NIGHTWATCHING: MALE MIGRANT NETWORKS AND THE SUSTENANCE OF BROTHERHOOD IN CAPE TOWN

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A friend loveth at all times; a brother is born for adversity (Proverbs 17:17)
Abstract

This dissertation provides an ethnographic account of companionship, enterprise, and urban survival among four transnational networks of young male African migrants in Cape Town, South Africa. It is based on anthropological fieldwork conducted in South Africa between 2006 and 2009.

The first three chapters examines labors and undertakings the young migrants action collaboratively in the context of the everyday. The first chapter studies ways the migrants navigate a hostile urban landscape using sensorial maps of the city to mitigate risk and evade state surveillance. The second describes how the youths organize themselves as entrepreneurial operations. The third chapter shows the migrants residing discreetly in Cape Town within and across various bachelor households, examining the kinds of domesticity these forms of male householding generate and foreclose. The dissertation employs the concept of network to chart and investigate forms of relationship and relatedness these migrants comprise, embrace, sustain, and produce.

Despite the migrants’ uncertain legal status in South Africa, the negative stereotypes they are branded by and the risks of violence they face there, and their exclusion from conventional modes of family and community life, I argue the youths’ networks afford these migrants a form of mobility and companionship that helps secure their survival as urban and economic actors. I consider how the youths’ lateral, flexible forms of peer association – relations subsumed under a special rubric of ‘brotherhood’ – make certain forms of living possible. The ethnography challenges dominant depictions of African migrants in South Africa as destitute victims.
The dissertation uses the migrants’ experiences in Cape Town to frame an exploration of life in a fast-changing, expensive, and segregated African metropolis. The urban setting of my study is examined throughout the chapters, but is foregrounded as particularly deadly and eventful in the final chapter.

South Africa has emerged recently as a hosting country to large numbers of African migrants and refugees, whose growing presence has roused rivalry and friction between South Africans and migrants. These tensions climaxed in May 2008 when a ferocious campaign of anti-immigrant violence broke out across South Africa, internally displacing hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals. The violence and its aftermath are examined in the fourth chapter, which uses evidence obtained from my participation in the relief and advocacy efforts in Cape Town to query official narratives and explanations of events. I suggest the crisis provides valuable insight into debates on migrants, citizens, and belonging in post-apartheid South Africa.

Advisor: Veena Das
Committee: Jane Guyer, Aaron Goodfellow, Todd Shepard, Dipankar Chakravarti
# Contents

Abstract iii  
Contents v  
Maps, Tables, and Figures vii  

## Introduction

**Relations as subjects:**  
**Other migrants in Cape Town**  
1  

Young migrants in Cape Town 1  
Survival as accomplishment, pleasure, and anomaly 3  
Marginal migrants 12  
Reading data sideways 16  
Networks as forms and systems 23  
Relations as subjects 29  
A chronology of fieldwork 33  
An outline of the chapters 41  

## Chapter 1

**Nightwatching:**  
**Fear and flânerie**  
44  

Alien apartheid 44  
Human, aliens, and ‘Nigerians’ 49  
Mobility, space, and transgression 59  
Sensorial geographies 61  
Flâneurs and their doubles 66  
Nightwatching 69  

## Chapter 2

**Relations as infrastructure:**  
**Guarding, selling, dancing, switching**  
71  

“Night eyes” 71  
Practices of collaboration, relational networks 74  
Lessons in posture and posturing 84  
“Dancing” and “switching” 90  
Reshuffling 96  
Confrontations 101  
Relations as infrastructure 105  

## Chapter 3

**Houses without memory:**  
**Kinship in search of a household**  
109  

Leaving the streets 109  
Surfeits and silence 112  
“The hell-pit” 117  
Threads of similarity 128  
Four and a half men 138
Chapter 4  National struggles in naming violence: Displaced persons, displaced words  172

Aftermath as crisis  172
Interrupted fieldwork  176
Displaced persons, displaced words  183
Ordering disorder, technical languages  186
‘Newspeak’  193
Reading and misreading images  197
The President’s “people”  206
Anthropological disputes  220
Conclusions  228

Conclusion  The sustenance of brotherhood  233

The idiom of brotherhood  233
Youth as “stuck”  234

Bibliography  237
Acknowledgements  258

Curriculum Vitae  261
Maps, Tables, and Figures

Maps

1. Greater Cape Town
2. Central Cape Town: Migrants’ main places of work
3. Migrants’ places of birth by network
4. Network D, Household 6, Places of birth
5. Residential areas sought by migrant youths, circa. 2007
7. Locations of households, April 2008

Tables

1. Basic data on 68 close informants
2. Network B, Membership
3. Network D, Household 6, Membership
4. Household census, Physical presence
5. Household census, Membership
6. Household census, Occupancy by type
7. Household census, Overview

Figures

1. Wikus serves an alien an eviction order
2. Wikus is captured by the ‘Nigerians’
3. ‘Nigerian’ gang leader, Obesandjo
4. The ‘South African’ Map of Africa, June 16
5. Segment of Network A (inc. H1, H2, H5), circa. 2007
6. Cape Town branch of Network B (inc. H4)
7. Refugee protest sign, June 2
8. Fanning flames of hate, May 19
9. Xenophobia and the meaning of ubuntu, May 25
10. South Africans take out rage on immigrants, May 20
11. Shock by two important icons in South Africa, May 22
12. The many faces of Thabo Mbeki, May 29
Introduction

Relations as subjects:
Other migrants in Cape Town

Young migrants in Cape Town

This dissertation provides an ethnographic account of companionship, enterprise, and urban survival among four transnational networks of young male African migrants in Cape Town, South Africa. It is based on fieldwork conducted between 2006 and 2009.

The study presents the migrants traversing three domains of city-life. It first shadows the migrants as they navigate a hostile urban terrain, mapping passageways through the city the migrants craft together to mitigate risk, stay unseen, and evade state surveillance (Chapter 1). It next describes ways the youths cooperate as economic actors in Cape Town; it shows the migrants organizing themselves effectively as slick, agile, entrepreneurial operations in the city and facing off competition from South Africans and other migrants (Chapter 2). It looks

1 Migrant is an old political, economic, and racial concept in South Africa, malleable. Complicit with recent scholarship from South Africa, and with how ‘migrant’ is used today in public conversations in the country, I use the term in its limited, recent sense to refer to black Africans who live and work in South Africa, who are not South African citizens. Literature on past and present processes and experiences of labor migration within South Africa (e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1987; Coplan 1985; Mayer 1971; Ramphele 1993; White 2004; Wilson 1972) are rarely connected to contemporary work on foreign national refugees and migrants. Given most migrants in Cape Town live alongside South Africans in townships, enduring similar living conditions, however, these and other studies could be connected by focusing on the mutual vulnerabilities shared by migrants and many millions of South Africans. Indeed, the accenting of migrants’ differences on grounds only of citizenship reinforces popular perceptions that migrants hold a special status in South Africa, cited as a central factor in causing the anti-immigrant violence in May 2008 (FMSP 2010; HRSC 2008a; Landau 2011). I use ‘youth’ and ‘young men’ interchangeably. The concept of ‘network’ is discussed below.
finally at how the migrants reside in Cape Town in a variety of discrete, interlinked, and mobile households – domestic units that are forged and inhabited differently to the family households they fled or left behind, which they both begrudge and deeply long for (Chapter 3).

