



Framing Gaza: Call for contributions

Allegra
October, 2023



The culture of fear instilled by the increasingly right-leaning structures of power that govern public spaces and our universities in the Global North have led to the silencing of critical voices on Palestine and Israel. In the last week, statements in solidarity with Palestinian civilians written by members of academic communities have been taken down by their institutions, and some local and national governments banned public demonstrations.

What is our purpose as anthropologists, educators, writers and academics in a moment like this one? At a time when there seems to be little space for nuance



and context, when talk of retribution dominates the public debate, and when dehumanising language is given free rein in the name of ‘neutrality’, we must speak out.

We empathise with those who have suffered violence, but we express this empathy without using ‘both sides’ as a flattening, equivalencing, uncritical phrase. We can both mourn Israeli casualties, decry the tactics of hostage-taking, condemn hate crime and antisemitic violence *as well as* denouncing Israel’s genocide of the Palestinian people and unchecked Islamophobia in Europe and beyond. However, we also cannot ignore the context within which violence takes place: one in which a vastly superior military and diplomatic formation has kept a people bereft of a state, of a functioning government and of basic services, whilst subjecting them to everyday forms of humiliation and brutality.

Since Allegra’s inception, we’ve been publishing work on the forms and manifestations of [political violence](#). In the past, we found it not only relevant but necessary to publish essays and opinions on the ongoing oppression in Palestine and resistance to oppression, including texts on [camps](#), [boycotts](#), and [struggles](#). As the military siege and bombardment on Gaza intensifies and as the political discourse polarises, we feel the need to open up the discourse on Palestine and Israel to a range of nuanced and critical positions. We cannot remain silent, *especially* in a European social and political context that is increasingly right-wing, nationalist and Islamophobic. This doesn’t make us apologists for anyone, it makes us concerned citizens.

Allegra is launching an open-ended [Thread](#) on the current situation in Palestine. We are open for submissions that push the debate further in a constructive, critical, humane way. We are specifically looking for ‘notes’, short-form comments without stylistic constraints or an established format. These will be desk reviewed for fast publication. Please aim for around 1,000 words. We also welcome statements of solidarity that have been taken down by universities or other institutions, which we will publish in our [Alliances](#) section.



If you are a scholar of the Middle East or a scholar who comes from the region, or a member of a Palestine solidarity group whose statement has been taken down, send your statement or contribution to submissions@allegralaboratory.net and Ccstuff@allegralaboratory.net.

Let there be Light: Frontiers of techno-Solar Capitalism

Samwel Moses Ntapanta
October, 2023



I grew up in an area surrounded by miombo woodland, located approximately 200 kilometres southeast of Lake Tanganyika. In the early 1990s, when I was five, my father was employed as a correctional officer at Nsenda agricultural prison. The Urambo district, where the nearest town of Urambo is located, is approximately 12 miles away from the prison and serves as the administrative centre. Even the



district centre had limited access to electricity, with only four hours of electricity in the evenings provided by a diesel generator. The first time I experienced living with electricity light was at the age of fifteen when I joined a boarding school to continue my secondary education. Before this, I had only experienced electricity during visits to relatives who lived in towns with access to it. During my early years, I had limited access to electricity and the devices that come with it. My father would occasionally buy batteries for our Panasonic radio-cassette player, and we had several battery-powered torches, a bicycle with a dynamo, and paraffin lamps. I spent many nights studying under a paraffin lamp during my early education years. This experience instilled in me both a fascination and fear of electricity, even though I did not anticipate pursuing a career in this field. However, this fascination and fear proved helpful in my master's degree research project, which focused on solar electrification in rural Zanzibar, as well as during my PhD project on electronic waste in Tanzania.

It is important to remember that light plays a crucial role in the fight against poverty.

The introduction of solar power technologies has dramatically improved the lives of rural children. In the past, they had to rely on paraffin lamps as their only reading light. With access to solar-powered light, they no longer have to endure the same conditions as my generation did. It is important to remember that light plays a crucial role in the fight against poverty. Throughout history, people have considered light a sacred and essential element for growth. However, the adverse effects and waste associated with the production and use of artificial light are often ignored. This essay delves into why society gauges progress based on access to artificial light and explores the fascination with light. Additionally, it examines the downside of renewable technologies, particularly solar-powered light.



Light is good!!

During my master's degree research project in 2016, I had the privilege to volunteer at Barefoot College Zanzibar on their solar mama initiative. The solar mama project's main objective is to increase light accessibility for underprivileged households. What made this project unique is its focus on empowering women by equipping them with useful skills and providing them with access to solar technology. While conducting field research, I had the chance to write an article for Barefoot College about one of the beneficiaries and how access to solar light had transformed her life. I am returning to this piece to show the impacts of projects like solar mama on communities.

Mwanapili Iddi Makame, a widow and mother of six, lives in a small village of Kandwi in northern Unguja on the archipelago of Zanzibar. She took care of her children alone and employed herself with a small rice cake business. "It was a difficult time. My rice bread was often smelling of Kerosene, and few would buy them. This was a problem for many of us in the food selling business. Those days, I was struggling to get together enough money to sustain my family", says Mrs Makame. In 2011, when barefoot started the solar power project in her village, she was chosen to be the solar mama. With four other solar mamas from Zanzibar, she was trained for six months in solar engineering at Barefoot College in Tilonia, India. For the first time in her life, she was visiting another country and continent. She became a solar engineer, something that in the rather patriarchal society of Zanzibar is considered men's work.

Solar mamas started their work at the end of 2011. They installed solar panels sponsored by the Indian government to disadvantaged households who pay a monthly fee, smaller than average monthly costs. "We are saving a lot in energy costs. I used to pay 15,000 Tanzanian shillings weekly for the Kerosene. Now, I pay 6000 Tanzanian shillings monthly for the fee for the solar," added Mrs Makame. In 2016, five years after the training, her life had changed a lot. Mrs Makame continued working as a solar mama, making repairs and maintenance for the households with the solar systems. She also had more customers for her rice



bread, which did not smell like Kerosene anymore. She had joined a savings group to save 2500 Tanzanian shillings (approx. 1\$) weekly from the bread business. She planned to construct a house, using her savings for cement and bricks. And she managed to send three of her children to secondary school, quite an achievement for single mothers in Zanzibar (Ntapanta, 2016).

Materiality of light

Most off-grid portable solar photovoltaics in Sub-Saharan Africa are used primarily to produce light (Karekezi & Kithyoma, 2002). Other uses like radio and charging mobile phones are secondary. There is a fundamental argument for providing light to rural communities. Light is regarded to be virtuous. Symbolically, light represents intellectuality, holiness, civilisation and, more critically, progress. Those with access to artificial light are regarded as “modern”, and those in the dark are assumed to be “backward”. The West referred to Africa as the *dark continent*, especially in the pre-colonial era when little was known about the continent. The label came from the western perspective of development and civilisation in which the continent was denoted as backward and characterised by savagery and primitive life (Jarosz, 1992). The strangeness of Africa and unfamiliarity with the lifestyles of its inhabitants led it to be related to the darkness because darkness can symbolise evil, mystery or fear.

The introduction of Christianity and the Christian ideology that light is good was regarded as a moral obligation of a white man to enlighten the savages of the dark continent. Enlighten comes from “the metaphor that ignorance is a state of being “in the dark,” “the dark side”, “forces of darkness”, and that knowledge is “illuminating, enlightenment”. Light represents the absence of darkness (evil) and exhibits power over darkness, evil, backwardness, and, recently, poverty (Edensor, 2015, p. 425). The material fear of darkness has become more pronounced in the modern age because of the massive illumination around people’s lives. It is perpetuated through the electric light at night, the daytime



light, and religious teachings (both to religious and non-believers) (Edensor, 2013). Light has provided the feeling of security, cleanness, health, and intellectuality. The securitisation of light can be traced back to around the 19th century in Europe with the rise of towns, cities, and modern societies (Hughes & Smith, 1987)- Before the invention of artificial light, night was considered an unpalatable time for Europe. The night was a time for witches, burglars, devils, and murderers. Houses were made with solid doors and bolts to keep out these “monsters”.

In patriarchal societies where the burden of everyday life is heavy on women, the night is a time for women to rest until dawn. In big cities, night walkers, like prostitutes, the homeless and beggars, can avoid public harassment and prosecutions by hiding in the dark corners of cities (Edensor, 2013; Edensor & Falconer, 2015). In Europe, when the light was only in the centres of towns and cities, outskirts and rural areas with no lights were a symbol of “pagan obscurantism, monstrosity, and diabolism” and a cause of “moral, intellectual, and physical depravity, production of social dislocation and inimical to social and economic dynamism”, so were those living in the outskirts (Edensor, 2013).

Billions of dollars are invested into electrifying rural populations—the underlying meaning of these projects is the same old school of thought of civilisation mission derived from colonialism.

From this perspective, the drive to increase access to light is the idea that it is an impetus for development. Societies with no access to artificial light are still regarded as backward. Billions of dollars are invested into electrifying rural populations—the underlying meaning of these projects is the same old school of thought of civilisation mission derived from colonialism. First, access to electricity has become an indicator of development. Those with no or less access are regarded as living in poverty. Solar power offers a new paradigm of energy production without the costs of erecting large infrastructures. However, possibilities provided by portable solar power devices are wrapped in green



energy politics, overshadowing their impacts. Second, solar technologies are opening up for conglomerates to accumulate even more wealth from poor communities by providing an expensive short-term solution that traps households in a never-ending cycle of buying new systems every few years. The cycle is not sustainable; instead, it is dispossession by greening or green-washing.

Green washing: The Dark Side of solar technologies

In the past decades, we have witnessed an enormous increase in investment and use of off-grid solar energy in Africa. The increase in investment by businesses, donor countries, and international and local non-governmental organisations points out a turn into new poverty eradication and developmental idealism. There are positive affects accompanying access to energy through off-grid solar power, like the story of Mrs Makame that I wrote in 2016 for the Barefoot College.

Without dismissing the role and importance of off-grid solar technologies and their adoption in rural areas, there is a gap in knowledge of the effects in communities concerning access to these technologies. For example, there is no comprehensive information how companies handle their products' afterlives or how, where, and who does that. This is because "Green" has become an uncontested concept in discussions around clean energy. However, ontologically, green energies are not as green as presented, and neither are off-grid solar technologies. The labels "green, renewable or sustainable" overshadow affects embedded in off-grid solar in rural communities. Because of these umbrella concepts, very little attention is given to harmful changes embedded with off-grid solar energy and what happens to the afterlives of the devices (Edensor, 2013). There is a growing literature on the accompanied effects and problematic social configurations that arise with these technologies (Cross, 2019, 2020; Cross & Murray, 2018; Cross & Neumark, 2021).

Energy production is one of the main contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. To reduce emissions and their adverse impacts, solutions have been directed into



technologies away from fossil fuel dependency to “green” energy sources. The adoption of eco-friendly, green, renewable and sustainable energy sources has increased tremendously. While renewable energy sources such as wind require intensive capital investment because of the infrastructure required, off-grid solar photovoltaics present a solution regarding infrastructure needed, affordability and investment. Off-grid solar systems are diversified from small to large systems. For example, the “solar mama” project in Zanzibar was installing a “solar home light system”, a simple system for lighting, charging mobile phones or/and radio or TV. These systems are affordable to many households through various payment methods. Compared to other renewables, which need capital and infrastructural investment, solar systems, are diverse, and users can choose according to their economic muscles and needs.

The burden of reducing global emissions has been placed on sub-Saharan’s shoulders.

Tanzania and other Sub-Saharan countries are vital for reducing greenhouse gases and the road to sustainable energy production, even though they contribute less to greenhouse emissions than large industrial nations. Dependency on biomass for energy by countries like Tanzania is mentioned to contribute to CO₂ emissions. However, the burden of reducing global emissions has been placed on sub-Saharan’s shoulders. Programs like Clean Development Mechanism under the UNFCCC and Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) have been widely implemented in Tanzania. However, some of these projects have demonstrated alerting levels of land grabbing, grievances of communities regarding access to land and resources like wood and disagreement on community access to carbon credit funds (Purdon, 2013, 2015; Purdon & Lokina, 2014).

