not only the seafarers. Ekaterina said, “This is a place where there is constant struggle”, adding that there were “well-educated people working as ABs” because “they can’t get work in their field”. Imagery of ships, sailing and the sea was pervasive in Odesa. As noted, Odesa had a long history of maritime prominence due to its Black Sea port, but as Yakiv had initially explained to me, struggle was not just a Ukrainian circumstance, but something he recognized from countries that “have nothing”.

Yakiv added to Ekaterina’s explanation: “There is no time that people can remember when there was peace and trustworthy leadership in Ukraine.” He explained, “Even though we know it’s not Soviet times now, we remember and have learned that if something goes wrong, then the people in charge will want to have someone to blame.” Ekaterina responded, “We remember our parents whispering. If you wanted to talk about politics, you had to whisper about it. We don’t have to whisper, but we saw our parents doing it.”

Some days earlier I met Alexander, an officer who had been subjected to an attempted pirate boarding. “I was afraid,” he told me, “that my mother would find out”. As we spoke about the risk of piracy, I asked him why he did not look for a job on land instead. He responded:

What job? The biggest problem in our country is corruption. In Ukraine, corruption starts at low level and goes all the way up. When you know this system, you understand that you can’t live without it. (…) At present, [seafaring]

is only way to make money in our country without cheating. If you want to make good money, you have to have good relationship. This is the only way.

This left Ukrainian seafarers – along with Ukrainians in general – alone with their troubles. During Soviet times, trade unions in Ukraine were controlled by the party. Problems were to be handled on your own, I was told. Experience taught them that involving authorities was not a wise strategy. Today, most Ukrainian seafarers are not unionized. Yevgeny, a maritime lawyer put piracy in perspective for me: “For Ukrainians, Somali and Nigerian pirates are no worse than what they’ve seen in their school, their police and their government”. These people were outspoken. There was no “whispering”, as Ekaterina put it. Because of this history, speaking out seemed to carry an existential weight.

The informal party at Yakiv’s went on till late. Yakiv had invited Lyudmila so that she could meet me and decide if she wanted to share her experiences with me. Yakiv was not sure she would be willing to meet with me: “I don’t know if she wants to talk. It may be too painful”, he warned. As the crewing agent, Lyudmila was responsible for Human Resources tasks for the crews her company sent to sea. In 2009, one of these crews was hijacked by Somali pirates and held for ransom. In the crew’s absence, Lyudmila became responsible for fielding questions and demands from the crew’s terrified loved ones in Odesa. The evening was coming to an end and there were hugs and one kiss on the cheek from everyone. As we said goodbye, Lyudmila said she would be willing to meet with me.

“I can stand it”.

Some days later, Yakiv picked me up and we drove towards Lyudmila’s office. We were a bit early, so he took me to his favorite place “Ваш Сад” [pronounced “Vash Cad”], meaning “Your Garden”, which was a garden center with places to sit outside. There was still a chill in the air amongst the budding trees and potted

plants for sale as the conversation turned to corruption again. Yakiv told me that the Ukrainian government only wanted to get money out of the seafarer through bribes. He went on: "If they want to change something then they have to change the corruption – but how to do that?" Poland seemed to fare better after the fall of the Soviet Union, he mused. Getting agitated, he asked:

And why? It's because a Polish electrician said that anyone who had anything to do with Soviet politics would not be allowed to get involved in current Polish politics. They cleansed Polish politics of Soviet influence. They did not do this here. It's still the same people.

Yakiv was referring to Lech Walesa, a shipyard electrician who was a key player in the establishment of "Solidarity", the first free trade union in Eastern Europe that grew into a large political movement, ultimately leading to the fall of the Communist party in Poland and the election of the non-communist prime minister – Tadeusz Mazowiecki – in 1989. Yakiv continued, telling me that there was a debate about whether Ukraine should join Russia in some kind of union. He had strong opinions about this idea:

People are always asking about the big existential questions – how should we organize our society? I tell my friends who think this is a good idea that Ukraine never benefitted from being with Russia – also before the Soviet Union. Why should it be better now?

It was getting close to our meeting time with Lyudmila and so we left this bright friendly place and after a short drive, found ourselves in a dimly lit foyer of an office building. It smelled musty and looked more like an old kitchen than the entrance to an office building.

We took the rickety elevator up to Lyudmila's office, where she re-told her harrowing experiences with the pirated crew, and ordeal that left her sick. But again, amidst this narrative, she reflected more broadly on life in Ukraine:

Ukrainians are brave people. Maybe our life on shore is too hard (…). We don't go

to a psychologist. We go to friends, my husband, take some rest. (…). Maybe we're not too brave – our lives are too hard here. Seafarers' job is very risky and hard. There is no work on shore, so they go to sea. It's a hard life. There are also wage problems, safety. But we have no choice. We accept any conditions.

While Lyudmila was dealing with family members of the kidnapped crew, her son was sailing on a similar vessel near the Somali coast. I imagined that this had surely been very difficult for her. She countered, "He knows me. He knows I can stand it. I shared information with him. He must know because he is a seafarer. I spoke a lot with him, especially about the difficulties."

This notion of being able to "stand it," and how this ability was communicated intrigued me. It struck me as a way of practicing care – a mutual agreement among loved ones to perform resilience. We spoke about being parents in Ukraine. Lyudmila laughed "Typical Ukrainian: we scare the children. We tell them to be careful." She and Yakiv agreed that Ukrainians "watch over our kids like hawks". She joked that her husband had suggested that they buy a boat to trail their son at sea to be sure he was safe.