These chapters examine everyday tasks the migrants undertake together as they attempt to forge livelihood, evade state suspicion, engage quietly in homemaking, and get by each day unharmed. I envision them as an accompaniment to the youths as they negotiate an environment in which African outsiders struggle routinely to find work and live in safety.

Brought together, the youths’ joined labors and experiences in Cape Town frame an exploration of life in a particular urban underworld. My study thus also examines the urban context in which the migrants operate: a wealthy, fast-changing, and segregated metropolis that has emerged recently (significantly, since 1994, after apartheid) as a major hosting city to migrants and refugees from across and beyond Africa. The growing presence of African foreign nationals in Cape

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2 No reliable data exists on the numbers of African foreign nationals in South Africa. The Forced Migration Studies Program (FMSP, a leading research collaborative based at the University of the Witwatersrand) estimated the total population of African foreign nationals in 2010 to be between 1.6 and 2 million, of which over half are Zimbabwean (FMSP 2010a:2-3). This figure is considerably lower than numbers quoted by the media and politicians; in 2009, for example, the South African Police Service claimed between 3 and 6 million undocumented migrants alone were living in South Africa (SAPS 2009; see FMSP 2010b for a discussion of the various methods used by the state and others in an attempt to estimate the numbers of undocumented migrants in South Africa).
Town, as elsewhere in South Africa, has roused rivalry, friction, and mutual resentment between South Africans and migrants. It has fostered a climate of xenophobia in urban South Africa, which political leaders and state institutions are accused frequently of advancing. These tensions climaxed in May 2008 when a ferocious campaign of anti-immigrant violence broke out across South Africa, internally displacing hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees (Chapter 4).

**Survival as accomplishment, pleasure, and anomaly**

That the young migrants I worked with survive in South Africa is a crucial first remark. It warrants continuous reminding. Scholarship from South Africa attests in detail to the many different efforts entailed in urban survival (Ashforth 2005; Buur 2009; Ellis 1999; Murray 2008; Ross 2010). Cape Town is not a place where one can walk without purpose or leave one’s back unguarded; crime and urban violence are ubiquitous. Most African migrants also lack the necessary

South Africa hosts the world’s largest number of individuals seeking asylum, but a small numbers of refugees. Of the 170,865 registered asylum-seekers in South Africa in 2007, for example, just 1,734 were granted refugee status that year. The difference speaks to intense procedural delays in the Department of Home Affairs (who manage immigration and refugee matters), the country’s porous borders, and the very complex legal case-histories of many foreign nationals in South Africa, which prolong case hearings (UNHCR 2008). Favorable South African legislation on refugee and asylum issues almost always guarantee individuals the right to an appeal after a first decision has been made, extending cases further. Distinctions between migrants and refugees in South Africa are also often hard to make, even by experts. It is simplistic to delineate African foreign nationals into two separate populations based on the standard legal distinctions of migrant and refugee (economic intent vs. the need for political protection). Most migrants in South Africa (all of the subjects of my research included) will identify first to the state, outsiders, and each other as refugees, regardless of whether they hold or qualify for or are applying for refugee status.

3 The growth of xenophobia in South Africa is typically considered a refraction or symptom of broader internal social tensions and transformations that define the post-apartheid era, much in line with arguments put forward in comparative studies (e.g. Geschiere 2009; Nyamjoh 2006). African foreign nationals arrived in large numbers with the onset of democracy, following, in 1996, South Africa’s ratification of the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 UN Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.
linguistic, racial, and socioeconomic camouflage to inhabit South African cities discreetly, thus face harassment and risks of violence on a continuous basis.

The dangerousness of Cape Town presented trials for the youths to reckon with. Met each day with derisive stares and threats of violence, the migrants worked continuously to camouflage themselves and reduce their visibility. They learned alternate versions of urban geography to minimize risky encounters, trained their eyes and bodies to be always alert to danger, and styled themselves in public to sometimes impress harmlessness, sometimes show strength. Recalling violence in Cape Town they had seen or heard of, several migrants spoke of themselves as ghosts who had mastered the art of invisibility. They sometimes convincingly masked their inner fears from me. ‘Nightwatching’ refers first to the strategies of movement and honed sensory practices the young migrants deploy as groups to survive and earn effectively in Cape Town.

Each chapter presents the youths reading a fluid, unfriendly landscape together to ensure their survival and safety. But because the men will show themselves to be wily actors also – resourceful, adept, mercenary – the focus of my ethnography tends to underemphasize these strategies as achievement. Absorbed and impressed during fieldwork, I often lost track of dangers the youths were always working to mitigate; on several occasions, they had to attend to my own safety during our nights together. While all of the men knew about incidents of violence against migrants in Cape Town, and some had witnessed episodes personally, few succumbed to physical injury during the period I worked with them.

At odds with these risks, however, which have been documented widely and which I sometimes observed firsthand, surviving in Cape Town was spoken of by the migrants as adventure. I was struck by the contrasts between how the youths spoke
playfully of violence in the city and acted so seriously in response. Urban violence, in fact, was a surprisingly enjoyable topic in our conversations. Competitively, prone to exaggeration, the men told me regularly that they much preferred being out on the streets at night to staying in the safety of their homes.

Despite its hazardousness, street life provided the men with rich material for storytelling, means to boast about the fearsome identities they had been given and had come to relish (see below), opportunities to earn, and companionship. The city further gave the youths a sense of purpose. Cape Town, one migrant told me, was a “gullible market [marché crédule]... that lets us steal fortunes.” In the men’s minds too, it was a place that could harm them inside and it needed repair. The youths made numerous remarks about Cape Town as a place of degeneracy and decadence. These comments were usually personalized through the many local women who traversed their homes and beds, and were spoken of as immoral and “diseased,” but they were ways I think of gesturing too to a divided South African world replete with inequality, scandal, and the palpable lack of neighborliness. As in one of my first encounters with the youths, in which two migrants told me they had come to South Africa to “clean [up] the country,” ‘nightwatching’ refers secondly to a righteous purpose the men invoked as they described their new existences in Cape Town, presenting themselves as watchmen in the city, as moral guardians. The

4 Despite conversations with the men about women and numerous women standing at the edge of the ethnographic frame, women do not appear in my study. I spoke to none of the women in the men’s lives. It is hard for me to admit that I enjoyed spending times with men who talked of women in the foulest and most derisive ways. I faced criticism from a close South African mentor for this omission. Though this may constitute ethnographic prejudice on my part, I have worried about overshadowing the accomplishments of the youths by including their negative statements on South African women too frequently. The scale of inequality in Cape Town can be hard to fathom. A recent survey (StatsSA 2009) showed 15% of households in Cape Town ran out of food during a typical month. The same survey showed that 39.4% of black Capetonians completed high school, compared to over 90% of whites. Overall unemployment in Cape Town is 24%; 35% of black residents are unemployed.
ethnography attempts to convey the concurrent fear, delight, and repugnance that mark my companions’ experiences of living and working in Cape Town. Throughout my fieldwork, not always comfortably, laughter and bravado accompanied migrants’ descriptions and bodily experiences of gruesome urban violence (see Goldstein 2003:18-57 for a discussion of the work of laughter in a context of desperation, poverty, and violence).