Solar energy is a pre-emptive approach to divert energy production from biomass and sources like coal that developed countries used to industrialise. Renewables are the solutions for greenhouse gas emissions. Apart from emissions, solar



technologies improve health and well-being, reducing the use of toxic kerosene lamps, smokes, children can do schoolwork at night, and aiding small businesses to flourish.

At the same time, solar technologies have opened and connected rural Tanzania direct to the market. The Tanzanian rural population has been on the margins of global capitalism. Solar technologies and mobile telephones are leapfrogging communities immediately to the techno-capitalism. Even the most interior communities in the Serengeti national park are connected directly to London and New York stock markets through energy and telecommunication companies. As a new frontier for capital accumulation, communities have become indispensable avenues for salvage accumulation (Cross & Neumark, 2021; Tsing, 2015). Let there be light and see communities flourish has turned to let there be light so that solar conglomerates can accumulate from the poor untapped by the market.

Around the landfill, several informal e-waste recyclers sort and dismantle scrap materials collected from all over Zanzibar Island.

During my recent fieldwork in Tanzania. I visited the Tunguu landfill, the only formal landfill in Zanzibar. Around the landfill, several informal e-waste recyclers sort and dismantle scrap materials collected from all over Zanzibar Island. In these workshops, rudimentary tools like hammers and methods like burning off the insulations from electric cables or pouring lead acid from batteries on soil are used. These activities release toxic chemicals into the environment. Vegetable gardens and farms around the area and water wells are threatened by exposure to toxic compounds. At the same time, workers in these areas do not have protective gear, so they, too, are highly exposed.

Solar waste is generally found in these workshops, commonly from batteries and portable solar lights. Most solar companies in Tanzania do not have programs for handling the afterlives of their products. While the lifespan of many solar technologies is between three to five years. It means that more solar waste piles in people's homes or is collected by scavengers to end up in informal recycling



centres.

Currently, in Tanzania, most solar waste is scattered throughout rural areas or handled by the informal sector, with little infrastructure to collect or handle it properly. For that matter, as the number of solar power devices increases with no mechanisms to properly recycle, rural areas are slowly turning into wastelands, creating what Jamie Cox and Declan Murray call “the gap”. The celebration by citing the number of devices sold, how many rural households have access to light, we must not forget that the consumption of solar devices leads to waste in a relatively short period (Cross & Murray, 2018).

In the end, I am thinking, what is the condition of the solar devices installed by the solar mama project I studied in 2016? Most of the devices installed before 2016 when I visited might have found their way to Barefoot warehouses or lying somewhere in the beneficiary’s houses. While the story for the solar mama that I started with is still accessible on the internet, giving this beautiful picture of solar technology, there is nothing of what those solar systems have become after five years.

The politics surrounding green technologies tend to overlook what happens to the devices once their lifespan comes to an end. Despite the excitement around increased investment and access to solar power and light, particularly in rural sub-Saharan Africa, the discussion of what happens to the afterlives is often missing. Unfortunately, the manufacturing process of these devices already sets them up for a future waste.

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[*Featured Image of Rural road, Zanzibar, Tanzania*](#) by [*Kristine Stevens*](#), courtesy of [*Flickr*](#).



Ordinary Treasures: Objects from Home

Agnès Maillot
October, 2023



I am going to start with breathing what I push out of me and what you push out of you and what we push out of each other

lungs working like billows

lungs working

sounds you could read on

the air is angry now

The air is thick with solidarity by Essa May Ranapiri



A bloodstained Nicaraguan flag, a jacket full of memories, necklaces that are rarely taken off- gifted by family members, shoes that dance, a Tibetan sound bowl that brings peace and healing - all feature in our [DCU Irish Refugee Integration Network](#) short film. It is recommended that [you watch the film now, before reading on.](#)

Ordinary Treasures: Objects from Home is underpinned by a commitment to what [Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange \(2018: 190\)](#) call “thick solidarity” - a form of solidarity anchored in the cultivation of radical empathy with the intimacies of experiences and lives which are not wholly accessible to one another. The film, through co-design and collaboration, follows educational philosopher Maxine Greene’s (1977) concept of “wide awakeness” which strives to encourage others to find conscious and intentional ways to “live deliberately” (1977: 120) through elevation, understanding, and empathy. We believe that this short film, as a kind of socially motivated artistic endeavour, with its’ emphasis on voice, object, story and music, can function as a multi-layered pedagogical tool.

The film participants (with the exception of one) chose not to be identified, as such, the visuals mainly focus on the storied artefacts. As a non-hierarchical, co-created film, the participants experimented with their voices and stories to articulate a shared humanity and desired social connections through meaningful objects. These storied objects serve as anti-racist method - a hopeful one that works in the service of enacting and producing thick solidarity. Becoming wide awake in this way is critical at a time when the “bright unbearable reality” (Badkhen 2022) of increasing conflict, displacement and the climate crisis is responsible for many kinds of uncertainties and fears - a time when we need collectivities of care more than ever before.

As academics writing from an Irish context, we see the need to centre the generation of thick solidarity in our work and engagement as an urgent ethical responsibility. For us, teaching otherwise, researching otherwise, writing



otherwise and collaborating otherwise are engagements which form the bedrock of this thick solidarity. We have witnessed with alarm and sorrow the growth of a far right politics in Ireland that is actively pushing an anti-immigration agenda with similar tactics to those deployed elsewhere in Europe and North America, in what sociologists Ulrike M. Vieten and Scott Pontying (2023) call the ‘normalisation of the global far right.’ This comes at a point of multiple intersecting crises, where asylum seeker and international protection applicant numbers have increased and a lack of available housing has seen the widespread use of hotels and warehouses to temporarily accommodate those seeking protection.[1] More broadly, the Irish State has failed to meet reception standards generally and has not delivered on its commitment to abolish part of the Irish asylum system (an egregious system of institutionalised living) called [direct provision](#) (see especially Day 2020) which has been widely condemned (Hewson 2022).

In response to this current context, the [DCU Irish Refugee Integration Network](#) was established in May 2022. This initiative has been delivering English language classes and intercultural workshops since its inception, from Monday to Wednesday, at three different levels. It is volunteer-led by DCU staff and students from across the university. A curriculum attentive to the particular learning needs of forcibly displaced students has also been developed with further plans afoot to make this open access. These classes have created a small space of sanctuary for students and staff alike, bringing much needed joy, laughter and learning in a classroom that is whole person centred (Brantmeier and McKenna, 2020). For the staff involved, this has been about doing crucial meaningful solidarity work through pedagogy. In cultivating new socialities and spaces of affectivity, the DCU IRIN classroom has generated a place of learning and mutual social support which works against [the false solidarity](#) (one that creates hierarchies and maintains a particular status quo), which according to Ruslana Koziienko (2023), so widely exists in the context of forced displacement. *Ordinary Treasures: Objects from Home*, our short film which centres on the objects of forced



displacement, emerged from this ethos of a collaborative classroom anchored in an ethics of care.

Understanding the material culture of forced displacement, of the power of mundane, familiar or intimate things to inspire empathy and solidarity is an important area of scholarly and creative interest (Yi-Neumann et al. 2023:15). Much of this work strives to engage the objects of forced displacement in both their socio-political contexts and deep affective dimensions. Our short film sits at this intersection of “shifting the focus from ‘identity-talk’ to ‘object-talk’ in order to better understand the complexity of migrants’ lives” (Yi-Neumann et al. 2023:15). There is a curious potency in the power of a storied object to inspire empathy and solidarity. In exposing intimacies and interiorities, objects produce their own creative alchemy, sometimes inexplicable. In *Ordinary Treasures: Objects from Home*, the selected objects serve as dossiers, as memory portals, and as tokens of interconnectedness. Through plotting the affective dimensions of the displacement journey, these objects also do anti-racist and solidarity work—conveying the complexities of displacement/post-displacement with clear and direct “no bullshit poeticism” (Chavez 2021).

The air is angry now: the path to co-design

“When you learn, teach; when you get, give.”—Maya Angelou

Swaying, swaying back and forth, back and forth, a blood stained Nicaraguan flag tells a story of protest, of solidarity but also of loss-of family and home left behind and of citizenship revoked. Swaying, swaying back and forth, back and forth, this flag betokens the complex configurations of lives lived through loss and forced displacement. The owner of the flag is firm in what she wants to convey and in what she seeks through the sharing of her story: radical understanding, empathy and solidarity. She, alongside other students in the DCU IRIN classes, were presented with the guiding premise of the film and invited to participate if they so wished. Students were immensely enthusiastic, particularly as many of them are housed in different kinds of asylum accommodation, some of which have



witnessed far right protests.

Our objective with the film, co-produced in conversation with participating students, was to use the project to speak to spaces of encounter and humanity in the hope of cultivating empathy and solidarity. The film centres a version of Jean Paul Lederach's (2005) vision of the moral imagination. As such, our aspiration is for the viewer to better imagine being part of a nuanced web of relationships, emphasising interconnectedness, solidarity and an ethics of care. Through the poesis of object, voice, story and music, the film project aspires to play a small role in generating an anti-racist community spirit and collective action at a time when it is crucially needed in an Irish context.

Embedded in our visual approach within the film is a sentiment akin to Tina Campt (2017), whose work is a poetic call to listen to images as something more than rhetorical in the way we approach them. Campts' calls to push beyond the limits of what we are told and what we see into the sonic and haptic layers of the visual record resonates with how we approach our constellation of object, image, and sound in this short film. The storied objects gathered together in the film provide a lens onto resistances—both ordinary and extraordinary—so as to generate, where possible, affective dialogue and exchange. Our pathway to all of this is firmly situated within the spirit of co-design, one which we believe is necessary for the cultivation of a thick solidarity which, “can withstand the tension of critique, the pulling back and forth between that which we owe and that which we share” (Liu and Shange 2018: 196). Indeed, in this messy intersubjective ‘co-designed,’ space between ‘owing and sharing,’ we found creativity, imagination, re-imagination, laughter, care, embodiment and of course, empathy for each other's experiences.

In preparation for the film, participants were asked to write a short reflection on an object that they had brought from home with them. Stories were workshopped in a class session, particularly as language levels slightly varied. Subsequently,



with the support of a script-writer, Orla Bourke, participants engaged in individual discussions about how they wanted their stories articulated. Initial recordings were made with both the scriptwriter and participating DCU IRIN staff. Once the final versions of the stories were agreed by the participants, the DCU recording studio was used for individual recordings. For many of the participants, it was their first time in a recording studio so ensuring their comfort and sense of safety was paramount. The studio technician worked closely with Maria Loftus for the series of recordings in a trauma informed, sensitive manner, particularly necessary given the harrowing nature of some of the stories. The film directors followed up with participants across the subsequent days to ensure everyone's ongoing well-being.

Next, we engaged participants in a co-design workshop, to storyboard and imagine the structure and flow of the short film. It also sought to ensure all participants were happy with how their stories were being represented, and comfortable with the accompanying imagery and soundscape. The cinematographer, Declan Nugent, a graduate of the [DCU Master's in Refugee Integration](#), also attended the co-design workshop. Discussions during that stage focused on participants' decision to remain anonymous or to appear, partially or fully, in the film. The suggestion that the corporeal be put in relation to the objects was put forward with quite a few participants speaking about their comfort or discomfort with having their hands or blurred images of their physical selves on camera. Participants' fears about being visible in the piece ranged from concerns about family members in the countries they had fled or indeed, concerns about one's whereabouts being identifiable (particularly for those who had fled targeted gang or state violence). Others were concerned about possible impacts on their international protection applicant status

One of the most interesting elements of the co-design workshop was a discussion around how the storied objects would be emplaced within the Irish landscape. The workshop convenors came with an idea of juxtaposition and parallelism - that the journeys, objects, partial aspects of the participants stories could be put into visual conversation with sites of memory, history and conscience in Ireland - such



as [Magdalene laundries](#) and industrial schools, famine sites, places of erstwhile conflicts and emigration ports. The convenors explained how they felt such parallelism might engender understanding and thus empathy - that in the betwixt and the between of different kinds of histories - there are shared experiences. The film participants firmly rejected this idea. Indeed, while they sought juxtaposition, it was not with places of loss or conflict, but with places of joy - beaches, parks, the buzzy Dublin cityscape. Their vision, which they agreed on collectively, was for a film that expressed their arrival in Ireland as a hopeful one. They were resolute in their determination to see their stay in Ireland, regardless of its length, as a positive, new chapter, in spite of the challenging reception conditions and international protection application process in which they find themselves.