Lyudmila had to get back to work. As we got up to leave, she said: "Here in Ukraine, we don't shake hands. Only if it's very business-like." We hugged and kissed each other's cheeks and she said, "Now you have friends in Ukraine and you can come back". I wish I could.

"A True Story"

Yakiv and I left the dark office building and found ourselves squinting in the sunlight. He pointed out Lenin Park across the street and told me, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "Now it is called 'Victory '." It seemed to me that Yakiv thought this post-Soviet re-naming was silly. He always insisted on the old names, he told me. It did not seem that he longed for Soviet times, but I got the feeling that the re-naming somehow felt fake to him. It reminded me of George Orwell's

fictional book *1984* in which words were changed to convolute their meaning for the purpose of indoctrination and suppression, such as Orwell's "newspeak" term "joycamp" instead of "forced-labour camp". Yakiv got excited, "Of course I've read it!" It was banned before the fall of the Soviet Union, but, with that same mischievous look when he teased me at sea, he confessed that he and his friends got their hands on illegal copies. Yakiv explained that George Orwell was actually telling a true story. "This is what life was like – not the main character, where terrible things happen – but everything else around him." As we crossed the street, on our way back to where his car was parked, Yakiv held out a protective arm, "You don't trust the light here – you have to look each way all the time!"

My time in Odesa was coming to an end. Yakiv brought me to the airport. He

insisted on carrying my suitcase and asked if my husband was coming to meet me at the airport. Because we arrived early, he rolled it to a makeshift café that was set up in the parking lot in an old shed. We sat outside drinking hot and strong black tea with lots of sugar out of a thin plastic cup. Yakiv told me that he keeps his money in Moldova, and not just for tax reasons. He was not optimistic. He thought the whole thing might collapse. We talked about taking leave – he said it was only one week until he had to join the ship again. He touched his heart and said he was beginning to feel sad: “One day before you leave, you start the crying.”

Yakiv and I have stayed in contact over the years. At the end of 2013, he sent me photographs of himself at a EuroMaidan demonstration in Kyiv against the then president, pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovych. Yanukovych had refused to sign an agreement to establish closer political and economic ties between Ukraine and the EU, although Parliament had agreed to move forward with agreement. The protests against his refusal grew into a broader social movement that addressed the kinds of injustices that Yakiv and others from Odesa shared with me: corruption, violence, lack of security and a rhetoric that was reminiscent of Orwell’s newspeak. The popular outcry resulted in violent backlash and

Yanukovych and his party members eventually fled Ukraine for Russia. The Parliament installed an interim government. In early 2014, Russian troops annexed Crimea and fighting in eastern Ukraine regions of Luhansk and Donetsk broke out. I wrote Yakiv again and asked if he felt safe – Odesa was not far from Crimea and was a major international shipping hub. He said that they were not worried. They spent some time at their dacha (land house), outside of the city. There were traffic problems to get his wife into the city where she worked, but otherwise it was fine. Was it fine, I wondered? Or was he telling me he could stand it?

Yakiv is not sailing anymore, but we continue to communicate sporadically. Russian troops began to assemble along Ukraine's border in November 2021, and in February this year, I reached out again to hear if Yakiv was safe. He responded:

All OK in Odesa, me and my family. Ukraine is strong and we will crash Russia with help from around the world [and] people like you. Hope Ukraine will join EU soon do what ever from your side [to] help Ukraine on this way. (…) Me and my son Boris almost all the time my land house 50 km outside Odesa. Galina needs to stay home since she is responsible person at hospital.

Adrienne: Great to hear from you, Yakiv. I agree with everything you write. If you need anything, feel free to text or call me. (…) We have a guest room in our apartment in Copenhagen. Stay safe and strong in Odesa and at your dacha. All of Europe is behind you. Warm regards, Adrienne

Yakiv: Hi Adrienne Many thanks for your care, situation here becomes more severe problem is that my son Boris has no external passport I will investigate how to arrange Thanks for your offer meanwhile my nephew Swiss citizen and my cousin Spain citizen. This is a matter to take dicision for me but its not so easy to leave present life Keep u update BR Yakiv

Adrienne: *Do please keep me updated. I don't think, given the situation that he will need a passport[4]. Just his ID card. The trains from Poland, Germany and*

Denmark – and other European countries – are free if you come from the Ukraine. I cannot imagine how hard the decision is. My offer stands: let me know if you need a place to stay, even for a short time. Best, Adrienne

Yakiv: *Thanks Adrienne for the moment stay in Ukraine*

Adrienne: *Stay safe. Greetings to Galina.*

Yakiv: *thanks Adrienne !*

After Russian troops invaded Ukraine and began bombing civilian targets, I revisited my fieldnotes from 2013. They struck me as visceral explanations for the Ukrainians' current determination – often packaged in dark humor – of their tired familiarity with abuse and unflinching insistence on protecting what they hold dear. I wish there was something I could do to help Yakiv. A poor substitute is this contribution that I hope can somehow speak to the current and past misery with respect and care for the generous and tough people who opened their homes and hearts to me. Yakiv's last message was sent on March 3rd. I wrote a week later, "Thinking of you, your family and friends and beautiful Odesa." I have not heard back from him.

Endnotes

[1] All names, other than public figures, have been changed to protect identity.