The youths will additionally demonstrate survival, capability, and creativity as collectives of economic actors. The exceptionally high costs of living in Cape Town render economic survival an arduous, unremitting struggle for the majority of people who stay there. This is especially the case in the more affluent parts of downtown Cape Town where most of my research is set, where violent crime is commonest, surveillance is concentrated, and, uniquely within Cape Town, where richest and poorest visitors and residents intersect. (The bulk of my research took place in areas these and other West and Central African migrants often work: in the ‘City Bowl’ and in the commercial-residential districts of Green Point and Sea Point to the north and northwest; see Map 1; Map 2).

Compared to the majority of migrants in Cape Town (and many of South Africa’s urban poor), the aptitude of these young migrants to generate small, but regular sums of money in a competitive informal economy is unusual. Over the last ten years, activists, journalists, and scholars have been rightly drawing attention to the generally dismal living conditions of African foreign nationals in South Africa (Crush and McDonald 2000; Desai 2008; Dodson and Oelofse 2000; Hassim, Kupe, and Worby 2008; HRW 1998; HRW 2006; Madsen 2004; McDonald et al. 2000; Steinberg 2006). However, in most of these studies of migrants and refugees in South Africa, economic survival entails an existence of holding on in the day-to-day,
of just barely coping to make ends meet. My focus, by contrast, on youths who relatively excel in their economic pursuits is not to suggest I was inattentive to the struggles faced by most African migrants and refugees in Cape Town. Outward extensions from my project are made carefully.\textsuperscript{5}

Survival, creativity, and enterprise are terms I wish to reclaim in my descriptions. They make up a chivalrous, sparkling language the young men used to describe their lives in the city to me. However, I use these words differently to how they are used in much contemporary South African anthropology (e.g. Besterman 2008; Colvin 2008). Dwelling less on those who struggle to survive in the city and more on the labors of those who succeed in doing so, my ethnography does not replicate a standing narrative from South African anthropology of poor Africans’ unending misfortunes (e.g. Fassin 2007; see Steinberg’s critique of Fassin and medical anthropology in South Africa, ‘Anthropology of Low Expectations’; Steinberg 2007). This study shows an unconventional set of young actors demonstrating resilience, nerve, inventiveness, and entrepreneurship in unexpected ways and milieus. I use survival in a register of vitality, taking from my fieldwork strong memories of the migrants’ laughter, of their survival and enterprise as pleasurable and game-like.

Emphasizing survival in my introduction raises a final, more applied problem in relation to current literatures and debates on African foreign nationals in South

\textsuperscript{5} Two significant groups of African foreign nationals in Cape Town are not featured in my study (though I came to meet many): Zimbabweans and Somalis. Both groups exist in South Africa in large numbers and their presence has shaped the social and political context of South Africa significantly, the work of NGOs and scholars especially. The violent murders of Somali refugees in Cape Town (since 2000) have emphasized the dangerousness of the city for foreign nationals. The migration of hundreds of thousands of Zimbabweans to South Africa in the mid-2000s, coinciding with political and economic decline in Zimbabwe, is cited regularly as breaking South Africans’ tolerance for hosting large populations of foreign nationals in the country.
Africa. This has been the greatest political challenge I have faced in researching and writing. I learned early on in my fieldwork in Cape Town that local conversations on African migrants and refugees tend not only to exclude or pass over accounts of migrants’ accomplishments in South Africa (economic and otherwise), but to express intolerance quite strongly towards them. Studies such as mine, therefore, of migrants who find ways to generate livelihoods with regularity, who survive despite risks to their safety and well-being, are viewed as anomalous or inappropriate, even as abhorrent. One researcher long experienced in research and advocacy with migrants in Cape Town was worried that “my positive research on migrants” would detract from the ongoing, responsible efforts by scholars and NGOs in drawing attention to migrants’ adversities. “Worse, James,” she continued – gesturing to how the post-apartheid academy delineates which populations constitute morally appropriate subjects for research – “studying those gangs will promote the stereotype that all migrants are Nigerian drug-dealers!”

Though my study aims to contribute to the growing literature on migrants and refugees in South Africa, if only by offering a small case-study as counterpoint, it is not primarily an examination of migrants’ helplessness in South Africa and their victimcy at the hands of South Africans. I foreground survival instead to start pointing to the specific modes and styles of organization and relationship among the youths that I will be using to explain how these particular migrants prove capable of working and living in Cape Town. It also starts delineating the population of migrant my work concerns: young men who travelled to South Africa from West and Central African countries in ones and twos, with peers not parents, who live there outside of families and diaspora communities. Survival propels a more hopeful story
of young male African migrants as unlikely achievers in one of the continent’s most foreboding and expensive metropolises.
Map 1 Greater Cape Town
Map 2 Migrants’ central places of work in Cape Town

Marginal migrants

The young African migrants I worked with, like other migrants and refugees in Cape Town, came to South Africa searching for economic opportunities unavailable to them in their home countries. As others also, having been displaced from their countries of birth by political violence and social unrest, they traveled southwards in pursuit of a safer, more stable existence. Like most migrants in South Africa, though many possibly qualify for it, few of the men have been granted refugee status there.

But only general connections link the groups of migrants I worked with to other migrants in Cape Town. Among the large population of migrants in the city, these young men comprise a small, discrete, and outlier constituency. Their everyday experiences in Cape Town do not match those of the majority, the distressing nature of which has gained attention through media and scholarship. Keywords in contemporary South African migrant studies – xenophobia, most centrally – feature infrequently in my descriptions and analysis.

This study thus concerns marginal migrants within a large, diverse population: male youths in Cape Town who operate independently of other migrants, who live there without their families, and who work, reside, and socialize outside of respectable migrant community associations based on common ethnicity, language, and nationality. Their unusualness was reminded to me continuously during fieldwork, sometimes angrily, by other migrants in Cape Town and by South Africans familiar with migrants and refugees in their country: through the youths’ particularly risky means of livelihood and kinds of employment in Cape Town (the men work in wealthy parts of the inner-city, in private security jobs and as traders and couriers in niche, illicit markets); in terms of their elusive residential patterns
(the youths live in bachelor households in racially-mixed, developed suburbs, not in the townships, where most migrants live); via their exclusive forms of association. Additionally, compared to the majority of African migrants, these youths fare quite well in terms of generating moderate incomes. They avoided a debilitating level of harassment endured publicly by most black outsiders. I will be arguing that the youth’s ties with each other, the ways these ties are deployed and sustained, and the youth’s separateness from the securities and burdens of conventional modes of family and community life afford the men an urban mobility that makes possible their economic and social survival. But the price they pay for these detachments and freedoms is suspicion – it is widely assumed the youths are using devious, violent, even otherworldly means to realize these incomes. The chief purveyors of suspicion cast on the youths are other African migrants.