Honouring the participants' vision for this short film project was key to its co-creation. The cinematographer accompanied by DCU IRIN staff and participants filmed the objects in isolation and then with the participants, always sensitively following their guidance around how they wanted the filming to happen. Dublin location shoots happened independently with the cinematographer travelling to film the different locations. As with any creative endeavour, edits and transformation, although limited by a short-timeframe and small budget, were core to the final outcome. Later editions saw some participants asking for imagery of their home countries to be included to better balance the different juxtapositions, and some actively chose the accompanying scenes. The centring of a co-design process has thus been a learning journey for all involved. However, crucially as an endeavour anchored in attentive listening, sharing and exchange, collaboration and an ethics of care, its outcome has been one attuned to the creative wishes and desires of all participants.

In many ways, this is a film that brings—through storied objects—a bearing witness to the nuance and complexities of forced displacement departures and arrivals. Swaying, swaying back and forth, back and forth, in different parts of the



film are two necklaces, both owned by women who have experienced extreme violence in their lives. The necklaces come from two countries: their owners very different. Both of their stories, however, beckon towards the urgent need for remedy, recovery and repair in responses to forced displacement. In so doing, these storied objects (like the others in the film) render visible the intersecting constellations of universalism in loss and survival as it manifests in complex life configurations and the displacement journey.

Sounds you could read on: the making of a musical score

Normally, we don't pay any attention to the ... rising and falling of our voices as we toss our thoughts back and forth to each other. We just talk and listen. The only time we pay attention to these qualities is in song.

[Spearin, The Happiness Project.](#)

The owner of the shoes that dance sings in this short film. She has sung many times for us now. The first time her voice quivered, she wanted to evoke the magnitude of emotion she felt for the loss of her family and home. She gets braver, her voice stronger and we re-record. Her voice sits into the flow of the musical score as it does with the simple, pure tone of the Tibetan sound bowl, filling the aural space. The bowl and the singing, the only two explicitly musical samples, are serendipitously both in C-Sharp, a distant key to the rest.

The original score uses elements derived from the voice samples to support the testimonies, using the inherent creativity in vocal expression as a guide for the music. Pitch (tone height), timbre (quality of the voice) and tempo (speed of articulation) are the main musical elements of voice prosody, the expressive qualities of voice. The composer sought to create harmony between the testimonies, created from the centre pitches of the speakers, thus striving to highlight common experience in the piece. The rate of speech is used to inform the tempo of the music over each speaker.



To achieve this, pitch tracking and segmentation was performed on the voice samples, extracting the melody of the speech. Despite the fact that several of the participants are not speaking in their native language, the non-explicit expression in their voice can be heard and celebrated. This was followed by key analysis for the harmony and event rate estimation for tempo. In using these features, the music supports the voice and the voice informs the music. The film's musical score thus works in communion with our participants' voices but also their losses, their hopes and their dreams. Note, pitch, melody all aspiring to trace, map and inspire empathy thereby fashioning a form of melodic thick solidarity.

The air is thick with solidarity: concluding reflections

*“Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it.
Because what the world needs is people who have come alive”*

[Howard Thurman.](#)

The owner of the jacket walks through a well-known Dublin park. He wants us to understand the textures of the worlds that are interwoven in his jacket. His story evokes interconnection, resolve, memory, comfort and repair but at the same time, indeterminacy, contingency and losses of many kinds. His jacket will eventually grow old and be replaced. He imagines this and so too his unfolding commitment to a new life in Ireland. As the owner of the jacket walks through the Dublin cityscape with ease, he shows viewers how in the movement between displacement and emplacement there are so many “unspoken relations” (Campt 2017). Our short film aspires to do this too, while it cannot be a remedy in full, it can through its attunements with the power of listening to the storied objects of forced displacement begin to play a role in generating thick solidarity. For us, as members of the DCU IRIN collective, this short film is part of an ongoing journey to cultivate anti-racism in the spaces we work and live in. This kind of way-making



in teaching and learning, choreographed as antiracist and decolonial, is now an imperative. For the participants in the film, the method of co-design was wholly agentive.

On June 20th 2023, World Refugee Day, we held a launch for the short film in Dublin City University and many of the film's participants attended. Some wept openly, and some spoke of how their displacements shot through with the wounds of loss, longing but also resistance were made visible through this intentional and evocative bricolage of object, voice and story. In spite of the ongoing traumas of their displacement journeys, for many of the participants, co-designing the short film became a source of joy - a scaffold between struggle, loss, ethical deficit and a chance to retell, to own and to begin again. Through co-design and collaboration, together with the participants, we sifted through and animated objects of displacement. Together, we found the kind of wide-awakeness which Stephanie Bartlett (2022) tells us has the possibility to be an antidote for complacency and grief. The cultivation of this collective wide-awakeness through co-design and collaboration is now a key foundation for the future work we plan to develop with the film participants and others over the coming months and years.

This short film thus joins Wenders and Zournazi's (2013: 107)'creative revolt to change perceptual habits' so as to disrupt and thus facilitate reimagination - a mundus imaginalis (Corbin 1976) in the making. In so doing, we see it as making a small contribution to relations of thick solidarity in displacement work. Indeed, in our uncertain world, as academics who work with those who have been forcibly displaced, our responsibilities thus lie first and foremost in this space of thick solidarity-deliberately grounded in ethics, integrity and radical care. This is the only way forward now for many of us doing this kind of work.

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Footnotes

[1] See the recent court case by the Irish Refugee Council against the Irish State for a failure to meet reception standards <https://www.irishrefugeecouncil.ie/press-release-irish-refugee-council-welcomes-judgment-of-high-court-on-homeless-applicant#:~:text=The%20High%20Court%20today%20declared,Rights%20of%20the%20European%20Union.>

Duties of Care, Servicing Debt

Till Mostowlansky
October, 2023



What better place could there be to think about the interconnections between service, duty and care than the Venetian Palazzo Vendramin dei Carmini? The palazzo is a 17th century building tied to the merchant family Vendramin. The family was deeply involved with Venice's confraternities, or Christian voluntary associations, through which they contributed to charities and funded the arts in the city. Historically, the palazzo also represents the socio-political hierarchies that emerged from endeavours of care, and from the duties, debts and obligations which such service entails. Today the palazzo houses Ca' Foscari University of Venice's Department of Asian and North African Studies where in June 2023 we, a dozen anthropologists and historians, gathered to debate the possibilities of connecting service, duty and care on a conceptual level. In the process, we moved between keynote talks by seasoned researchers, presentations of impressive ongoing doctoral research and plenty of time for open discussions in the palazzo, over meals, coffee and on long walks through Venice.



Over the past years, literature on the anthropology of care - from medical to political anthropology - has rapidly grown (e.g., Amrith 2017; Feldman and Ticktin 2014; Gagné 2018; Gelsthorpe, Mody and Sloan 2020; Govindrajan 2018). As Megha Amrith emphasized in her keynote in Venice, the concept has gained expansive as well as “polysemic” qualities (Buch 2015). Existing work has focused on multiple dimensions of care, including affect, ethics, economy, (state) control and global inequalities. This has enabled a critical reassessment of dichotomies such as autonomy and dependence, warm and cold, sentimental and instrumental, private and public, caring and careless. Furthermore, questions around “moral deservingness”, or who deserves care and who does not, and who actually cares and delivers care work have received critical attention. In her own research, which focusses on medical and domestic workers from the Philippines, Amrith observes conflicting modes of care. While her interlocutors occasionally do refer to the ethical underpinnings of their care as rooted in Catholicism or medical professionalism, personal aspirations and care for one’s own future stand at the forefront. Transnational care work is thereby bound up with personal forms of care towards homeland and kin left behind. Not infrequently, this involves contradictory emotions that emerge from social settings in which duty and obligation pull and tug at the neoliberal promise of individual progress.

Duty is a concept “hidden in plain sight” and, though used ubiquitously in anthropology, remains undertheorized.

Duty, as Philip Fountain argued in his keynote talk, is deeply interconnected with various forms of care. It is also linked to moral formations that imply qualities of “family resemblance”, such as obligation, solidarity, compulsion and demand. Nevertheless, duty is a concept “hidden in plain sight” and, though used ubiquitously in anthropology, remains undertheorized. Fountain noted that studies on humanitarianism and giving are particularly useful examples of how duty lies at the core of many ethnographies and yet is often left out of social, historical and genealogical investigations (e.g., Fassin 2012; Malkki 2015; Mittermaier 2019). Drawing on his longstanding research on Mennonite



development institutions in transnational perspective, Fountain called for more attention to duty as a means of reinserting the notion of “debt” into our thinking about care. The transnational mobility of Mennonites from Russia to the United States and Canada in the context of the Volga famine in the 1920s is a striking example of how debt can inform the duty to care. Owing their lives to assistance from overseas, the Mennonites who escaped the famine accumulated a *Reiseschuld* (travel debt) that had to be repaid far beyond financial obligations. Engaging in service for Mennonite development organizations, these survivors and their descendants - all conscientious objectors on religious grounds - had to navigate debt towards the Mennonite institutions as well as expectations of the US and Canadian states.

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that service, duty and care - once opened up conceptually - begin to bleed into each other. A thorough genealogical embedding into concrete ethnographic and historical settings is thus essential to theorize them in relation to each other, as Fabio Vicini argued in his keynote on service. The Gülen movement on which some of Vicini’s research focusses is a case in point that provides insights into how Islamic service emerging from Sufi hierarchies (*khadimat al-shaykh*) has been reappropriated by projects of modernity. In the Gülen movement, which developed in Turkey and expanded rapidly and transnationally (before getting banned in Turkey after the 2016 coup attempt), service is envisaged as care on different, expanding scales: towards “brothers” within the movement, broader strands of society, the Islamic ummah and humanity at large. Economic ideologies play a crucial role in this transcendental notion of service, as Vicini also illustrated using the example of Deniz Feneri, an Islamic-inspired charity organization active in Turkey since the 1990s. However, what can be observed here, Vicini noted, is not necessarily a neoliberalization of Islam, but a “reinjection of the civilisational impetus of Islam” into neoliberal environments.



Processes of economic change and their embedding in larger historical contexts were core themes in the discussions throughout the workshop. In their presentations on vernacular aid organizations in Serbia's Sandžak region (Pol Llopart i Olivella) and hospitality towards Ukrainian refugees in Lithuania (Beatrice Juskaite) both speakers put obligations to care in relation to the emptying out of landscape. As a result of post-Cold War economic transformation and the end of socialist economies, "emptiness" and "aging" have become crucial attributes in rural regions (see also Dzenovska 2020). People's reactions to this change vary but often include ideas on how to re-populate the frontier. In the Sandžak, for instance, this is expressed through the notion of a duty to preserve and foster Muslim presence and belonging in the region. In his talk on techno-enthusiasm amongst Colombian teachers, Juan Forero Duarte shed light on a different mode of economic change. Entwining neoliberal aspiration of "serving the self" with Catholic-inspired ethics of care, these teachers navigate transcendence, New Public Management and notions of biographical debt towards their students. The temporality of debt also appeared in Gulzhan Begeyeva's paper on Turkish traders in Kazakhstan. In this case, the historical origins of Turks in Central Asia shape their charitable practices based on feelings of indebtedness and kinship, which are, in turn, wedded to Islamically-driven service to God and humanity.