[2] A "rating" is a non-officer position on board, sometimes referred to as "AB" (able-bodied seaman) or "OS" (ordinary seaman).

[3] The bow (front) and stern (back) thrusters enable a ship to maneuver more precisely. They are often used for docking. Yakiv was planning on careful maneuvering for my sake.

[4] Shortly after we wrote, the Ukrainian government restricted men of fighting age from leaving the country.

Featured image by author

Being Like Family: Humanitarian Mobility and Metaphors of Kinship across Asia

Chika Watanabe
April, 2022

In this webinar series, we explore the relationship between mobility and humanitarianism in the course of four episodes. We – this is Till Mostowlansky, an anthropologist at The Graduate Institute in Geneva and Agnieszka Sobocinska, a historian at King's College London. Based on our disciplinary pathways, we approach the topic from the vantage point of both anthropology and history. In each episode, we showcase the work of either an anthropologist or a historian of humanitarianism and discuss with them how mobility features in their work.

In this week's episode, we meet Chika Watanabe from the University of Manchester to discuss her work on the activities of a Japanese NGO, the Organization for Industrial, Spiritual and Cultural Advancement (OISCA), in Myanmar. Firstly, Chika presents some research she worked on towards her book on the organization, titled Becoming One: Religion, Development, and Environmentalism in a Japanese NGO in Myanmar. Her presentation is followed by a discussion on intra-Asian humanitarian mobility, kinship, religious connections in humanitarianism as well as the legacy of Japanese imperialism. We hope you'll enjoy!

Watch the other webinars in this series here.

Multispecies Anarchism in the

Postnuclear World

Anibal Garcia Arregui
April, 2022

Connect the dots between “state”, “imperialism”, and “war”. Add “leaders”, “testosterone” and “nukes”. Look at the picture and tell me anarchism was a bad idea. In effect, as a band of Russian dudes and their Western elite-peers spoil the world, it seems the right time to summon those other Russians who could help us to imagine future reparations. One of them is “prince” Pyotr Kropotkin, the Moscow-born anarchist and naturalist who posited mutual aid, not competition, as the major force driving evolution (1902). Mutual aid is both a biological strategy of organisms to endure through cooperation, and the core ethical and practical orientation of many libertarian ideologies. Mutual aid traces a different history of

the environment, one which recoils from naturalized Darwinian schemes of inter-species struggle for existence. Unfortunately, it was Darwin's ideas that were picked up (and greatly distorted) by Victorian social engineers, eugenicists, and racists, whose arguments contributed to the naturalisation of violent imperialism, social inequality, and war. Now, imagine that modern political ideologies would have bought mutual aid instead of competition as the "natural" driver of social organisation. What would happen if we were to imagine both biological and social relations with Kropotkin not (only) with Darwin?

> *Unfortunately, it was Darwin's ideas that were picked up (and greatly distorted).*

Besides Kropotkin, there is a deeper Russian genealogy of naturalists who have shed light on forces of evolution which depart from the zero-sum premises of Darwinian ecologies. One example is the phenomenon of symbiosis, or symbiogenesis, as per the generation of new biological forms through combination of different organisms. The study and revelation of symbiotic processes can be traced back to nineteenth-century botanists as Konstantin Merezhkousky, Andrey Faminstyn and Boris Mijailovich Kozo-Polyansky. Since the late sixties, symbiogenesis was made famous to the West by evolutionary theorist Lynn Margulis (1981), who in turn inspired the later work of social science scholars such as Donna Haraway (2016), Stefan Helmreich (2009) or Anna Tsing (2015) among others. Vital interdependence and symbiosis are natural facts as well as powerful socioecological forces. And yet, planetary leaders remain oblivious to the possibility of reimagining a global politics through *this* kind of science.

In a time when testosterone, nuclear puissance and mutual phallocratic destruction seize the fate of the entire planet, it seems ok to recall other forms of imagining interactions both within and beyond the human sphere. The important here is probably not the human but the humane. In this regard, Kropotkin's notion of mutual aid seems way more humane than social-Darwinist notions of the

natural "survival of the fittest" (Spencer 1864: 444). Of course, mutual aid is not exempt of violence. In the same way that human collectives' self-organisation can be an effective strategy against killer states (Channell-Justice 2022), mutual aid can be a smart defensive gesture in nonhuman animals, too. Kropotkin famously wrote that "it is not love, and not even sympathy (understood in its proper sense) which induces a herd of ruminants or of horses to form a ring in order to resist an attack of wolves; not love which induces wolves to form a pack for hunting" (1902: xviii). Ruminants, horses, wolves, and people can effectively self-organise to exert violence in defence of dignity, life, or the humane.

> *Planetary leaders remain oblivious to the possibility of reimagining a global politics through this kind of science.*

That biology, ethics and politics can be rekindled in this way makes me think that the relational heuristic we identify as "anarchism" should be expanded beyond the *anthropos*. This is to simply say that, in the event of wanting (or needing) to become anarchists, we can't possibly do it alone. Social and ecological existence is irremediably built upon alliances *within and across* species. And despite human pulsion towards all-out acts of domestication, many of these alliances are still based on situated, practical arrangements between specific collectives (not entire species) or even among individuals (Arregui 2020: 823-25, forthcoming). I'd say these practical arrangements are closer to mutual aid, self-organization, and anarchism than they are to the "state" and "domestication"- the pinnacles of our anthropocentric projects.