I witnessed few interactions between the youths and other migrants during my entire time in Cape Town. Relations between my companions and others were tenuous and strained. Other, older migrants, particularly those who had established homes and names in South African communities, took great efforts to distance themselves from the men in my project, viewing them as troublesome, dangerous, and untrustworthy. Many assumed that young migrants who survive quite well in South Africa must be relying on criminal means or hidden forces to do so. Similar views were held by legal professionals and scholars in Cape Town who work with migrants, several of whom tried to warn me off the project by saying it was too unsafe for me to conduct and too peripheral to migrant studies. Claiming the growing visibility of delinquent groups of young, disconnected male migrants in South African cities was poisoning the cause for African migrants’ acceptance, and possibly imagining an outside researcher might dispute this perception by
documenting new cases of struggle and victimhood, one anthropologist suggested my work amounted to rumor-mongering.

Despite the youths’ marginal status within the broader migrant population and all of their dissimilarities, however, they are also some of South Africa’s most well-known foreign residents. All Capetonians will claim to know immediately about the young, muscular, and stylish male migrants in their city whose experiences I describe here. On one hand, this is because the youths are seen prominently in the city guarding cars belonging to residents and tourists in Cape Town’s busy commercial and entertainment areas – one of their commonest ways of earning incomes. On the other hand, the youths are known about because they embody a type of African migrant that is rife in public discourse – ‘Nigerian’ – which crucially separates the migrants I worked with from those considered deserving and genuine, and associates them instead with unlawful activities and gang violence. The figure is so familiar in urban legend and popular culture in South Africa – ‘Nigerians’ are stock, miscreant characters in literature, soap opera, and tabloid media – that I often found myself using the term to describe my work hurriedly to others. Alternative ways to describe the men in my project caused confusion, and kinder, cleaner terms available, such as ‘unaccompanied youth’, were always slightly inaccurate. While the men’s relations with the majority of migrants were strained and infrequent, their relations with South Africans were more ambiguous. South Africans look at these youth with scorn, desire, annoyance, and envy.

‘Nightwatching’ titles my study three times. It first describes practiced actions: the youths have trained themselves to read an opaque landscape to act and

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7 South Africans are aware that ‘Nigerian’ does not refer to citizens of Nigeria. Of the 68 men I worked with closely, just two were Nigerian citizens. This is explored in Chapter 1.
earn in safety; miscalculations of risk or a poor assessment of a stranger’s next moves can have lethal consequences. ‘Nightwatching’ secondarily invokes the way the migrants see themselves as principled warriors in an immoral city. This summons Rembrandt’s famous portrait of the Dutch citizen militia who guarded the streets independently of the state. But I use it thirdly here in the way the same painting by Rembrandt has also been so legendarily misread. The name it acquired centuries later (‘The Night Watch’ in English) was based on mistaking the damaged state of the canvas for a nighttime scene and from misreading its pious subjects as unruly, vigilante defenders from a lower social class. The naming of the painting still conditions our viewing of it: even after knowing its intended title, audiences can still easily read in the painting a sinister scene of raucous men stalking the streets unrestrained.

Anthropological texts are often titled in ways that ask readers to see their subjects differently to how they are viewed by those they live besides (to invoke sympathy, to claim commensurability or difference, to provoke reaction). The men with whom I worked in Cape Town are also viewed locally in multiple ways: as vulnerable, marginalized youths displaced and threatened by violence; as associations of disciplined, resourceful would-be businessmen; as misogynist, dangerous gangs (see note 4), sourcing income from illicit trades. Each reading is valid. An aspect of the youths’ brilliance in Cape Town is how they appreciate how others see them, performing back as circumstances demand. Though I may prefer
the reading I provide of my companions is privileged, I accept that the men in the project might be read by others in different ways.8

The youths may introduce themselves to you as members of the large population of migrants in Cape Town. They enjoy speaking about themselves in frames which resonate with popular and scholarly accounts of migrants and refugees in South Africa – commenting on how they expected to have been welcomed to South Africa as repayment for their countrymen’s efforts and hospitality during black South Africa’s struggle for liberation, for example; identifying as victims of xenophobia. But they operate independently of other migrants, live and socialize outside of family units and formal migrant communities, and are seen by city residents and other migrants as a distinct body of detached young men, often in negative terms. If you befriend them, they may eventually admit these differences.

Reading data sideways

The subjects of my study are young male African migrants who lived in Cape Town between 2006 and 2009. The following table presents some details of 68 young men I worked with closely during this period (Table 1).

Read downwards, row by row, Table 1 shows my companions in Cape Town comprise a diverse set of individuals. There are differences between the men in terms of age, place of birth, and length of stay in South Africa. An accompanying

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8 For example, I received two different kinds of feedback on my research after a preliminary presentation in an Africa-focused academic conference in the U.S. in 2009, in which I tried to bring out how differently the same youths are seen in the city. One email came from an anthropologist asking me whether my “poor young boys” will ever manage to rectify torn family ties and go home. A formal letter was sent to me after the same presentation from U.S. Intelligence officials requesting detailed guidelines on how I managed to “infiltrate criminal networks” (for an example of how network-studies have now proliferated intelligence studies, see Duffield 2012).
map plots the migrants' places of birth to illustrate their varied national origins (Map 3). Such variation places my work at odds with other studies of migrants and refugees in South Africa; my project centers neither on a specific, nationality-drawn migrant diaspora or a particular locality in Cape Town in which migrants live and work. Emphasizing individual differences, this table may cast an image of the migrants as solitary, war-torn, and dissimilar souls, struggling alone in a foreign city.

Read sideways, however, the table’s cells begin to repeat and pattern – commonalities between the migrants now come forward, points of convergence. Table 1 shows, for example, how most of the men were born and grew up during times of conflict in their home countries, matured in cities, passed into South Africa during a common time-period, are unmarried, and exist in South Africa with few to no accompanying family members (except those in analogous, age-based categories, such as brothers and male cousins). In thinking how migrant ‘communities’ are composed, at least at first, we may want to query which biographical or legal indicators we privilege to determine resemblance and connection.

Counter to impressions of the youths as solitary, isolated, and surviving alone, I found the migrants to be far from friendless and struggling. My first impressions of them were as energetic, self-assured, ebullient, and intimidating men, doing reasonably well in terms of finding work in an expensive city, and embedded in multiple, dense webs of relationships with other migrants. Some of their relations were made in the city, others before. These relationships were not primarily with family members (if those existed, they were bonds with siblings or cousins and already present). An early challenge of fieldwork, in fact, after meeting particular youths individually or in pairs, was to try and keep track of the migrants'
many contacts and associates. They initially seemed too connected to too many people for me to meet, note, and process comprehensively. Demonstrating their connectednesses in Cape Town was also something of a show-and-tell the men played out to me frequently. I later learned their webs of relationships were always finite, exclusive, and unstable. Despite their spirit, they were not internally harmonious.