In addition to the mentioned examples, most talks and discussions touched upon the theme of "religion". While religion stands in interaction with other forms of sociality, the ethics and communal interrelations brought forth by different religious traditions featured as central for an understanding of care, duty and service. Federica Cicci's presentation on women's involvement in the Chinese Red Cross in the 1930s and 40s was an example for how a seemingly nationally-oriented organization drew on a much longer history of missionary and philanthropic engagement in China. Megha Amrith, in her talk on care, mentioned how Catholic repertoires of sacrifice continue to play a role for medical workers from the Philippines even though economic considerations, wages and working conditions often take precedence. However, when it came to the forms of care



that these workers expressed towards each other Catholicism trumped economic paradigms.

A focus on duty, service and kin in state contexts could also foster a renewed engagement with the literature on street level bureaucrats.

Economy and religion are of course only two of a plethora of themes that workshop participants discussed in relation to service, duty and care. Many presenters - and discussants - also referred to the centrality of kinship and relatedness for thinking these concepts together. For instance, in Juskaite's presentation, Lithuanians hosted Ukrainian refugees at their homes and interpreted this encounter through memories of past suffering, shared history and cultural relatedness. Moreover, in his response to the panel on duty, Philip Fountain mentioned several aspects that have so far remained neglected in anthropological research on humanitarianism. In particular, he highlighted the moral and political intersections between "neoliberal altruism", state welfare, and kin-based solidarities. A focus on duty, service and kin in state contexts could also foster a renewed engagement with the literature on street level bureaucrats (Zacka 2017). Kathryn Allan's presentation on elected female members of parliament who had to flee Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban in 2021 is a case in point. Forming a parliament in exile in Greece they continue to serve the constitution of a past state. At the same time, they are enmeshed in relations of hospitality in Athens and at the forefront of gendered civic engagement in Afghan diasporic settings. Allan's work, along with the keynotes and panel presentations mentioned above, provoke a number of central questions that have arisen from two days of intensive discussion in Venice. To what extent can the focus on service and duty help us think about care in nuanced and differentiated ways? What are the roles of guilt, debt, disappointment, shame and humiliation in this constellation? And what can the ethnographic grounding and specificity of service and duty teach us about the generative, but also vastly expansive concept of care?



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Featured picture by [Matteo Angeloni](#), courtesy of [Pexels](#).

Venn diagram showing the overlap between supporters of BDSS & BDS

Allegra
October, 2023



VENN DIAGRAM SHOWING THE OVERLAP BETWEEN SUPPORTERS OF BDSS & BDS



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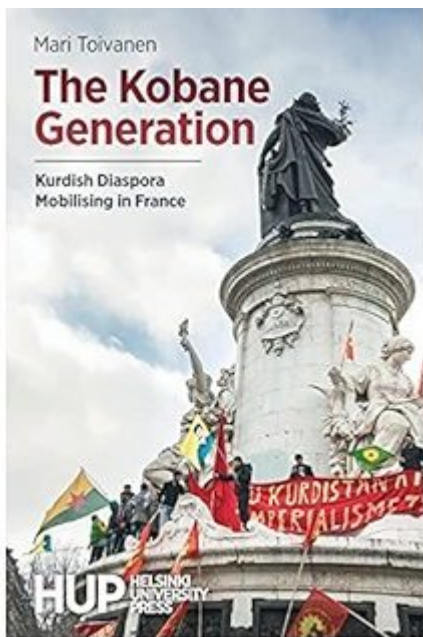
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Mari Toivanen (2021) [The Kobane Generation. Kurdish Diaspora Mobilising in France, Helsinki UP.](#)

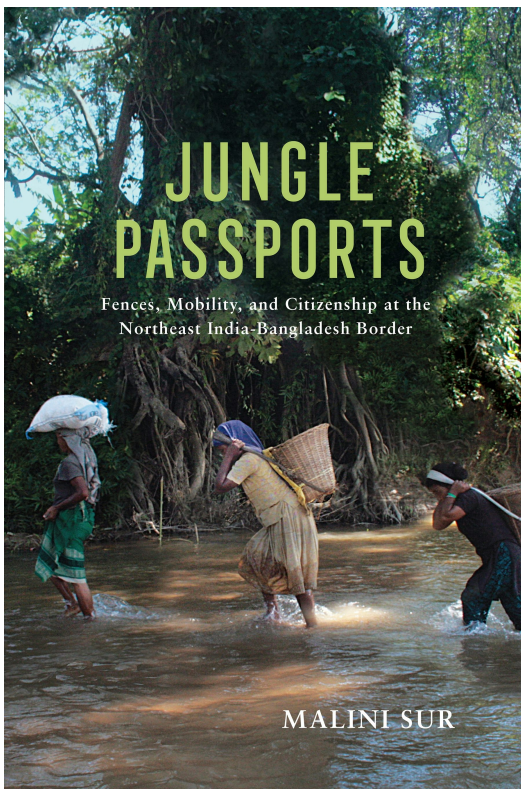
A small Kurdish city located in northern Syria, Kobane, became symbolically significant when ISIS laid siege to the city between September 2014 and January 2015. This pivotal moment in the fight against ISIS threw the international spotlight on the Kurds. *The Kobane Generation* analyses how Kurdish diaspora communities mobilised in France after the breakout of the Syrian civil war and political unrest in Turkey and Iraq in the 2010s. Tens of thousands of people, mostly but not exclusively diaspora Kurds, demonstrated in major European capitals, expressed their solidarity with Kobane, and engaged in transnational political activism towards Kurdistan.

In this book, Mari Toivanen discusses a series of critical events that led to different forms of transnational participation towards Kurdistan. The focus of this book is particularly on how diaspora mobilisations became visible among the second generation, the descendants of Kurdish migrants. The book addresses important questions, such as why second-generation members felt the need to mobilise and what kind of transnational participation this led to. How did the transnational participation and political activism of the second generation differ from that of their parents, and is such activism simply diasporic or also related to more global changes in political activism?



The Kobane Generation offers important insights on the generational dynamics of political mobilisations and their significance to understanding diaspora contributions. More broadly, it sheds light on second-generation political activism beyond the diaspora context, analysing it in relation to global transformations in political subjectivities.

Malini Sur. 2021. [Jungle Passports: Fences, Mobility, and Citizenship at the Northeast India-Bangladesh Border](#). Pennsylvania University press.



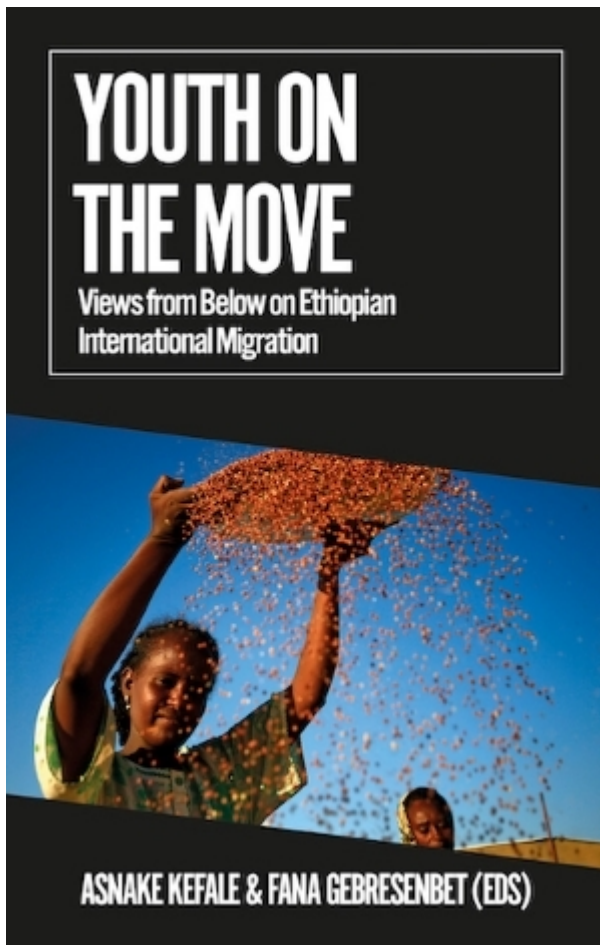
Since the nineteenth century, a succession of states has classified the inhabitants of what are now the borderlands of Northeast India and Bangladesh as Muslim “frontier peasants,” “savage mountaineers,” and Christian “ethnic minorities,” suspecting them to be disloyal subjects, spies, and traitors. In *Jungle Passports* Malini Sur follows the struggles of these people to secure shifting land, gain access to rice harvests, and smuggle the cattle and garments upon which their livelihoods depend against a background of violence, scarcity, and India’s



construction of one of the world's longest and most highly militarized border fences.

Jungle Passports recasts established notions of citizenship and mobility along violent borders. Sur shows how the division of sovereignties and distinct regimes of mobility and citizenship push undocumented people to undertake perilous journeys across previously unrecognized borders every day. Paying close attention to the forces that shape the life-worlds of deportees, refugees, farmers, smugglers, migrants, bureaucrats, lawyers, clergy, and border troops, she reveals how reciprocity and kinship and the enforcement of state violence, illegality, and border infrastructures shape the margins of life and death. Combining years of ethnographic and archival fieldwork, her thoughtful and evocative book is a poignant testament to the force of life in our era of closed borders, insularity, and “illegal migration.”

Kefale, Asnake and Fana Gebresenbet, eds. (2021) *Youth on the Move: Views from Below on Ethiopian International Migration*. Hurst, August 2021.

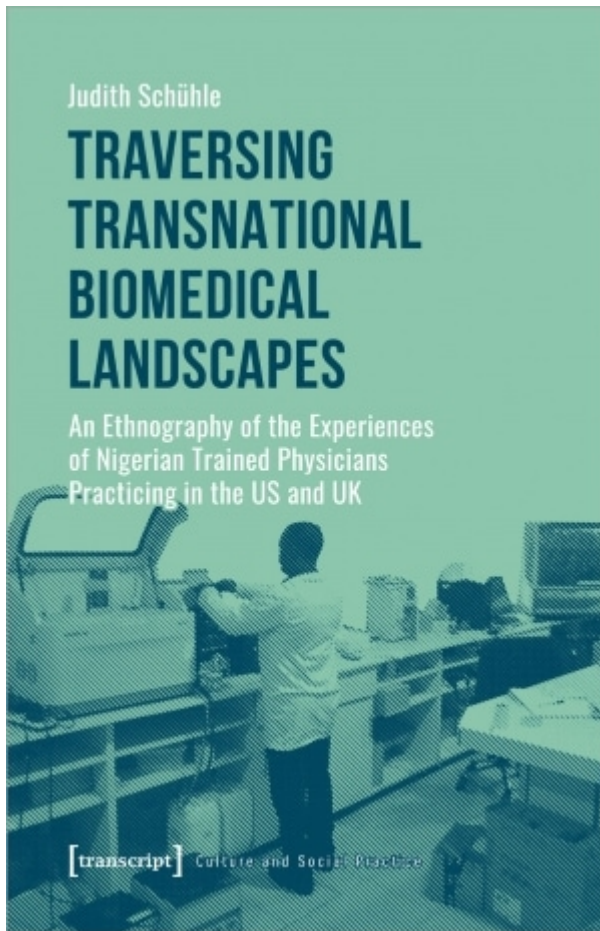


At a time when policies are increasingly against it, international migration has become the subject of great public and academic attention. This book departs from the dominant approach of studying international migration at macro level, and from the perspective of destination countries. The contributors here seek to do more than ‘scratch the surface’ of the migration process, by foregrounding the voices and views of Ethiopian youth-potential migrants and returnees-and of their sending communities.