So, if mutual aid is a fine relational orientation for a more-than-human politics, multispecies anarchism could be a motto, or perhaps the only available option, to relaunch life after the atomic ejections of world-leading machos. These ejections can be materialized in the near future, or they may remain as a disastrous potential. They are either way extremely harmful. Or isn't there already a "nuclear damage" inflicted in our spirit? The very possibility that current chiefs of state's decisions can trigger The End extends nuclear fear well beyond Ukraine.

But it also extends the impulse to collectively resist, and the anticipatory imagination of a reconstruction.

> *"Anarchism" should be expanded beyond the anthropos.*

Since elaborating on the present will only make us feel like an irredeemably stupid species, I'd prefer to speculate with a postnuclear future – whatever that might be. Just imagine for a second where to start if we need to rebuild everything from scratch. What would we do? Would we start again with Darwin, Spencer and the survival of the fittest? If fitness today equals to military strength, I am afraid that mutual assured destruction will lead to none of the "fittest" left there to tell the remaining what to do. It might rather be the case that relatively small human and other-than-human collectives would need to make their own choices about what is best for the common interests. It looks like social and biological fitness would need to be after all reframed, along Kropotkin's ideas, in more collaborative terms.

I invent multispecies anarchism not to save the planet, but to intellectually and (above all) emotionally navigate this awful, self-destroying moment. And I invent it because it already exists. Take the urban wild boar I accompany as an example (figure 1). These ethnographic subjects are unruly, smart, and creative. They produce new urban ecologies and say domestication and state measures of conservation are not an option. Of course, states and scientific institutions effectively cull and control wild boar populations for sanitary, ecological and biosecurity reasons all over the world – tracing institutionally-driven control of wild boar populations is in fact the goal of the collaborative project in which I participate. So, if these pigs with a mohawk partly succeed in Barcelona, it is because they are finding unexpected comrades among humans who feed, pet, or simply tolerate them in the city. I am not celebrating nor rejecting those alliances, just noting that multispecies partnerships follow dynamics that from a conventional ecological purview could appear as being recalcitrantly "anarchic", autonomous, and unforeseeable.

The fact is that wild boar are re-occupying parts of the outskirts that were previously invaded by expansive real-estate projects. Barcelona provides illustration of how wild boar flourish in and despite the Anthropocene. They do not obey species-level ascriptions in terms of habitat or behaviour, and while they weave intimate alliances with suburban neighbours, they do not show signs of planning to subjugate to human designs at any point (Arregui, forthc.). They are, as Spanish anarchist Federica Montseny liked to think of herself, “indomitable” ([1926] 1991). Gaining more and more iconic traction in recent decades, wild boar have been claimed as a totem for an unruly Barcelona, a reminder that cities can enact freedom in unexpectedly wild and admirable forms. Killer chiefs of state should be wary of wild boar totems and other forms of radical resistance. And even in the worst-case scenario of the atomic ejections being materialized, these pigs have proven to be still quite good in reinhabiting postnuclear environments (Bell 2020; Morimoto 2022).

Killer chiefs of state should be wary of wild boar totems.

Humans are not wild boar, but multispecies anarchists of the future might need to negotiate domestic spaces with them and with other resilient critters. In this time of deep existential anxieties, the weirdest possibilities of future coexistence become increasingly plausible. This is why neurotic people already wonder how to re-organize things in case these militarized dudes really do what they implicitly or explicitly say they are going to do. Listen to the neurotic people, because the rest are just aliens. Then, take a look backwards in time, for this can bring some ideas to the table. One of the things that were recently being discussed is whether self-organisation, direct action and freedom is a rarity or in fact a core feature of homo sapiens. The answer is that archaeological, historical, and ethnographic evidence suggests these things are not only common, but that freedom can be (and has in fact many times been) scaled-up (Graeber and Wengrow 2021). Isn’t this at least an interesting place to start? You may picture a myriad of counter examples of domination and submission driving history, and they are also true. Yet the goal here is to de-fix historical linearity, and to reckon with human agency

in producing endless oscillations of socioecological forms. The linear narratives that go from savage egalitarianism to resigned bureaucratic subjection are the sprouts of a post-Darwinian science and politics, one which tells the fable of a lonely homo sapiens who is fiercely "homo" but very little "sapiens". This poor dull guy cannot foreclose the possibilities of what can be created.

> *The goal here is to de-fix historical linearity*

My observation here is that fables, along with myths and scientific equations, always involve more than one species, so it makes no sense to rethink the whole story from the unique angle of the homo sapiens. If the goal is to stress non-linearity, agency, and even cooperation in processes of ecology-making, then we might start by acknowledging that what can be created depends in part on how we think about our relations to other organisms. Kropotkin hinted that these relations are oriented by ideas as well as by how we act *directly* (that is corporeally, morally, affectively, and strategically) upon human and nonhuman others in mundane ecologies. This is why along with mutual aid and self-organisation, direct action will be a key issue for multispecies anarchists of the postnuclear world. Voltairine de Cleyre wrote that "direct action" was the way to grant that all have the access to "the sources of life, and all the natural wealth of the earth, and the tools necessary to co-operative production" ([1912] 2016). She was thinking of industrial workers in the early twentieth century, but nonhuman life itself has always worked that way. Look at wild boar. They don't ask whether they can be free. No state and no nuke can stop the self-organisation of life, mutual aid, and direct action. These things are just natural, occur across species, and will again and again chase those who hide behind the brute monopoly of violence.