The forms, qualities, and fullness of migrants’ relationships with each other are not included in Table 1, but they are central to the men’s lives in South Africa in enabling their savvy, adaptable, and resilient modes of livelihood. Their sum and substance help explain how the men had become resourceful and streetwise in Cape Town, unexpectedly capable in the face of hazards and risks.
Table 1 Basic data on 68 close informants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Migrant</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Household</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Age (1 April, 2008)</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Arrived in South Africa</th>
<th>Arrived in Cape Town</th>
<th>Relationships and histories among the migrants that predate their arrival in Cape Town</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Gerard</td>
<td>H1</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Kirungu, DRC</td>
<td>09-03</td>
<td>01-05</td>
<td>Half-brothers (same father). A23 is A2's first-cousin (maternal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>H1</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Kirungu, DRC</td>
<td>09-03</td>
<td>01-05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>Abelo</td>
<td>H2</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Kibuye, Rwanda</td>
<td>12-04</td>
<td>02-05</td>
<td>Brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>Gael</td>
<td>H2</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Kibuye, Rwanda</td>
<td>12-04</td>
<td>02-05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5</td>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>H5</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Goma, DRC</td>
<td>08-01</td>
<td>02-06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A6</td>
<td>Michel</td>
<td>H5</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bukava, DRC</td>
<td>06-03</td>
<td>02-06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7</td>
<td></td>
<td>H5</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Goma, DRC</td>
<td>06-05</td>
<td>02-06</td>
<td>Met in Johannesburg and travelled to Cape Town together. A7 and A8 are brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A8</td>
<td></td>
<td>H5</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Goma, DRC</td>
<td>06-05</td>
<td>02-06</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A9</td>
<td>Eko</td>
<td>H5</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Cyangugu, Rwanda</td>
<td>?</td>
<td>08-05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Kampala, Uganda</td>
<td>12-01</td>
<td>01-02</td>
<td>Heads family unit. Friends with A15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A11</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Cyangugu, Rwanda</td>
<td>07-07</td>
<td>07-07</td>
<td>Attached to a family unit. Connection with A9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9 The 68 informants here are migrants with whom I worked closely in Cape Town and compiled full records on. All are male. Each migrant is identified by a letter denoting their network (A to D) and a number denoting the order in which I met them. Numbers do not equate to rank or status.

10 The youths chose their pseudonyms. Only youths known already among each other by pseudonyms are retained (e.g. Wesley Snipes, X-Man).

11 I collected data on households for all of the migrants. In Chapter 3, I examine data on six households comprising migrants in networks (H1 to H6). Only members of these households between August 2007 and December 2008 are noted in this column.

12 All the migrants were born in urban or peri-urban settings. To preserve confidentiality, places of birth are recorded by province or nearest town.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
<th>Date of Birth</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A12</td>
<td>Jean-Marc</td>
<td>H2</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Kalemie, DRC</td>
<td>Twins</td>
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<tr>
<td>A13</td>
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<td>H2</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>Twins</td>
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<tr>
<td>A14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Kigali, Rwanda</td>
<td>Heads family unit. Connections with A3 and A4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>Network commander with A22. Lives with A22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Robert</td>
<td>H2</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>26</td>
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<td>First-cousins (paternal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Kampala, Uganda</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>A18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Bukavu, DRC</td>
<td>Brothers; comrades, FDLR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>Brothers; comrades, FDLR</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>Kisangi, DRC</td>
<td>Assistant to A15 and A22. Lives alone</td>
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<td>1991</td>
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<td>A23</td>
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<td>Brad Pitt</td>
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<td>Jacky</td>
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<td>1982</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
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<td>Rocky</td>
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<td>1980</td>
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<td>Matadi, DRC</td>
<td>Met B5 in Johannesburg and travelled together</td>
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<td>1981</td>
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<td>Zorro</td>
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<td>1984</td>
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<td>Caprio</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>B8 and B9 are brothers. B10 and B11 are first-cousins (paternal). The two pairs have travelled together since 2003</td>
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<td>B8 and B9 are brothers. B10 and B11 are first-cousins (paternal). The two pairs have travelled together since 2003</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Brazzaville, Congo</td>
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</tr>
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<td>05-07</td>
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<td>H6</td>
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<td>H6</td>
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<td>12-06</td>
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<td>D7</td>
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<td>1986</td>
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<td>08-06</td>
<td>08-06</td>
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<td>H6</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>? Kenya</td>
<td>05-06</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Map 3 Migrants’ places of birth by network

The map shows the birth places of the migrants I worked with. It shows how three of the migrant networks (circles A, B, C) comprised members drawn from quite specific regions of the continent. By contrast, the members of Network D are overlaid here to show this network’s diversity in terms of national origins.
Networks as forms and systems

Cognizant of its varied applications in anthropology and other disciplines, I refer to the webs and work of relationships among the young migrants as networks. Instead of other descriptive terms, including terms the youths sometimes used to describe themselves and their activities (such as businesses, military operations, patrons and clients, age-sets, gangs, or fictive families), ‘network’ serves best in holding together descriptions of these groups of youths and the arrangements, aggregates, and actions of their lateral, peer ties. The migrants’ groups were not structured consistently as implied by other kinds of collectives; they did not have ‘leaders’ who stood constantly at the top or in the center, for example. Roles and positions shifted from context to context and I could not assume them in advance, based on, for example, a migrant’s age or birth-order.

Networks feature in anthropological work in many different ways: as social, economic, and political systems found and studied in the field (kinship networks, trade networks, etc.); as practices of engagement and interaction (‘networking’); and as methods to conduct research or to model and decipher action (e.g. actor-network theory). Anthropology’s networks centrally examine relations between people, institutions, things, and environments. Alternate descriptive terms (such as gangs or businesses) either prioritize the structures of persons and relations over the actions they do and can make possible, or overemphasize functions at the cost of understating form and composition (or they prove helpful in describing one joined practice, but not another).

Early in my preliminary fieldwork, I learned that the migrants’ survival in Cape Town and their ability to generate livelihood rested on the distinct ways they cooperated together, with skillfulness and organization. The relations they formed
among themselves were not generated out of desperation, as last-resort coping mechanisms (as presented by many scholars of children and youth in situations of extremity, for example Lockhart 2002). Network membership (a notion of maintaining a boundary between an inside and outside) was taken very seriously. Exclusivity and secrecy are central to their operability as economic actors. Even if the practice of fieldwork drew me closer to particular migrants within these networks (‘egos’ to study or narrate outwards from), and though certain members were identified or shown to me momentarily as taking decisions on how their combined labor should be divided or over how resources are used, I knew I ultimately needed to gauge the totality of their relations to understand how each networks’ labors were fully possible.

I was motivated to craft methods to map migrant networks as fully as possible in response to gaps I see in the large body of social scientific literature that expresses and theorizes manifold forms of connectedness and action through social and economic networks extensively, but which often lacks detailed descriptions of networks themselves. At times, scholarship uses the device of ‘network’ to the point at which it seemingly warrants little explication.