The volume focuses on the perspective and agency of these young people, both potential migrants and returnees, to better understand migration decision-making, experiences and outcomes. It brings together rarely documented cases of young men and women from several communities across Ethiopia, migrating to the Gulf and South Africa. Explaining the agency of local actors-prospective migrants, brokers and sending families-*Youth on the Move* illuminates the pervasive, persistent failure of state attempts to regulate migration. Moreover, it examines the financing of migration and the sharing of remittances, within a culturally situated moral economy. While accounts centred on economics and political violence are important, the contributors demonstrate compellingly that these factors alone cannot provide a full understanding of migration’s complexity, nor of its social realities.



Judith Schühle (2020) Traversing Transnational Biomedical Landscapes. An Ethnography of the Experiences of Nigerian Trained Physicians Practicing in the US and UK. Transcript



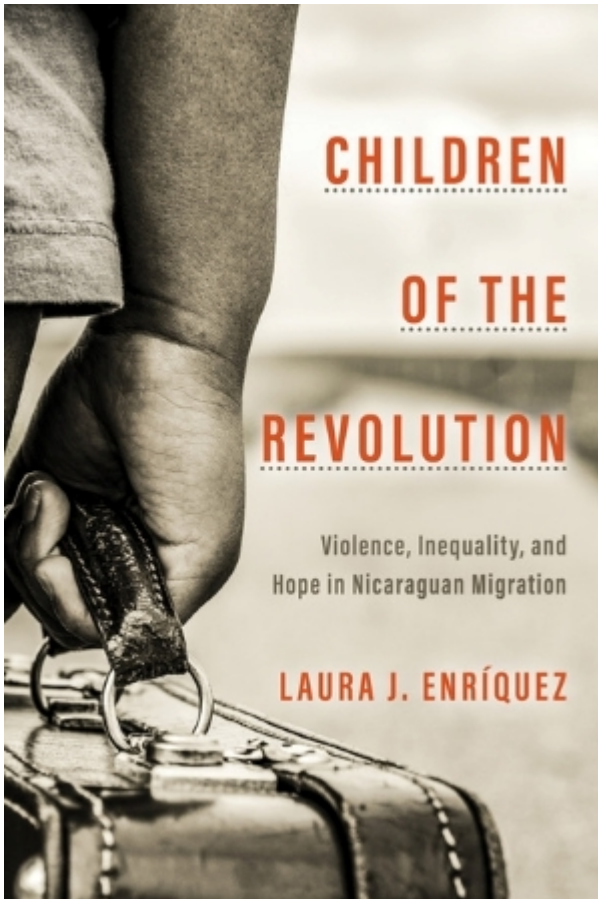
In the age of globalization, the transnational dimension of sciences like medicine seems to be given. However, the agents connecting different parts of this transnational biomedical landscape have yet to receive their due attention. Situated at the intersection of contemporary debates as well as theories of medical anthropology and migration in the 21st century, this book explores the experiences of Nigerian trained physicians who migrated to the US and the UK within the last 40 years. By drawing on individual professional life stories, Judith Schühle illuminates how these physicians disconnect from and (re)connect to diverse local social and biomedical contexts, becoming established abroad while at the

same time trying to influence health care services in Nigeria through transnational endeavors.

Laura J. Enriquez. 2022. Children of the Revolution:



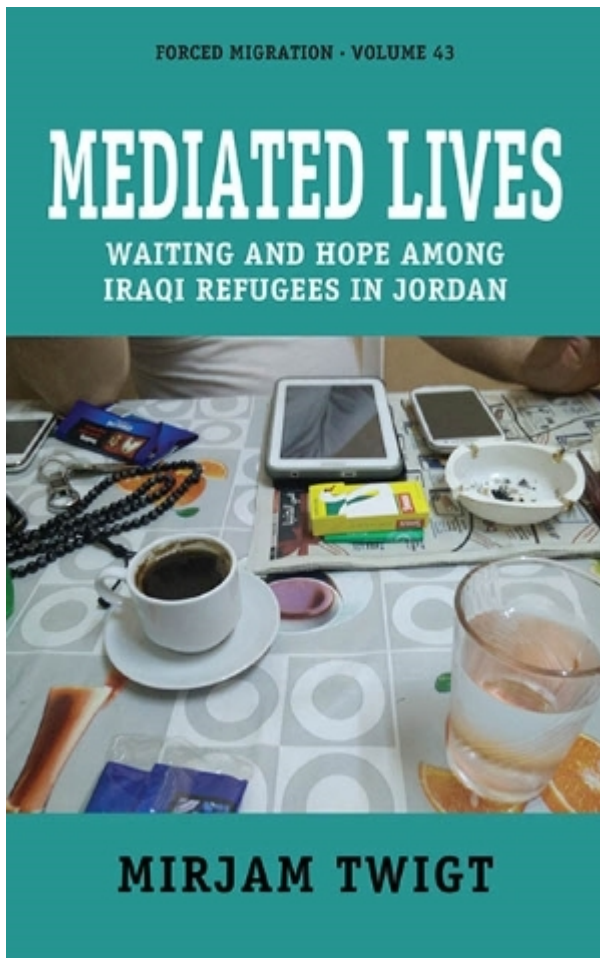
Violence, Inequality, and Hope in Nicaraguan Migration.
Stanford University Press.



Andrea, Silvia, Ana, and Pamela were impoverished youth when the Sandinista revolution took hold in Nicaragua in 1979. Against the backdrop of a war and economic crisis, the revolution gave them hope of a better future — if not for themselves, then for their children. But, when it became clear that their hopes were in vain, they chose to emigrate. *Children of the Revolution* tells these four women’s stories up to their adulthood in Italy. Laura J. Enríquez’s compassionate account highlights the particularities of each woman’s narrative, and shows how their lives were shaped by social factors such as their class, gender, race, ethnicity, and immigration status. These factors limited the options available to them, even

as the women challenged the structures and violence surrounding them. By extending the story to include the children, and now grandchildren, of the four women, Enríquez demonstrates how their work abroad provided opportunities for their families that they themselves never had. Hence, these stories reveal that even when a revolution fails to fundamentally transform a society in a lasting way, seeds of change may yet take hold.

Mirjam Twigt. 2022. Mediated Lives: Waiting and Hope Among Iraqi Refugees in Jordan. Berghahn.



Using the example of Iraqi refugees in Jordan's capital of Amman, this book describes how information and communication technologies (ICTs) play out in the everyday experiences of urban refugees, geographically located in the Global South, and shows how interactions between online and offline spaces are key for making sense of the humanitarian regime, for carving out a sense of home and for sustaining hope. This book paints a humanizing account of making do amid legal marginalization, prolonged insecurity, and the proliferation of digital technologies.

Featured [image](#) by [Alexander Dodd](#) (courtesy of [pexels.com](#))

On Censorship and the American Anthropological Association's



Declining Democracy

Lori Allen

October, 2023



The American Anthropological Association (AAA) is awaiting the results of a membership vote on a resolution to boycott Israeli academic institutions submitted in response to a solidarity call from Palestinians. Despite the AAA's decision to hold the vote in the summer, there has been a robust exchange of views on the resolution. Much of it has happened on the association's online "Communities" discussion site. What was once just a venue for circulating information about upcoming conferences became a public sphere for "citizens" of the AAA to partake in dialogue and critical debate. This should have been lauded by the AAA's leadership as a sign of democracy in process. Instead, association leaders have engaged in acts of censorship that contradict their claims to fairness and neutrality. This is behavior unbecoming of an academic association,



especially one that [espouses](#) a commitment to anti-racism and social justice, and the values of collaboration, dialogue, and transparency.

The AAA's "[Community Rules & Etiquette and Privacy Guidelines](#)" state that the "AAA does not actively monitor the site for inappropriate postings and does not on its own undertake editorial control of postings. However, in the event that any inappropriate posting is brought to the attention of the AAA, we will take all appropriate action."

This disclaimer is belied by the AAA's actual practice. The discrepancy between guidelines and practice has been most glaring when it comes to the "Communities" site moderation of posts by supporters of the boycott resolution. Take for instance the July 10 post by Thomas Hansen (Stanford U) titled "YES, because the symbolic matters." While not rejecting it outright, the site moderator asked Hansen to remove the name of Ed Liebow, outgoing Executive Director, from the post. Hansen's original message referred to Liebow's quoted statement in an article in [Middle East Eye](#) on June 14, about the AAA vote: "Our association has never undertaken such a boycott before. Even in the case of South Africa and the height of the anti-apartheid movement, our association raised concerns that are derived from our scholarship, but did not join any boycott." Hansen quoted Liebow in the context of debunking an argument proffered by those who oppose the boycott that its supporters are "merely driven by some narcissistic desire for moral purity." Hansen wrote:

"What is exactly the moral stance involved in celebrating neutrality, or impartiality, in the name of some professional ethos, one may ask? A commitment to a higher 'scientific' truth, and a cool professionalism that purports to see all sides and therefore have a higher truth claim than those moralistic hotheads advocating for one side only? Is that not the ultimate moral purism? A moral purism that among other things leads Ed Liebow to proudly defend that [the] AAA never took a stance on apartheid."

After removing Liebow's name from his post, Hansen wondered in an email to a



member of Anthroboycott, “How can [Liebow] be free to speak, but we are not....?”

The AAA’s uneven application of free speech principles becomes even clearer in the contrasting responses to pro and anti-boycott speech on the “Communities” site. One comparison will suffice. As the period for voting on the resolution drew to a close, supporters of the boycott sought to share a round-up of arguments in its favor. On July 13, Jessica Winegar (Northwestern U) received an email from a site moderator asking her to remove or radically edit the part of her post that quoted a message from Dan Segal (Pitzer College). Segal’s message from April stated:

Decent people do not cross a picket line.

Decent people do not cross a picket line set up by victims of corporate exploitation.

Decent people do not cross a picket line set up by victims of state oppression.

Decent people honor rather than cross the Palestinian call for BDS.

The moderator noted that “the Community board has become extremely divisive and tumultuous” and that there had been “a recent uptick in personal attacks and inflammatory posts.” While recognizing that Segal’s post was originally approved, the moderator said: “I believe that characterizing all anti-bds [sic] proponents as indecent will only cause more turmoil.” Only after deleting Segal’s original message were Winegar’s post approved.

However, this concern for tone and language did not extend to characterizations of boycott supporters. A month earlier on June 12, the AAA Director of Communications and Public Affairs, Jeff Martin, edited the title of an anti-boycott post by Cynthia Saltzman (Rutgers U), replacing Saltzman’s “The Noose is Tightening” with “Disingenuous and Deluded”—a reference to supporters of the boycott. Apparently, such disparaging terms, even when used by an officer of the



AAA, are acceptable when describing boycott supporters, while a plea for decency is too divisive!

Time and again, supporters of the boycott and their arguments have been called deluded, disingenuous, misguided, shallow, and antisemitic without having the speech of those slinging such slurs curtailed by the AAA.

Egregious as these examples are, they pale in comparison to a more deeply problematic instance of censorship from late June. On June 25, Sami Hermez (Northwestern U, Qatar) received a response from Jeff Martin informing him that his message was not posted because it was found to be “incendiary, with racist overtones, and not grounded in the anthropological scholarship consistent with the postings on our Community platform.”

Hermez’s post said:

If you’re arguing against the boycott and asking why we single out the Israeli state then you’re in good company #AnthroTwitter @AmericanAnthro @anthroboycott.

Below the text, Hermez included an image of a 1989 *Christian Science Monitor* [article](#) by Anne-Marie Kriek, a South African university lecturer, with the headline, “South Africa Shouldn’t be Singled Out,” and quoted Kriek’s defense of apartheid: “Contrary to popular belief, the whites did not take the country from the blacks. When the Dutch settled in the Cape in 1652, they found a barren, largely unpopulated land. Together with French and German settlers, they built a dynamic society.”

It is unclear why the AAA moderator determined that Hermez’s post was itself racist. Hermez had highlighted the parallels between South African and Zionist responses to anti-apartheid boycott movements. Was Hermez’s post deemed racist because it cited the virulent racism of 1989 South Africa? Or did the AAA moderator think it beyond the pale to compare Israel to South Africa as polities



rooted in racial supremacy?