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Building Aidland: Aid Workers and the Creation of a Global Aid Industry in the 1970s

Kevin O'Sullivan
April, 2022

Building Aidland:
Aid Workers and the Creation of
a Global Aid Industry in the 1970s

In this webinar series, we explore the relationship between mobility and humanitarianism in the course of four episodes. We – this is Till Mostowlansky, an anthropologist at The Graduate Institute in Geneva and Agnieszka Sobocinska, a historian at King's College London. Based on our disciplinary pathways, we approach the topic from the vantage point of both anthropology and history. In each episode, we showcase the work of either an anthropologist or a historian of humanitarianism and discuss with them how mobility features in their work.

This interest in mobility is linked to our previous work in which we explored the role of globally mobile volunteers in humanitarianism and development (Agnieszka) and how managers of Muslim NGOs draw on far reaching historical-religious connections to pursue their projects (Till). But the theme of mobility also has a broader significance in humanitarian contexts. Historians and anthropologists have often defined humanitarianism as concern and action assisting a distant Other. Yet, the different dimensions of distance and ways of overcoming them remain open questions.

In conversation with our guests, we discuss the different types of mobility that inform humanitarianism. We talk about the power dynamics that shape these mobilities, and attempt to traverse static North-South and South-South

configurations that have sometimes flattened discussions about humanitarianism into simple binaries. This series is therefore not exclusively about the mobility of people, ideas and artifacts in humanitarianism. It is also about kinship, colonialism, religion, and war. After the conclusion of the series with episode four in a few weeks, we will revisit these themes and how our guests relate to them in their work in the form of a concluding article.

To get the series started, in this episode we talk to Kevin O'Sullivan from the National University of Ireland, Galway. Kevin is the author of the book The NGO Moment: The Globalisation of Compassion from Biafra to Live Aid, a rich and fascinating account of the historical emergence of non-governmental organizations. In his contribution to the episode, Kevin presents on aid workers and the creation of a global aid industry in the 1970s. We really enjoyed the discussion and we hope you will, too!

Watch the other webinars in this series here.

Bend like a Willow Tree

Emmeline Rumpf
April, 2022

‘Watch out, we’ll catch every one of you!’

Hamza’s shrill voice echoed in the stairwell, and through the opening, he saw a swarm of children scattering to hide behind the surrounding blocks covered with graffiti. Running as fast as he could, he went down the two floors separating the old shopping arcades from the esplanade, a barren square of concrete located at the center of the Willows residential compound. As he accelerated, Hamza heard:

‘Wait for me!’

Ali was struggling to follow. He and Ali always made arrangements to be in the same team when they were playing cops and robbers after school. Of course, they almost always won, as Ali knew all the hiding places in the neighbourhood, and because most of the other kids were younger than them. 8-year-olds stand no

chance against 10-year-olds in a race.

The rain had just stopped, and the neighbourhood was regaining its colours in the pale sun. Hamza noticed movement behind the garbage containers, and he headed across the square, but suddenly, he twisted his ankle in a pothole and fell heavily into a muddy puddle. As he slowly opened his eyes, he could see all the buildings in circle around him: four towers, each seven stories high, all with the same small windows and weird balconies that made them look like crooked creatures. Hamza's heart sank as he realized that what he was looking at would soon be gone.

At the Willows, the imminent demolition of building 3 was the subject of many discussions, including among Hamza's group of friends. After their game, as the kids were walking back to the street, they passed by the worksite where machines and piles of construction material were stored. Even though the inhabitants of the district had risen against this new project, it seemed very real now. Yunis, one of the youngest and most daring of them all, couldn't help but pee against the fence in an ultimate gesture of protest. He yelled:

'They shouldn't have come to bother us in the first place, we were doing fine without their shit…'

After years of poor maintenance due to alleged lack of money, the city had decided to replace the Willows social housing and its somewhat crappy flats with more modern buildings, in order to make this part of the city centre attractive again for families and businesses. At least, that is what Hamza had understood during one of the neighbourhood gatherings. What he did not understand was the logic behind forcing dozens of families to move out just to allow new ones to come. Because of the 'revitalization' of their 'problem area', as the information leaflet that had been distributed put it, Hamza's parents as well as Yunis's had to find a new place to call home, leaving more than a decade of life at the Willows behind.

When his mom had first told him about the construction project, Hamza had been

worried about losing his friends and having to live far away from everything he knew, but she had promised they would stay. The city council had promised, too, they would have priority on the new apartments once finished. However, after seeing the difference in rent prices, his parents had started to look elsewhere; with his dad receiving a mechanic salary and his mom staying at home to take care of his little sisters, Hamza's family just could not afford to live at the Willows any longer. Hamza had felt a strong feeling of injustice, and one night he had taken his anger out on his parents:

'Because of you, I will never see them again, not Ali, not Dimi or Yunis or Issa! Everybody will just forget me!'

'Don't be so dramatic! Public transports exist, you can always come back with a bus or whatever to meet Ali.'

'This is bullshit and you know it! Since Hadji Ahmed retired and moved away, nobody has heard of him. I tell you, it's as if he didn't exist anymore! It's so unfair, why do *we* have to go? Why is it always the same people that have to pay?'

He had vigorously slammed the door, and after a while, had heard his dad mumble, resigned:

'Kid's going nuts talking to us like this, but he is not wrong though'.