I draw principally on a concept of network aligned with earlier anthropologists who pioneered social network analysis as a method of studying community relationships and dynamics. Max Gluckman and the members of the Manchester School, including John Barnes, J. Clyde Mitchell and Elizabeth Bott, are often credited with leading this research, much of which, appropriately, took its impetus from studying African newcomers to African cities (Barnes 1969; Bott 1971; Epstein 1969; Mitchell 1969; see Schumaker 2001:235-237 for a history of the study of networks among the Manchester School African anthropologists; for review essays
on networks in ‘older’ anthropology see Jay 1964; Mitchell 1974; Wolfe 1976). In diverse, challenging, heterogeneous urban situations, these scholars sought to study relations between and across individuals and circumscribed groups, examining ties linking “unbounded units of analysis” (Schumaker ibid.).

Elizabeth Bott’s study (1971) of working-class families in London is an example of this work. Bott examined the “conjugal role patterns between husband and wife in 20 London families” by studying each couple’s separate and joined ties outwards “of kinship, friendship, or neighborhood” (Jay 1964:137). Studying husbands, wives, and the relations they make or hold with others helped Bott understand how a family’s social network affected family life and role performance. She concluded that families with ‘closer-knit’ networks, with “network-connectedness” (Bott 1971:97), not only fare better because their networks provide instrumental assistance and emotional support, but that the couple’s “conjugal interdependence” is lessened healthily through networks and husband and wife roles within the household became more clearly segregated; consensus on social norms within the family is thus reached more easily (Bott 1971:60). In my ethnography, the migrants show reflexivity in how their working ‘brotherhood’ with other migrants shapes how they behave with each other and how they view themselves. Their experiences with strangers in the city color intimate relations between the men. This is shown to be particularly problematic in my study of the migrants’ domesticity.

Edward Jay compares three early approaches to ‘network’ in anthropology. The Manchester School’s scholars, he argued, first conceived of “a network... as a piece of a totality of relationships. It always consists of a unit looking outward at other units, some of which are also looking towards each other, some not. From the
point of view of any given unit, the system is boundless” (Jay 1964:138). Second, Jay highlighted an approach to study social and economic networks in India by Bernard Cohn and McKim Marriott (1958), who showed that trade and marriage relations (networks) hub in particular spatial centers and contain clearly demarcated boundaries. “Within such networks are various ‘centers’ or nucleated ‘denser concatenations of relationships’” (Jay 1964:138). Jay finally highlights anthropological works of networks in which “there is no hierarchy, no nucleated denser focus of relationships or ‘center’... The only ‘center’ would be the unit from which we are looking outward in any given, arbitrary instance. Every unit is in this sense a ‘center’. We might say that such a system is always ‘egocentric’” (ibid., emphasis added). My study shows validity to each of these approaches.

In a later article, Alvin Wolfe (1976) notes a resurgence of anthropological research involving networks. Wolfe claims that the ‘rise in network thinking’ in anthropology derives from four factors: the interest in relations over things; a trend towards process over form; “the trend toward seeking out elementary phenomena rather than institutions” (Wolfe 1976:55); and an interest in “constructing generative models rather than functional ones” (ibid.):

To the network analyst, relations among persons are at once elementary phenomena and they are processes which generate social forms which are themselves subject to continual regeneration and adaptation to changing circumstances expressed in relations among persons. The network analyst does not conceive a social network that is structurally fixed, does not reify the patterns of relations observed, does not attribute purpose to them. Purpose enters only at the level of the elementary relation, which has persons transacting. Yet, the network approach does not entail reductionism, for the relation itself is more than the sum of its parts. Network theory, when it develops, will generalize about relations among relations, how transactions affect such relations, how such relations affect transactions. But though they depend on transactions, these network statements will not be a kind of economics, for the relations at issue are not those between resources (e.g. “prices”) but rather those between actors (true social relations). (Wolfe 1976:55, emphasis added).
Wolfe correlates the rising interest in networks to the growth of urban anthropology. “When one looks at the close association in Africa between the study of urbanization and the turning toward network concepts, one is almost ready to argue that the network image of society comes to mind when we study city life” (Wolfe 1976:54). Images of networks, webs, and nets – and what one can do conceptually with such imagined objects and metaphors (such as weaving, cutting, and catching; e.g. Strathern 1996) – have influenced my fieldwork and writing. Wolfe also accords fresh interest in networks in anthropology to the nature of ethnographic research, which, he claims, naturally dispose researchers to studying societies through a network orientation, the influence of mathematics, and the availability of technological tools that allow social scientists to process large datasets (a challenge faced particularly by anthropologists of the Manchester School; Mitchell 1969).

Networks hold comparative potential. I found variety between the different networks I worked with – structurally, dynamically, and in terms of size (see Jacobson 1973 for a comparison of friendship networks between “elite” and “non-elite” urban migrants to Mbale, Uganda, in the 1960s). The migrant networks were also systems: internally governed by shared codes of behavior and conduct;

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14 David Jacobson’s study (1973) shows how elite Ugandan males in Mbale go to great lengths to show off their networks of friends, going out to bars almost every night if possible – the city is associated with anonymity and loneliness, and a man without friends is viewed as suspicious. Most intriguing are the findings Jacobson presents from quantitative surveys of close dyadic relationships. Whereas non-elite migrants in Mbale and the wives of elite male migrants choose their closest friends as “social equals,” “elite Africans do not consider tribal identity to be a criteria of social equality and it is not a significant factor in their friendships... 82% of their friendships are tribally heterogeneous” (Jacobson 1973:88).
generative and repetitive; dynamic. I selected methodologies that attempted to capture systematic data.

Recent work from outside anthropology on networks has helped me analyze additional phenomena. Studying the migrant networks’ operability at work in the inner-city, for example, entails attending to ‘assemblages’ comprising people and relationships, but also to things, places, dress, words, sensations, light, and sounds (Bennett 2005; Latour 2005). My study particularly extends Mark Granovetter’s (1973) important work on the spatiality and density of relationships in networks. Studying job mobility among professionals and executives in the United States, Granovetter showed that a person’s irregular and casual acquaintances (so-called ‘weak ties’) can prove valuable in making opportunity and differentiating oneself from others (for example in sharing information on new job openings). This has an obvious resonance in my project, where the socially respectable institutions of families and community associations – so-called ‘strong ties’, densely and spatially clustered – are least effective in securing migrants’ well-being in Cape Town; indeed, they impede their survival and successfulness (see Chabal 2009:48 for a discussion of kinship-political networks in terms of degrees of obligation).

The migrants will show their networks take on particular forms and textures within different contexts of the everyday. The youths additionally use various languages to talk of their relations with each other, sometimes simultaneously – frequently generating confusion. In my analysis of the migrants’ work, for example,

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15 “An obligation defines how individuals relate to each other as human beings, and not just what is expected of them by way of political transactions. The web of obligations that link people is densest at the core of the kinship association and more diffuse at its periphery. Obligations from different networks intersect. Nevertheless, there is no clear and absolute division between the realm of obligation and non-obligation: the very texture of social relations is woven from ties of obligation, some of which are more compelling than others in kinship terms” (Chabal 2009:48).
networks are spoken about and presented foremost as economic operations, tightly choreographed and organized, hierarchical, and business-like. (Languages of war are also used by the migrants here). In other contexts, within households for example, the network sees itself (or tries to see itself) through the language and ethics of kinship: though few are natural kinsmen, all of the men are named as ‘brothers’.