If it is the latter, the AAA leadership has not been paying attention. Kriek's settler-colonial tropes about the home of the colonized being "*a land without a people for a people without a land*" and the colonizers' magic in "making the desert bloom" are widely propagated Zionist slogans. Current Israeli Finance Minister, Bezalel Smotrich, [declared](#) in March 2023 that there is "no such thing as Palestinians because there's no such thing as the Palestinian people." Smotrich also has responsibilities in the Defense Ministry unit in charge of civilian affairs in Area C of the West Bank where Israel has full security and civilian control. The erasure of Palestinians is not limited to members of Israel's current far-right government. The myth that Palestine was *terra nullius* and that Palestinians have no basis for claiming peoplehood are tracks on a Zionist broken record with a long history. Golda Meir's statement in an interview published with [The Sunday Times](#) on June 15, 1969, that "there was no such thing as Palestinians" is just one iteration.

Across North America and Europe, right-wing and Zionist activists have been working hard to shut down critical discourse about Israel/Palestine and support for the Palestinian liberation struggle. The censorship and harassment are well documented by the European Legal Support Center in their recent [report](#), by [Palestine Legal](#), and by the [United Nations](#) and its [rapporteurs](#).

It is shocking, and should be shocking, that a people's mere existence is deemed an existential threat and that their fundamental right to free speech be so trammelled. And it is shocking, and we should be shocked that those running the AAA have jumped on the censorship bandwagon by hindering the free and honest exchange of ideas and information about Israel and Palestine. Censorship undermines the potential of a robustly inclusive association built on mutual respect. It is antithetical to the AAA's own stated commitment to academic freedom and open scholarly debate.



Lori Allen and Ajantha Subramanian are both members of the [Anthroboycott](#) collective.

Summer Break

Allegra
October, 2023



We have been fighting to make it to the summer break and, look, there it is, the summer holidays are within reach!

Allegra has rolled down the shutters, put on her swimming cossie, and is going to bathe in ice-cream, sun-cream and why-am-I-not-writing-guilt-screams until September.

While we are away, please feel free to continue sending us [submissions](#),



comments, and questions.

Featured image: personal archive Ian M. Cook

On Starships and people: Can we rescue the liberatory potentials of technology?

Anna Szolucha
October, 2023



On April 20th, 2023, SpaceX attempted the first integrated flight of its biggest rocket called Starship. SpaceX is a private American aerospace company that was founded in 2002 by the South African-born business magnate - Elon Musk. From the launch pad in Boca Chica in south Texas, Starship flew for four minutes and reached an altitude of 39 kilometres, but its flight was terminated after the spacecraft started to tumble and lost several of its engines. A few days after the long-awaited event, Elon Musk appeared for an interview at a popular TV show with the comedian Bill Maher. Among many of his titles, Musk was introduced as Tesla's Technoking (which is the official title that Musk holds at the company). The often-sharp-tongued host showered the billionaire with pleasantries but rather than his unusually smarmy attitude, it was what Maher presented as the "alternative" view of history that struck me the most. "When you study history..." - Maher mused - "there is the great man theory and they talk about kings and princes and queens and presidents, [but] it's really the people in tech who change the world. They're the people who deal the cards, whether it's fire or electricity - for good or bad - or the cotton gin or the iPhone or the atom bomb, those are the cards and the rest of us just play it."



Maher is not alone in his assessment; in most popular understandings, technology is usually thought of as a product of quirky tech visionaries and as such, external to society. According to this way of thinking, people have to adapt to new technological inventions and are subjects to their “impacts”. An anthropological perspective on technology, on the other hand, treats it as just another material object and a set of social behaviours that are produced by humans and hence, are deeply steeped in beliefs, values and myths (Pfaffenberger, 1992). Although anthropologists are often excellent at deconstructing the social makings of any technology, we may sometimes forget to apply the same approach when it comes to our critiques of the relation between technology and the dominant economic discourses. Capitalist relations constitute powerful societal forces spanning the entire globe, there is no doubt about that. However, can thinking about non-terrestrial worlds push back against these dominant analytics and thus, help us reimagine social and technological relations not only in space, but also here on Earth?

Technologies, and economic relations that they are bound up with, rest on certain ethical grounds, rather than being merely an automatic outcome of capitalism. Multiple possibilities are always present in any society (Graeber, 2014) so the “fate” of a new technology is not necessarily predetermined by its perceived affiliation with a particular economic narrative. Despite these ideas, it may often seem like the dynamics of capital overpower any social counterforces. Yet, we miss a whole set of complex social and cultural processes by adopting that perspective. In this essay, I aim to bring some of them into view to speculate about how the social and the technological could be rethought in non-terrestrial environments such as Mars.

“They must get it” - I think to myself as I look around the room where a group of SpaceX enthusiasts have gathered to watch a YouTube stream with a weekly round-up of developments at the company’s production and launch facilities in Boca Chica. During the three-hour stream the commentators go through hundreds of close-up and panoramic photos of Starbase (as the SpaceX’s facilities in Boca Chica are called). The aim is to meticulously record all changes, decipher the



purpose of newly arrived parts and equipment and speculate about the design and operation of the ground systems as well as the Starship/SuperHeavy combo.

Starship/SuperHeavy is [the biggest rocket ever built, standing at 120 metres tall](#) and able to lift more mass than [Saturn V](#) which blasted astronauts to the Moon over half a century ago. People in the room can appreciate the level of detail with which the commentators on the stream talk about the special type of concrete used under the orbital launch mount, various types of pumps that are pushing propellants into the rocket, down to the number of bolts or conduit paths. All of these details are fascinating for those who have been following the development of this spacecraft and witnessed how its design and operation have been subject to many iterations and more or less spectacular failures. Even though it is impossible to predict the company's next move or know for certain what prompts particular changes, to the people in the room, Starship is far from a technological "black box". It is largely stripped of its mystique through SpaceX enthusiasts' deep familiarity with its development; they gain this familiarity by observing the movement of people and equipment around the production and launch sites on a daily basis. The room that I am in (and the area surrounding it) may then be the best place to explore the social making of Starship and the possibilities for reimagining the relation between the social and the technological - on Earth and in outer space.

I have spent around eight months conducting ethnographic fieldwork next to Starbase at the very southern tip of Texas. Seeing the excitement of space enthusiasts and SpaceX fans from near and far, I often wondered whether it could be a sign of more fundamental social potentialities that were transforming our common reality.

Labour of imagination

To many people in this room, Elon Musk appears as contemporary [Prometheus](#) - a hero and a rebel who challenges the stale rules of the game in any industry that he becomes involved in. He also garners support for his ideas from people across



the social and political spectrum, as if following in the footsteps of his archetype who by stealing fire, connected the realm of mythical gods with the earthly mundanities of humanity. The difference is, though, that the futures that Musk is projecting are not supposed to be mundane even in the slightest degree. SpaceX's appeal is built on the premise that the spacecraft that the company is building will one day make humanity a multi-planetary species, no less. When asked why he embarked on such an ambitious mission, Musk (who is SpaceX's CEO and also retains the title of the company's Chief Engineer) often repeats that he wanted to make people feel excited about the future. It would be easy to dismiss such pronouncements as speculation speak - a form of hyperbolic language and a material projection that is aimed at accumulating capital in anticipation of the "real" capital-generating activity. But seeing the faces of space enthusiasts light up when they talk about SpaceX, makes me want to treat such pronouncements seriously to explore if they are perhaps more than a trickster tactic aimed at making people believe in a pipe dream, as some critics of SpaceX would say.

Through their engagement with the cosmos, space enthusiasts perform, what I would call, building on Laura Bear's work on speculation (Bear, 2020), the labour of imagination. Some of them "merely" follow the developments at Starbase in person or online. Others use photography, video and other forms of online content creation as technologies of imagination that make Starbase accessible to a global audience, thus also validating and possibilising space travel. Space enthusiasts who work as YouTubers, photographers and film makers are instrumental in helping others experience space exploration in a more direct way: "I really try to capture with my art specifically what it feels like to be at Starbase... hopefully, grounded in reality pretty well... because it is really a profound experience... Being there is a different experience from just seeing it... The majesty of these pieces of engineering that are, hopefully, going to get us to other destinations in our Solar system, there's the grandeur of engineering and there's the grandeur of the vision behind it that is very inspiring." When asked about what they were doing their work for, one Starbase photographer told me: "people, if [Starship is] successful, will look back and wonder what were the first steps of humanity



getting to the Moon again or Mars for the first time and I feel like I'm involved in that process somewhat extemporaneously... I look back at many of the old Apollo pictures and I'm glad that there's a photographer who captured what it felt like to be there, not exactly what it looked like or exactly how it happened but just the feeling of the grandeur of being there. And I'm really hoping to be able to provide that to the future. I want to preserve the photons in a way that other people can enjoy."

"[SpaceX are] actually concerned about getting the thing done" - another space enthusiast told me - "instead of 'oh, let's take this money that we've got from the government and stretch it out as far as we can', which is another model for old space versus new space... it's just extremely refreshing." By talking and hanging out with space enthusiasts, it became clear to me that Starship revitalises the feelings of achievement, potential, grandeur and technological advancement. It also carries on the trope of American imagination i.e., the belief in manifest destiny and the imperative to spread the ideology of American Dream to the stars (McCurdy, 2011). However, it also has a much more contemporary meaning; the rocket offers a material and discursive representation of a transmutation of capital (Kapferer and Kapferer, 2021) i.e., a moment when old economic orders and productive forces are devalued and make room for the creation of new relations and markets. At this point in history, Starship acts as a counterforce to the dynamics of socio-economic impotence exploited by such actors as Donald Trump and the politically correct stalemate enacted by socially liberal yet resolutely capitalist parties. Capitalism has generated limitations within itself that it must now overcome by reconstructing and rebranding its emphasis. The rocket is by no means the only vehicle for countering these forces, but it offers a useful case study in how social and technological dynamics play into the transformation of capital. Starship helps capital renew its potency not only by revitalising the discourses of American-led technological progress, but also by offering a potential for expanding its scope into outer space. SpaceX gives credence to space travel and extraterrestrial resource exploration. Space enthusiasts for their part are thrown into the middle of these tumultuous and sometimes contradictory



processes.

The labour of imagination and its technologies that space enthusiasts employ show that the social imaginaries that they help create through their work attempt to “bring space down to Earth for everyday people” (as the motto of one space creator puts it). Thus, these imaginaries are often liberatory or egalitarian in nature to begin with, but over time, they may come up against powerful economic and political forces. In this respect, Starship is no different from any other technology. Will it, then, be a technology of freedom or control?

Starship and the future

Among many space enthusiasts that I spoke with, Starship evokes visions of an entirely different society, organised around the principles of efficiency and common responsibility. If these are compatible with freedom or hyper-control is a little bit less clear. However, while ideas for a new social contract on Mars necessarily remain a bit murky at the moment, the rocket (and the imaginaries of space exploration accompanying it) are already reimagining capital. They firmly expand its scope and resource base into outer space, discursively doing away with the earthly “limits to growth”. They advocate space travel as a common goal of all humanity on the basis that it is to become widely available instead of catering to the caprices of the few wealthiest individuals. Space exploration is also supposed to be efficient thanks to the reusability of the new generation of spacecraft such as SpaceX’s Starship. None of these goals are necessarily novel, but what’s new is the way in which they succeed in advancing the case for a corporate-technocratic governance models that are portrayed as more efficient, cost-effective and forward-looking than older forms of government such as the nation state.