Trying to put these thoughts aside, Hamza suddenly realized his little group had reached the neighbourhood shops. The streets around had been noticeably transformed during the past months, as a different type of population had joined the Willows' small world. Some artists and young people with weird ideas had seen the cheap rents and decaying stores as an opportunity to start new businesses, and a few boutiques were already flourishing. For instance, Hadji Ahmed had run an all-in-one store for ages, where you could buy everything from shoes to computers and even furniture. But when he retired, the old man had no family members to take it over, and the cramped and dusty shop had become an old-style barber shop. Just a bit further, a chatty woman had opened a small

gallery displaying artsy candles with dried flowers incrusted in them, which Hamza secretly thought were very beautiful. One day, while he was walking by with his little sister, they had pressed their nose against the window in awe, and the smiling lady had offered him a tiny blue candle for free. He had then proudly given it as a gift to his mother.

This new vibrant atmosphere attracted more and more people from the city and even tourists could now be seen in the local bars. Ali liked to make jokes about how they had become the cool kids of the city, thanks to the Willows arcades becoming 'the new place to be'. But it was annoying that the very people that had despised their neighborhood, considering it too insecure and grungy to deserve their attention, were all of a sudden falling in love with the place as if they had discovered an untouched Eldorado. To the boys, it had always been *their* Eldorado.

The children were thirsty, but the kebab place where they usually hung out was closed at this time of the day, so Hamza suggested they try and ask the adjacent fancy coffee shop for some Coca-Cola. As they entered, it seemed people were looking at them, yet Hamza could not recognize anybody. He saw the waitress imperceptibly tensing up when she inquired about their orders. Ali was about to pay for the others, but when he saw the prices on the receipt, he almost choked and asked to remove half of the drinks because he had not enough money. With a polite tone, the waitress then advised them to take their drinks outside, and as they felt awkward in the almost silent room, they obeyed.

This experience left Hamza thoughtful on his way back to the buildings. Once home, he let his mind drift again. Not only had the shopping street changed, he thought, but the Willows public school had also welcomed many new students. Hamza did not know them well, as they did not mix with kids from the Willows towers, but he felt their families were not like his. For example, none of the new kids would eat breakfast at school. Ever since Maïa had fainted during her history presentation because her dad had forgotten to buy groceries, the teacher brought milk and bread and left it on a table in the entrance hall. Nearly all Hamza's

friends would gather around the food every morning, especially Dimi and Yunis, whose mothers' cleaning shifts lasted until late morning. Apparently, the newcomers did not need free food.

The only new friend he had made this year was Leon, but that did not count because Leon was not like the others. Both liked to play chess together, a game Hamza had learnt with Hadji Ahmed, and when Hamza's mother cooked fresh Künefe, he'd often invite Leon home. Leon had once confessed that he enjoyed hanging out at Hamza's place, especially when all the neighbours came, because there were always good stories being shared. It made him feel less alone.

Hamza also went along to Leon's home, where his mother, Karina, was so loving and never punished them when they were messing around. He admired her rope-like hair, it looked just like Issa's hair, only in blonde color. Karina was always overly enthusiastic about things, but Hamza was not sure she really understood what was happening, as it sometimes seemed as if she lived on another planet. Hamza would always remember the first time Karina had met his own mother, as after having extensively complimented their carpets in the living room, she had whispered:

'Also, Elif, don't hesitate to talk Arabic with Leon, I know he will really feel home here with you and he will be happy to learn a few words with you, right buddy?'

Mom had nervously pulled a thread from her gown and, pressing her lips together, she had replied:

'I wish I could, but honestly it is going to be really complicated…'

'Why so? I can guarantee you he is very quick at picking up languages!'

'Sure, but my main concern is that we speak Turkish here at home.'

Leon and Hamza had not been able to refrain from laughing, and although Karina had apologized, Mom had been furious for hours.

That funny moment seemed very distant now, and everything felt more complicated. Hamza was totally lost, but the difficult part was that he did not know who to blame for this situation. It seemed all the changes he had already faced were nothing compared to the tsunami a move into another neighborhood would represent. Just the thought of it made him want to cry, but he then remembered how Hadji Ahmed used to talk about their community, always in a wise and metaphorical way:

‘Hamza, do you know what a willow tree does? It bends when it must, but surely never breaks. That’s us, right? We are stronger than you think, they won’t cut our roots and branches so soon’.

As much as he felt those strong ties between people in the neighborhood were still alive, the boy wished he had the words to tell the world. To shout and to show everybody what was happening in the Willows housing compound…

Explanatory appendix

This short story is inspired by Loretta Lees’2008 article on ‘Gentrification and Social Mixing: Towards an Inclusive Urban Renaissance?’ (*Urban Studies*, volume 45, issue 12, pp. 2449–70). Academic research on gentrification and social mixing is mainly policy oriented: although it often provides a valuable basis for understanding the political, economic and social dynamics of gentrification, such as the decrease in affordable housing, social polarization and increasing precarity, articles such as Lees’ sometimes fail to adequately picture the drama displacement and social change represents at the individual or family scale. Literature on the social and psychological effects of gentrification is still surprisingly sparse; my short story is an attempt to explore these aspects. Moreover, many studies emphasize the importance of specifying a neighbourhood’s socio-historical context, as there are many different types of gentrifiers and of gentrified areas. Therefore, the fictional aspect of the short story becomes particularly relevant for the topic of gentrification. In her article,

Lees discusses whether there is evidence of ‘positive gentrification’, in other words if the policies promoting social-mixing development projects in underserved neighbourhoods really contribute to alleviate precarity and build more sustainable communities. Her findings rather suggest that gentrification actually exacerbate existing inequalities, social polarization and segregation, eventually leading to displacement of low-income groups.