I hope the following chapters, which demonstrate the complexities and variedness of migrants’ sum of relations within their economic practices and shared domestic lives, can show validity in presenting the lives of these migrants through the concept and tool of network. There is much more work to be done with this concept, approach, and language. However, the young men were interested in charting their lives with me. In different ways and for different purposes, they were auditing their relations already.

Relations as subjects

More accurately, therefore, the dissertation examines young male migrants’ relationships with other young migrants in Cape Town, and the entities – networks – the sums of these relations produce. It shows how these youth, in the aftermath of war and migration, generated or joined networks of peers and ‘brothers’ that supply crucial resources both for economic survival and for the spiritual project of cultivating an adult self. Having migrated generally in the wake of political violence in their home countries, the youth faced their future life projects without the benefits of inheritance and support provided by traditional forms of kinship (and the security of legal status in South Africa). Rather than view migration principally as a process of hardship, disorientation, and the fragmentation of relations and selves
(De Genova 2002; Hansen and Stepputat 2005; Kunz 1973; Malkki 1995; Reitzes 2000), my work explores how the youths drew from existing relational repertoires and generated new ones in the everyday. Peer relations hold migrant youth as groups and allow them to operate within the informal economy – dexterously, secretively, and often surprisingly well: relations modelled on sibling ties; ties shaped by trajectories of migration and new economic collaborations; bonds of intimacy.

Through close study of the ways bonds are made and nurtured between these men, through a series of commercial practices produced in daily struggles to survive, in which particular relations and particular dimensions of relations gain salience, I argue that an analysis of the plasticity of kinship forms is required. These relations are not usually made from the ties of kinship – rather out of friendship, work-ties, and shared social circumstance – but they operate at times in the language of kinship. All of the men, in daily remarks to each other and in statements to the outside world, are ‘brothers’.

Relations are the staple ingredient of anthropological inquiry. My work follows on from many studies of relations and relatives from Africa and beyond. But it is hard to present data on these migrants’ relationships and networks in familiar forms. I have needed to adjust or invent tools to do so. Perhaps in a similar critique of the study of kinship, which has objected to the centrality of the kinship chart in anthropology and its givenness as a portrait of relatedness at the cost of omitting what kinship does and constructs in the service of larger entities (Borneman 1996; Schneider 1984), my project makes a parallel intervention on behalf of studies of relations between economic partners, friends, and ‘brothers’, of networks.
It is false to imply that the profuse relatedness of these young migrants was something I did not expect to find in my fieldwork – I sought funding and permission to study the lives of migrant networks in Cape Town, and undertook preliminary research on the topic – but I was derailed regularly by the scale and spiraling pace of their connectedness and the openness with which the migrants shared such information with me. I was surprised too by the variety of ties the migrants had made in the city, and with the speed at which many youths, arriving in the city alone or in pairs, had found others to live with and work alongside.

What stuns me more, however, is how so little on young migrants’ relationships with peers and others features in the large literature on migrants in Africa (relations between younger men especially), a library that has recently ballooned on the subjects of children, youth, violence, and war, and gained additional prominence given current concerns into the welfare of African foreign nationals in one of the continent’s wealthiest countries. The men are representatives of an increasing population in Africa – youths who migrate across national borders in formations that crisscross lines of nationality. Most current literatures, in contrast, center on African migrants who are struggling in Africa, their victimhood and tragedies. Though it is known that large-scale migration processes in Africa occur outside the ambit of the family, especially in South Africa with its deep histories of internal labor migration, the scholarship is consistently organized through given prisms of the family and nationality-derived diaspora. The focus and political stance of most of the literature on migrants and refugees makes it hard for me to incorporate many of its categories in my writing. Unaccompanied youth, for example, a legal category defining young people not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian, does not apply easily to the men I worked with. Likewise, the
organizing phrase in the African scholarship to speak of migrants and their interests – ‘community’ – is problematic here because those I worked with do not constitute a natural community (there are no female members; their lives are not oriented towards biological reproduction) and they do not live in a specific part of the city bound by uniform national and ethnic origins.

The first three chapters examine the compositional forms and dynamics of the migrant networks through patterns of mobility, work, and residency. Data collected systematically through surveys and mapping exercises are annotated with material from conversations and from my intrusions into the migrants’ daily routines. They offer different portraits of the migrants’ relations and mobility in the context of the everyday. Combined, they provide a backdrop for the final chapter, which considers how the networks fared during an urban crisis, in which African migrants and refugees were rendered vulnerable and visible. I bring these portraits together to show what networks make possible in a hostile world.

Though the ties that bind these young men together into networks are kaleidoscopically varied in form and feeling – robust, loving, brittle, historic, discordant, abusive; and this is perhaps what I set out to document and understand most deeply in my fieldwork, the perseverance and industry of what I term ‘brotherhood’ among male migrants in the very broadest sense – my ethnography shows the migrants’ networks proving erudite and supple structures and systems that allow the migrants means to founding work in a city such as Cape Town and securing a mode of survival. My ethnography thus challenges dominant depictions of migrants in South Africa as destitute, noble victims.

The dissertation investigates the multiple forms of relationship and relatedness that transnational networks of young male African migrants in Cape
Town comprise, embrace, sustain, and produce. It celebrates how lateral and flexible forms of association and companionship make certain forms of living possible.

A chronology of fieldwork

One of the elements which makes fieldwork challenging is that it is carried out with quite a different activity (writing) in mind. And what makes the study which follows in its own way challenging is that it turns out in fact to be much more than a matter of writing-up – for the writing only works, as the student discovers, as an imaginative re-creation of some of the effects of fieldwork. (Strathern 1999:1)

Preliminary fieldwork I conducted in Cape Town in 2006, networking myself, taught me to be patient. I sought ties with an elusive population that operated at night and in parts of the city unsafe for a white male on foot. Being too direct in asking questions – Where are you from? Where do you live? What do you do? Who do you know? – would cast suspicion. To conduct fieldwork with young male migrants, its beginnings had to be on my subjects’ terms. I learned carefulness, but also that some risk-taking and in-breaths of confidence on my part were required.

Starting slowly, I began my research by learning the geography of Cape Town and meeting different migrant populations in the city. Without private transport for my first nine months of fieldwork, I stood out as I commuted each day to walk sections of the city frequented by migrants, waiting for them to approach me. That happened quite quickly. I got lost continuously for one thing – I followed maps only to alight from a train or minibus taxi someplace other than where I expected. I needed to ask for help from fellow travelers many times and migrants were the friendliest to approach. Some migrants I met in public took my details and referred me to others. Early exchanges were cautious, skirting around personal issues to
reflect on general subjects. Some men did not follow through after numbers were swapped. Where lines of communication continued, it could take weeks or months of guarded exchanges before ‘real’ research commenced. I learned later I was being tested and screened.