From this perspective, Starship appears as a product of rational economic conduct because it could offer a solution to many Earthly ills such as: the climate crisis, potentially deadly asteroid strikes or a shortage of resources. However, by reimagining capital as an interplanetary saviour of humanity, the rocket also



helps to re-engineer the social in the process. On Earth, this is already going on in the form of an emerging digitalised society that becomes the domain of hyper-control by the most powerful corporations; however, Starship also makes it possible that the entire process will be influenced by the (real or imagined) governance structures and procedures necessitated by the radically different conditions found in extraterrestrial realms. Even if Starship does not become the rapidly reusable vehicle that allows ordinary people to travel through cosmos, the discourse of transformation can still prompt changes in terrestrial and extraterrestrial governance. What I've learnt by hanging out with space enthusiasts and sceptics alike, is that far from being an agent of expanding capitalism, as it is often portrayed by its opponents, Starship actually manifests the contradictions of these processes.

Technology has an extraordinary capacity to represent opposite things to different people. In the general media and political discourse, Starship appears rooted in American culture, especially in western and frontier myths. A fair dose of messianism and millenarian hope can also prevail among the most ardent of Musk's fans. To others, the rocket represents a persisting symbol of national imperialism and colonial expropriation. The liberatory potential of space exploration, however, doesn't lie in the elite and military visions of a multi-planetary species or settlement and dominance in space. Wanting as they are, they have one positive effect - they invite (indeed, dictate) speculation about more just and free alternatives.

If we were to take any cues from the social lives of space enthusiasts in south Texas, we could speculate about the tight entanglement of the social and the technological in extraterrestrial contexts. Human life in space would probably be highly dependent on technology for even the most basic of its functions and Space enthusiasts may well be the early progenitors of Starship knowledge. Their active engagement with the development process and intimate knowledge of the spacecraft and its ground systems may be similar to the degree to which future societies in space would have to become familiar with their extraterrestrial technologies. Even their (relative) isolation and the harsh natural environment in



which space enthusiasts work in Texas may be seen as an analogue of the kind of self-dependent living that future communities would have to cultivate in space. This may undermine the currently predominant view of technology as a product of tech visionaries. Technology may become “de-alienated”. Its everyday operation and maintenance would be so central to sustaining life - and perhaps constitute a key part of every person’s day - that people would no longer perceive it as something external to their societies. Technology may also become part of what we consider human as it becomes incorporated into our biological bodies in ever new ways. How could that influence governance in space? Would capitalism still work well with this reimagined, social view of technology? There are multiple possibilities here and far too many for this short essay. Suffice to say, there are no obvious patterns that have to emerge and nothing has been determined yet.

Starship’s place is paradoxical because it is both a driver and an effect of future-making forces. It invites speculation about the future of humanity as much as it enacts it in its material construction and economic narrative. Future visions that it propagates appear, then, simultaneously open and closed.

In moments of self-reflection, some space enthusiasts that I spoke with, sometimes wondered how history was going to judge their devotion to Elon Musk and their hope in SpaceX - were they too passionate to see the “obvious” limitations of his project? Or would they be championed as early visionaries? Whatever the final outcome, looking at Starship from the vantage point of those who follow its development very closely can remind us that technology is social and hence, always an avenue that allows us to see social, political and economic alternatives. Insisting on the technology’s liberatory potential may sometimes mean using its intended meanings for unintended purposes. It is inevitable that at some point, sweeping economic and political forces will try to co-opt emerging technologies for their own purposes. However, these forces are neither all-powerful nor uniform so there may still be room for change. As anthropologists, our task may be to carve out a space for this kind of work. We could identify the cracks in smooth narratives and dominant social processes and populate them with critical and analytical speculation, even though the latter will necessarily be



quite risky at a time when nothing is certain.

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Waiting as Productive Fieldwork

Meenakshi Nair Ambujam
October, 2023



Several weeks into my fieldwork at one of the Integrated Tribal Development Agencies (ITDA) in Telangana, a federal state in India, I couldn't shake the feeling that I had wasted a lot of time waiting. ITDAs are bureaucracies tasked with enhancing the welfare of *adivasi* or tribal communities and catering to their needs. At the ITDA, I spent Mondays attending grievance hearings or *Prajavāni*; Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays observing hearings and court procedures on land disputes; and Wednesdays interacting with bureaucrats, government



functionaries, and adivasis. Conducting institutional ethnography in/of a state bureaucracy means that somewhere one accepts that waiting is part of the process. Yet, it took me a while to come to terms with waiting and see it as *more than* a waste of time. This piece takes seriously the temporal dimensions of fieldwork and reflects on what considering waiting as productive fieldwork means for our understandings of ethnographic research.

That fieldwork has its pace—its unique ebbs and flows, lulls and activity—is known and widely acknowledged. Doctoral fieldwork sits uneasily here: on the one hand, the PhD programme limits the duration of fieldwork and therefore, time is of the essence; on the other hand, precisely because of how fieldwork unfolds, waiting is part and parcel of the process. In such contexts, it is but natural to be anxious about the time ‘lost’ to waiting, so to speak. I found myself in this situation in 2019 too, and it forced me to approach waiting critically and analytically.

Waiting is, in many ways, a state of consciousness.

Anthropological scholarship has long been interested in waiting, albeit for the most part the waiting of our interlocutors. Waiting has been seen as a way in which people and institutions exercise power and dominance (Auyero 2011; Bourdieu 2000; Schwartz 1974); it is also viewed as a space of possibility, where relations are built, upended, altered and even transformed. As Janeja and Bandak (2018, 5) argue, waiting is a distinct way of inhabiting time. While some may choose to sit or remain stationary, more often than not, we pace, talk, fidget with our devices, doodle or even engage in *timepass*. Waiting is, in many ways, a state of consciousness, where one is unceasingly thinking about the wait while also ‘constantly updating oneself of the social and political condition waiting has imposed’ (Khosravi 2021, 17).

Waiting is also processual and relational. On the one hand, waiting allows people ‘create or mobilise a set of relations or networks that allow for them to spend long hours’ (Auyero 2011, 14); on the other hand, waiting also brings with it



‘uncertainty, confusion, and arbitrariness’ (2011, 14). For Bourdieu (2000), waiting is a form of social domination and control. Power is imposed by ‘making people wait’, by ‘delaying without destroying hope’, and by ‘adjourning without totally disappointing’ (Bourdieu 2000, 227-228). Carswell et al. (2019, 598), for example, reason that waiting practices of ‘poor low-class Dalit and Muslim Indians’ reveal how citizenship is experienced, negotiated and established. Focussing on different forms of waiting— ‘chronic’, ‘on the day’ or short-term, and ‘to and fro’ waiting— they show that spatial-temporal practices of waiting are deeply striated along the lines of race, caste, gender, class and more. Waiting, thus, ‘is patterned by the distribution of power in a social system’ (Schwartz 1974, 843). Who is able to wait, for how long, and at what costs depends on socio-political relations and circumstances.

While indeed these works discuss waiting to better understand the experiences of power, uncertainty, doubt, hope and even desire in the contexts of our interlocutors, there has been little engagement about our practices of waiting, its pervasiveness in fieldwork and how it shapes our own experiences, interactions and understandings of the field. Taking seriously how fieldwork (and anthropology) unfolds in time allows us to engage with the generative qualities of waiting—be it building alliances, recalibrating power relations, or even observing otherwise overlooked details or nuances. Palmer, Pocock and Burton’s (2018) work is a step in this direction. Building on the concept of *interstitial time* (Gasparini 1995), Palmer et al. discuss how ‘reflective and self-aware waiting’ has the potential to facilitate a ‘power exchange between the researcher’ and their interlocutors (2018,3). Here, the authors particularly draw attention to the ‘changes in affective relations’ when fieldworkers and researchers submit to waiting. By waiting *for* our interlocutors, but also, more importantly, ‘*waiting upon*’ them, we open ourselves to the potent transformative potential time embodies. A [recent essay by Josephine Chaet](#), similarly, draws attention to ‘the function of waiting in anthropological fieldwork’ (2021). Waiting permitted her to examine the gendered dimensions of fieldwork in non-governmental organisations, and it shaped her relationship with her interlocutors and opened



up avenues for exploring '(non)activity' in these spaces. Thus, waiting, in her case, was not simply passive; it was active and dynamic.

For me, waiting opened up the possibility to explore how corridors, seemingly in-between spaces, operated as important avenues of mediation in the ITDA, particularly for adivasi women. For instance, I waited *for* court proceedings, *for* grievance redressal sessions or *for* official meetings to commence so that I could observe how bureaucrats and other government functionaries interacted with adivasis and dealt with their issues, particularly related to land disputes. Adivasis, on the other hand, were waiting *to* submit their petitions, *to* meet with government officials to impress upon them the importance of their concerns, *to* participate in court proceedings as either defendants or plaintiffs, and *to* mostly get work done by repeatedly showing up (Carswell et al. 2019). The differences that underpin the nature of our waits are important: I waited, in anticipation, *for something to happen*, whereas adivasis waited to meet with specific government officials or participate in distinct processes so as to determine if some action would be taken in response to their concerns. In Khosravi's words, though 'we all wait, we wait differently' (2021, 13). It is this shared, albeit dissimilar, experience of waiting that permitted me to comprehend how affective exchanges circulated within spaces of waiting. Thus, rather than seeing 'waiting' in fieldwork as a waste of time or another lost opportunity, I began considering the 'analytical possibilities' it had to offer (Chaet 2021). *What role does waiting play in fieldwork? How may our act of waiting, during fieldwork, create opportunities to understand institutional and social arrangements and everyday negotiations in ways we may not otherwise?*

Waiting, Writing and Conversation

On entering the ITDA, one encountered a quadrangle. The corridors along this space were where most of us waited—there were a few chairs and a big notice board. From here, one could see the doors leading to the office of the highest



ranking officer, the ITDA's reception, where a few lower-level government officials could usually be seen chatting, as well as observe who walked in and out of the building. These little nuggets of information allowed those of us waiting to gauge if officers were in their rooms, if they were busy, how long they took to meet people and if they were busy with meetings or other administrative activities.

One day, having seen me wait in the corridor for hours, a clerk I had come to know told me that here was 'no point waiting'. He said, '*nothing is going to happen... you are only going to waste time by sitting here*', in an effort to convince me of the futility of my wait. Throughout the rest of the afternoon, he made it a point to exchange a few words before going about his usual tasks. Adivasis who were also waiting in this corridor noticed this. At one point, some adivasi women approached me and asked if I worked at the ITDA. They wanted to know if I came to this organisation regularly and if I could assist them with the petitioning process. I clarified that I was only a researcher working on adivasis' land rights and the ITDA's functioning, and that I was also waiting for my turn to meet with government officials to gather information. I also indicated that I had no authority or power to intervene in the processes of the ITDA.

The shared experience of waiting, however dissimilar the reasons for waiting may be, had created an opportunity for affective exchanges and social interactions to occur between me, the clerk, and the adivasi women.

Though we had all been waiting since morning that day and had indeed exchanged smiles earlier, we had not spoken until then. The shared experience of waiting, however dissimilar the reasons for waiting may be, had created an opportunity for affective exchanges and social interactions to occur between me, the clerk, and the adivasi women. The fact that the clerk spoke to me several times that day signalled to those around me that I could be well-connected in this bureaucracy, or at least someone who knew 'the right people'. Without realising, I was being exposed to how informal negotiations and mediations unfolded in the



ITDA as people tried to navigate the bureaucracy.

As we continued to chat, Damu — one of the three adivasi women from the group — asked me if I could give them my phone number. She indicated that each visit to the ITDA cost them considerably— in terms of time, money and labour. Aside from having to travel long distances, most of them lost out on a day's wage. Not knowing whether or not the bureaucrats they wanted to meet were in station meant that they faced the risk of their efforts leading to nought. As women, moreover, they faced another hurdle. Since most clerical staff and lower-level government functionaries were men, they found it difficult to ask for numbers and build networks within the ITDA that would help them plan their visits to this bureaucracy, which was located no less than 70 kilometres away from their homes. While over the course of my fieldwork I had noticed men — adivasi and non-advasi — chat with government functionaries and exchange numbers while they waited — sometimes even buying tea for them or sharing food — women waited differently.