Different elements of Lees’ research are reflected in my fictionalisation: the story revolves around a central event, an archetypical project of ‘urban revitalization’ meant to attract middle classes back in a low-income neighbourhood, which induces spiralling rents prices and results in displacement for Hamza’s family; the disruption in the microcosm of the community, caused by broader gentrification of the neighbourhood, is highlighted in the conversations, as well as in the description of the spatial transformation of the area; also, the growing segregation and lack of interaction between newcomers and long term residents is pictured through the boys’ experience of rejection in the expensive coffee shop and through the kids’ behaviour at school; finally, the character of Karina as well as the new ‘creative’ class exemplify the desire of the middle class for cultural diversity and illustrate, through their somewhat voyeuristic and appropriative attitude, how socio-cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and create tensions.

The story is framed from the perspective of a boy, Hamza: devoid of judgement, the contemplative and relatively innocent look he has on the world around him becomes the lens through which we can better understand the traumatic consequences of gentrification and displacement at the individual level. This subjectivity allows us to reduce complex social science concepts to simple everyday life situations that everyone can relate to. The intimate setting helps us identifying ourselves, shifting the focus on the *perception* of gentrification, on Hamza’s feelings and on the psychological impacts of social mixing policies. Considering the process of gentrification through the eyes of a child that does not even know what the word means further underlines the powerlessness and vulnerability of the affected communities in the face of such events.

Furthermore, the deliberate choice to avoid anchoring the narrative into a defined place and time adds a universal dimension to it. Hamza's story is personal, but it could be anyone's; although he feels alone, many isolated individuals suffer from the effects of gentrification around the world. However, the Willows neighbourhood comes as a reminder to keep faith – willow trees do not break, they bend. They symbolize hope, safety and a sense of belonging, and as the future of Hamza remains open, the power of his community to heal, reinvent itself and to grow strong again should not be underestimated.

Featured image by Deb Nystrom, courtesy of Flickr.

This post is part of our second Academic Fiction thread – see Dennis Rodger's introductory post.

Dear Yaye

Larissa Mina Lee
April, 2022

November 2017

Dear Yaye,

I am writing to you because a week ago, Babacar returned. Babacar Diop, I think I might have written to you about him, do you remember? Or maybe I have not, if I am to be honest, I probably have never really thought much about Babacar, not before he came back. It was Tuesday, late in the morning, the sun was already up high, but the trees along the main streets provide shade, and in some streets, you get a breeze and can smell the salt in it. There were women with their plastic bags and kids in their arms walking down the pavement next to the big road, around us the sound of cars and motorcycles, an early 2000s hit playing inside a

shoe store. Sometimes during that time of the day I just stay in one spot, later in the day I might move as I get restless. Anyway, that morning I was standing under a tree at the intersection close to Ponte Rio Niterói, a long bridge people cross every day as it connects Niterói with the Rio the newly arrived probably know about, the Rio with the famous Cristo, Copacabana, Ipanema… and so it is an important bridge, I guess. But then again it doesn't mean too much to me, the Dahira is here in Niterói, I sell my goods here in Niterói, and so this bridge connecting our neighbourhood with others is not something I think about too often… Anyway, as I was saying, it was Tuesday morning last week, and Ousmane is messaging us in our WhatsApp group chat about Babacar returning. Ousmane arrived two years after me, and he is one of the newcomers who does not like me. Most Senegalese I know in Ri, live in Niterói, but he was directly incorporated upon his arrival into the housing system in Copacabana where street vendors are living a very different life, I am telling you, Mother. I could send you a postcard from that beach, but I do not think you would appreciate the look of the ladies on that beach very much, I would not want to offend you. Ousmane and I could meet of course if one of us was to cross the Ponte Rio Niterói, but I have only met him in person on a few occasions as he only rarely makes it to the meetings of the Dahira. But we are connected through the Dahira WhatsApp group and so I learnt through Ousmane that Babacar had returned. Babacar is the Dahira's oldest member, he is older than you, maybe seventy years old, maybe older. As I mentioned before I never really thought much about Babacar, but of course I knew of him. I know Dahira members had been helping him with daily tasks and also financially ever since he arrived a couple of years ago at an already very advanced age, and I pitched in myself when our collective raised funds to buy Babacar's tickets to make one final trip back to Senegal to see his family before it was too late. Our understanding, or at least mine, was, that he would stay there. So his return was surprising news for me – and many others, I'm sure. Why Babacar decided to come back I don't know. But of course the Dahira will continue to care for him. And so Babacar has arrived again, to Rio de Janeiro, for the second time. But this time it will be different, as many things have changed over the past few years since I came here and since Babacar arrived for the first

time. As I write these lines I realise just how much has changed and how much we have changed, and I really want to tell you about it, Mother.