Damu told me that having my phone number would allow them to 'confirm if officers were around'. Since I knew senior bureaucrats and lower-level government functionaries at the ITDA and was at this building regularly, Damu said that I could relay information to them so that they could avoid a 'wasteful journey'. This was an important moment of reflection for me for it allowed me to realise how adivasis navigated and minimised wait times, and mediated the bureaucracy by building networks, as well as the institutional and social conditions that waiting evoked. Having seen me wait in the corridors alongside them allowed Damu and her friends to also partake in a form of 'network building' that was not always available to them. Damu and I kept in touch through the remainder of my fieldwork and indeed, she would ask me if I could gather information about the availability of certain bureaucrats or if they were meeting with other petitioners. Here, the common experience of waiting, albeit for different purposes and people, played an important role in relationship-building. On other occasions, my apparent ethnographic waiting time afforded adivasis the opportunity to ask me to assist with writing or paperwork. Sometimes, this



involved filling in forms, while at other times I was asked to speak with the office clerks to request staplers, paperclips or other stationery. These actions — of writing, sharing pens, finding paper tags — which were rendered possible because of waiting, also had the impact of making us feel more at ease with conversation, allowing me to learn about the informal arrangements through which adivasis navigate and mediate their daily interactions within the ITDA.

The Worth of Waiting

Viewing waiting as productive fieldwork allows us to engage with the temporal realities of fieldwork and seeming unproductiveness. While in some instances waiting may help build relationships and foster enduring horizontal alliances with our interlocutors, in other cases, it creates opportunities for us to understand institutional and social arrangements, everyday negotiations, and mediations. Focussing on the methodological possibilities waiting has to offer allows us to move away from a view of fieldwork as one that privileges overt action. It helps us normalise the apprehensions that come with '*nothing happening*' or *slowness*. By treating waiting as infused with possibility, we account for its potential to refashion or even enhance the praxis of ethnographic fieldwork as it unfolds in entangled registers of time — ours, our interlocutors, and more.

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Encountering Precarities: The



Podcast

Ian M. Cook
October, 2023



Allegra Editor Ian sits down with Thread guest editors Viola Castellano & Olivia Casagrande to discuss '[Encountering precarities: ethnography, spurious solidarity and neoliberal academia.](#)' The thematic thread engages with the multiple and asymmetrical forms of precarisation and vulnerabilisation involving both ethnographers and their interlocutors in and beyond the field.



A knot in the throat, or that time a gangster died of appendicitis

Marco Mussa
October, 2023



Based on "Fools Banished from the Kingdom: Remapping Geographies of Gang Violence between the Americas (Los Angeles and San Salvador)" by Zilberg Elana.



I had spent the last hour staring at my cell phone screen, open on the chat with Martin, my finger ready to press “send”. In my throat, a knot had formed, and each time I asked myself “what should I do with Gato?”, it pulsed. The bag of cocaine was still there on the table. The first time I tried coke was when I was fifteen years old. I was with Henri. I remember that when Gato found out, he beat the shit out of him. “Next time you make my woman try coke, I’ll shoot you in the face!”, I remember him shouting while breaking Henri’s hand with a hammer. That was not the only time Gato had beaten someone for me, but I’d be a liar if I said that, deep down, a small part of me didn’t like it. In the beginning, at least. Over time, dating Gato became more and more suffocating. First came the decision to move in together, and I still remember him dragging me out of my family house, my mum’s face in tears looking at her only daughter leaving forever. Later, Gato told me that he didn’t appreciate me spending so much time away from him and that I should’ve dropped out of school. But the worst came when I got pregnant with Marlon, and he decided that I had to stay home and take care of our son, while he was out working. During those endless days alone in our house, I started realising the nightmare he had trapped me into: it was almost as if I existed and, at the same time, I did not.

To everyone, I was known as “Gato’s woman”, some sort of appendage of him. A cook, a babysitter for his son, a trophy to show off with his friends. No other purpose or ambition. The worst was that I would have probably been okay with spending my whole life like that if he had not left for the US. However, once in L.A., Gato struggled to send money home at first, and I had to find a way to buy food. It was then that I started working in a barbershop in the neighbourhood, helping out the owner, an old man who had recently lost his daughter. He became very fond of Marlon and me and began to give me more things to do to earn a few *colones* more. When he died two years later, without anyone to leave the store to, he gave it to me, and I have to say it was very hard at first. But, I managed to keep it running. For the many women in Modelo who lost their husbands, the barbershop became a meeting place for them. In parallel, I also started hiring some of the girls and boys from the *barrio*: I like to think of the shop like those



boxing gyms in movies, where the sport keeps kids away from the streets. In Modelo, everyone calls me “mama Lory”, and children beg to work with me. Most importantly, I’m not someone else’s appendage any more, but a respected part of the community, with a son that I want to raise honestly. I won’t let Gato ruin all this.

The door creaked and Gato entered the house with Marlon, interrupting my thoughts. They were laughing, imitating some cartoon character whose name I couldn’t recall. When Gato looked at the table and saw the bag, he stopped talking. I had promised myself to wait until Marlon was asleep to confront him, but an overwhelming rage began invading me, too powerful to resist.

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“What the fuck is this shit?!”, I said, pointing at the bag. Gato hung up his coat and dismissively replied, “None of your business”. I felt the knot in my throat throbbing.

“How dare you bring coke in here? After all the shit this family has been through, you wanna put us all in danger? This is an MS-13 neighbourhood and you’re already on their radar”, I exploded. Gato was getting angrier at every word I said but, for some reason, I didn’t feel threatened. Maybe it was his ridiculous green mohawk or that now I also had some violent people to call, or, maybe, I had forgotten how dangerous he actually was. Whatever the case, every time he raised his voice, I raised mine louder.

“We need money, don’t we?”, he said with the most condescending tone.

“My family does not need your dirty money!”

“Your family?” blurted Gato with a scornful look, “who the fuck do you think you



are? I'm the boss here, I make the decisions."

He paused, staring at me. "You must quit the barbershop. Marlon needs his mother around...he already behaves like a fucking weirdo! I bet it's because you've been around fucking half the barrio instead of raising him properly."

The knot seemed on the verge of exploding. Hearing him shitting on all the sacrifices I made for my son when he was a gangster in L.A. was too much.

"Christ, you'd really do anything to crush my dreams. Can't you see what you've become? You're an over the hill ex-gangster with a fucking green mohawk! You're an embarrassment to yourself. If you started dealing again you wouldn't last five minutes! If by some miracle you didn't die, I'd fucking kill you! I swear, I won't let my son grow up with a *marero*."

Gato jumped at me and grabbed me by the throat, in his eyes the same murderous rage as when he beat Henri all those years ago. I tried to reach for something to strike him but he pushed me to the ground. His hands kept squeezing my neck.

At that point, looking up at his tattoo-covered face, contorted in commitment to ending my life, I did something unexpected. A gesture that was surprising even to me. I stretched out my hand and, tenderly, caressed his cheek. It was a caress of pity, slightly amused contempt, one saying: "Great, Gato! This is the climax of your failed existence, killing the mother of your son." As if he could hear the caress speak, he let go. The murderous fury vanished from his face, replaced by a mixture of terror and then surprise as he realised what he was about to do. He took Marlon in his arms, and ran out of the house into the rainy night.

It took me a couple of minutes to recover, then I grabbed the phone.

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The car sped through the bumpy streets of Modelo. Gato had one hand on Marlon's shoulder, trying to quell his desperate sobbing. "This bitch, how could she call me '*marero*'?", he screamed. That he was a '*marero*' - a gangster - is



what explained the scared faces and disgusted looks he received since coming home/ A constant reminder that in Modelo, there was no space for the deported to return . There wasn't even space even for him among the *mareros* any more. The MS-13 - one of the largest gangs operating in San Salvador and abroad - would've killed on sight an ex-member of the 18th Street Gang like him.

But his bar job in La Luna, with its low-ass wage, the shame of being back in the *barrio*, and the constant fear of getting murdered were not what really bothered him. It was more than that.

He left to the US as a breadwinner embracing a dangerous destiny to provide for his family. He came home a deportee, as a "fool expelled from the kingdom", as Elana Zilberg, his academic friend, used to say. Seeing Lorena running her store successfully had been the last straw. She, who had always been "Gato's woman" to everyone, was now bringing the money home.

Hence the bag of coke on the table. His decision to look up an old contact and start dealing again. The desire to get back into business, and regain the respect he lost. Not money, power, or the thrill of *la vida loca*, but respect. The respect that comes with being a gangster, someone who is seen with a mixture of fear and admiration. Someone who fucks life, not someone who gets fucked by life.

In the midst of these reflections, Gato failed to notice a burning barrel rolling down the road until it was too late. He swerved to avoid it, ending off-road. As he tried to restart the car three men appeared from behind the trees, MS-13 tattoos on their faces. Martin was among them. Gato didn't have time to hide before the two gunshots shattered the car window and left him dead next to Marlon.

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My phone vibrated, breaking the silence that reigned in the room. The screen illuminated my tired, shaken face. A message stood out below the time stamp: "It's over," I swallowed. The knot was finally gone.



Commentary

This fictional short story is based on Elana Zilberg's *Fools Banished from the Kingdom: Remapping Geographies of Gang Violence between the Americas*, an ethnographic analysis of gangsters' deportation from Los Angeles to El Salvador. Zilberg's work reflects on the deep intertwinement between government-imposed deportation, the geographical physiognomy of San Salvador and the existential positioning of deportees in this changing *milieu*. Specifically, Zilberg argues that state action in the form of deportation and incarceration influences the foundations and manifestations of identity, belonging, exclusion and 'otherness' among deported gangsters, engendering diverging reactions among them to the reshaped spatial environment. Building upon this analysis, the short-story looks at the identity shock perceived by Gato - a Salvadorian gangster who lived in L.A. - after he gets forcefully transplanted into San Salvador by the US government.

Throughout the story, I attribute to Gato some features belonging to Weasel, one of Zilberg's key interlocutors, such as the green mohawk, his aversion for the term *marero*, or the fact that he hangs out in La Luna.

This choice allows me to highlight the disruptive impact that Gato's return has on her life: the attempt to reaffirm his patriarchal primacy contrasts with the independence she achieved while he was absent.

By looking at the vicissitudes of Gato returning to Modelo, this story focuses on one specific aspect of Zilberg's paper, namely the challenges faced by gangsters deported to San Salvador in adapting to the new environment. Inspired by Margery Wolf's *A Thrice-Told Tale: Feminism, Postmodernism, and Ethnographic Responsibility*, my story expands upon Zilberg's academic contribution by providing an alternative perspective on the consequences of forced migration and deportation.

In this story I shift focus from the spatial dimension of the deportation found in Zilberg's work to its personal and emotional repercussions. This is achieved by



adopting the standpoint of Lorena, Gato's wife. Observing the distribution of power in her relationship with Gato and how this is reshaped by deportation, the story investigates the struggle of deportation victims and the embedded features of gang violence. This choice allows me to highlight the disruptive impact that Gato's return has on her life: the attempt to reaffirm his patriarchal primacy contrasts with the independence she achieved while he was absent.

The story also offers a look into the personal and existential struggle faced by gangsters deported (back) to El Salvador. In the second half of the story I abandon Lorena's perspective, adopting an external narration when following Gato's last moments alive. The man who left for the US as a breadwinner facing a dangerous future to provide for his family is now returning as a felon, a "fool expelled from the kingdom" to quote the title of Zilberg's article. I address this topic in light of the recent research in Central America and Africa contrasting men's experiences with migration and deportation, describing the latter as a much more emasculating and vilifying phenomenon (Galhardi, 2022; Schultz, 2020). The decision of resorting to criminal activity emerges as the only option to earn back that respect and existential purpose lost with deportation. I also touch upon different aspects related to Gato's struggle to adapt to San Salvador covered by Zilberg, such as the stigmatisation of *mareros* within Salvadorean society, and the troubles arising from his previous gang affiliation.

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