Did you know that I am now a legal resident of Rio? This is a fairly new development, so I don't think I have told you about it yet. My residence status has been 'regularised', and so has that of Babacar, Ousmane, Amadou and his wife, and almost 200 more. I first learnt about it in a WhatsApp group too, not the Dahira's, but one called 'Touba Brésil TV Rio de Ja[neiro]' which is made up of members of the Dahira, the Senegalese Association of Residents in Rio, and others. You might be wondering how this came about, who advocated for us and who made this possible. I am happy to say that the Dahira has played its part in the matter. During a reception with the ambassador of Senegal, the Senegalese Association of Residents in Rio came together with the Consulate and Caritas, and the latter's lawyers worked for the benefit of Senegalese newcomers here in Rio and successfully appealed for collective regularisation. Now this might not have been so easy if the Association had just been one among many different groups representing the Senegalese here in Rio. But because the Association and the Dahira work so closely together and agreed that this issue was a common priority for all, there was a strong case, or so I have been told.

I also want to tell you about the first màggal we held in 2017, which is to this day my most cherished memory I have made in Rio. Here too the Dahira members have worked together closely with the Association. You know I am not a mastermind or a man with too much ambition, but I think the màggal was possible thanks to the efforts of many members like me, who all helped in organising different things from pamphlets, to food and drinks and music. Mother, if you had been here, I know you would have been the most beautiful woman amongst them all, and that means something. All the women attended in elaborate turbans and the men in their most beautiful kaftans. We held the event at the Caminho Niemeyer, a very impressive and prestigious architectural landmark here, if I may say so. It is directly on the open shores of Niterói, facing Rio, and what better place for us to welcome Cheikh Mame Mor Mbacké. Everyone was so proud that day, we couldn't stop talking about our marabout and reminded each other that in

2007 he had even made a speech at the UN, and now he was here. Oh mother, you would have been moved to hear him speak. I can see you before me, how you would have sat very still, your head held up high with your festive turban, eyes fixed and your face so beautiful as you would have been completely concentrated on our Mame Mor Mbacké. It was a full day with religious ceremonies and conferences, held both in Wolof and Portuguese. Had it been just us, the Dahira, organising the events, we might never have obtained the permission to hold the event at the Caminho Niemeyer. But because we organised it not just as the Dahira, but together with the Senegalese Association of Residents in Rio, we were able to hold this event which showed the transnational significance of our local Murid community here in Rio de Janeiro. Most attendants were Senegalese, though there were also Brazilian friends of the community, students who were hanging out nearby and the odd person passing by who joined us. There was also Dona Antônia, we call her our mãe brasileira, which I hope you wouldn't mind. Senhora Antônia owns a wholesale business for sunglasses in Niterói and so you understand it is important to me and many other Senegalese street vendors to be on good terms with her. But that day I was not thinking much about this to be honest, I was too elated to have our marabout with us and I was so proud to be a Senegalese in Rio that day, business was the last thing on my mind.

I am also proud because I think over the past year I have never been called "*Angolano*", which is what Brazilian's call Africans in the city when they don't know any better. But I think since the first màggal the Senegalese have slowly but surely become a respected community here in Niterói, and metropolitan Rio at large. I am here now, your son Ibrahima, not as an *Angolano*, but as a Senegalese with legal residency in Rio. When I think about it, I am almost surprised and astonished myself that we have achieved so much, that we have come to not only inhabit Rio de Janeiro but to become a legitimate part of it and are contributing something so valuable as the màggal in a space like the Caminho Niemeyer. After all, we are not a government with ministers, cabinets and funds who can draw up plans and then implement changes or additions to the city just because we decided to do so. We are not even just one organisation, there is the Dahira, the

Association of Senegalese Residents in Rio de Janeiro, the Senegalese General Consulate as well as the ambassador, and if I think about it in this way, I am actually even more surprised that we have achieved the regularisation or were able to organise the màggal. Because truly, conflict and disagreements are quite common, especially in WhatsApp group chats holding Senegalese who are street vendors, shopkeepers, professionals, professors, old, young, religious, or not. But here we are, mother, Rio is different today because of us and I wish you would actually get this letter so you could be proud of your son.

I know you have passed long ago now. But that doesn't mean you are not with me anymore. After all, I am here in Rio de Janeiro, as are Babacar and Ousmane and Amadou. And together with many others we have come to find our place in this already existing place, and Senegal is always with us and it is now also in Rio. Who would have thought?

Your son, Ibrahima

Explanatory appendix

This epistolary fiction is inspired by Tilmann Heil's 2020 article "Interweaving the Fabric of Urban Infrastructure: Senegalese City-making in Rio de Janeiro" (*International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, volume 45, number 1, pp 133-149). It depicts the first-person perspective of a Senegalese newcomer in Rio de Janeiro, a member of the Dahira, a street vendor in the streets of Niterói, the city mentioned in Heil's article. Before starting to write I had to look up many of the Wolof words, I wanted to find out more about who Cheikh Mame Mor Mbacké was and googled pictures of the Caminho Niemeyer. Then I had to consider what a different format, a piece of fiction, could do that the original article did not. I thought about which anecdotes most impressed me, and that's how I came to choose the story of the old Dahira member who returned to Rio as the starting point. What I try to bring home in my fictional piece is not only how the Senegalese diaspora in Rio was successful in making an imprint on Rio, but also

how impressive that is considering that it is so different from the processes one might usually imagine in relation to city planning and the provision of infrastructure. I chose the format of a letter to the (deceased) mother at home as it allowed me to describe the events in detail and explain the situation to an outsider, but I also could allow Ibrahima to be open about his feelings and express both his astonishment about the success of their efforts and also his pride in what his community had contributed to Rio.

Featured image by Emmaus Studio courtesy of Unsplash.com.

This post is part of our second Academic Fiction thread – see Dennis Rodger's introductory post.