I also spent long periods of time in places of the city where migrants congregate, observing activities. The central train and bus station is a key place in migrants’ urban landscapes. Newcomer youths arriving overland from Johannesburg would be met by migrants based permanently at the station to catch and direct them. I loitered where young migrants work: Sea Point; on Long Street; Greenmarket Square. My first chapter describes how one migrant accosted me on a train. My third chapter examines the relations I made with a household of migrants in Muizenberg, the seaside suburb I stayed in.

I met most of the subjects I came to work with, however, through chance encounters in which migrants made the first move. Several instances were dramatic. I met two migrants, for example, at knifepoint in Green Point. Coolly, the migrants rescued me and my belongings from a daylight assault on a street corner by nonchalantly revealing handguns strapped to their jackets’ insides. Fast-walking me away to a safer stretch of road, they launched into a narrative that I would hear variations of in many first conversations: about black South Africans as uneducated and lazy; how they, the migrants, had come to “clean the country.” I scoured the same area for a week before meeting the two men again to thank them and introduce myself, too terrified at the time to turn the experience into a fieldwork moment. A motif of my fieldwork: my safety was always in the hands of others. Though I left Cape Town with bruised ribs and faded stitches on my right wrist, I was grateful to the men for keeping me from harm as best they could.
My unfamiliarity with the ways research in South Africa conventionally unfolds proved helpful in entering into relationships with the migrants. The highly professionalized research landscape in South Africa is saturated. Anthropological research is conducted commonly through NGOs and community associations, and, as advised, I presented myself to several organizations working with migrants and refugees with appeals for assistance. Most showed disinterest. Others expressed bewilderment, saying it would just not be possible to find young migrants matching the profile I had outlined in my research and funding proposals who would feel comfortable enough to talk to me. There was some truth here – the men did not draw attention to themselves by circulating in formal centers; they avoided migrant community associations or were rejected from them; they were not classified as sufficiently “in need” to qualify for institutional aid.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the Johns Hopkins University listed a set of topics I was not able to explore in this research, principally to do with illegal and criminal activities I might encounter. They also had concerns with the possibly unlawful immigration statuses of those I met. Committee members had read between the lines of my proposals closely. With some surprise, however, these restrictions proved productive, because, by explaining what I could not discuss with the migrants at the start of my meeting them, the protocol allowed the youths to set boundaries to our exchanges. That I was not “allowed” to hear or see certain events was greeted with signs of relief.

My maiden conversations with migrants were packed. I was met regularly with torrents of detail and what felt to be rehearsed narratives: of violence in Cape Town and the risks migrants face; of the difficulties of finding work without permits; remarks of surprise at the levels of hostility in South Africa towards migrants,
despite past support and hospitality. Conversations deepened in time – individual biographies broke through standard accounts as my fieldwork settled and we turned to their working lives and the routines and contours of street life. Urban violence became the grammar of our discussions – it brought migrants together and provided rich, humorous material for storytelling. Violent words filled awkward silences, distracted us from somber and painful subjects, and put us at ease. Certain topics, such as legal statuses, money, and remittances sent home, took me longer to find out about or did not emerge directly at all, and it would take almost a full year of fieldwork before some migrants allowed me to observe them at work and see what their businesses entailed. The migrants also guarded precise details of where they lived in Cape Town from me for many months.

I spent the first year of my fieldwork accompanying the migrants through the various domains of the city where they live and work. I charted ties and connections between the migrants systematically. I also followed their connections outwards to build a fuller geography of the city marked by relationships and patterns of work, noting places the young men feel safe or avoid. Meetings were planned cautiously and precisely, strictly marked with cell phone messages of expected arrival times. I learned how the travel patterns of migrants in Cape Town were definite, shared, and cumbersome. The maps we composed revealed a nervousness in the city shared by young migrants. I explore these geographies in the first chapter. I learned how precise corners, underpasses, and taxi stands were tainted by personal experiences of violence or by passed-on stories of a brother in distress, thus how know-how of the streets are informed and mobilized by relational knowledge. In contrast to other topics we discussed where individual qualities and personalities are differentiated – from skills in selling to fortune with girls – matters of safety and risk were felt
equivalently. The migrants’ inside worries and impressive physical strength were jarring. I collected stories about Cape Town as we walked. Often out of sequence, stories about the present were interlaced with memories of former lives lived in other places. Though less amicable and talkative spaces, I also began to study the migrants’ homes and households.

In January 2008, I bought a 1970s white Beetle with no brakes. It earned me an odd credibility among my informants and allowed me to break away from public transportation. I became a transporter and messenger. I was soon a fixture outside the city’s maximum security prison in Westlake on Monday mornings, collecting migrants who had been detained over the weekend, then common for foreign nationals caught by the police without papers.

I also began voluntary work that month at a free law clinic for migrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers in order to engage larger populations of foreign African nationals in Cape Town, including women, and learn about the legal processes young migrants negotiate or avoid. Working at the clinic for one half-day per week, I learned to read the legal documents migrants and refugees possess and use – artifacts that standardize and refract their biographies and claims of persecution. I completed basic training in refugee law and process to contextualize South African legislation. Under attorney supervision, I accompanied young migrants to the Department of Home Affairs to observe how interviews are conducted by state officials to determine an individual’s eligibility for refugee status. A respected site of assistance for migrants and refugees in Cape Town, my presence at the clinic earned me a reputation among the men as some kind of legal expert. Migrants’ contacts started contacting me with requests I look at their papers.
By the end of 2007, I was immersed in the migrants’ working and domestic routines, collecting what I thought were quality data. But something uncomfortable now started developing inside me, an emotional hardening. I caught myself numb to news of terrible crimes and violence in the city. My experiences match Adam Reed’s descriptions of conducting research in a Port Moresby prison, where Reed catches himself immune to a further narrative of violence, and laughing with his informants to their stories of rapes and stabbings (Reed 2005:50-56). I was not aware of ever trying to impress the men; the youths had varied personalities and we regularly argued and shouted. Yet, as I typed up fieldnotes in the early hours and took time alone to reflect, I could not always believe the scenes I had been part of hours before, or how I had endured the words I had taken down. After a shift at the law clinic, I needed time alone to pause over the testimonies I had taken. The IRB created one series of ethical boundaries for me to follow and respect, but I could not always square the youths’ economic gains in the city against the sometimes deplorable means by which they had sourced them. A senior South African anthropologist I trusted encouraged me to not listen to South African radio. I started swimming fanatically.

In the final weeks of May 2008, the lives of African migrants and refugees in Cape Town were shaken dramatically by outbreaks of violence on foreign nationals that unfolded across the country. The attacks led to the displacement of over 80,000 people in Cape Town, a declaration of national crisis, and the internment of refugees and migrants in camps and shelters. From May 2008 until I left the following January, I found my research focusing on the dynamics of displacement, on days of camp living, and the anxieties and fear these spaces and their regimes of control
give life to. The young men in my project were affected indirectly. Some of the youngest took refuge in my apartment.

Details of my involvements in the relief efforts are kept apart for the final chapter. I describe there how I assisted civil society groups by canvassing students from local universities to conduct a survey of camp conditions, basing myself at one of the largest camps for five months to do so. The survey data was presented as evidence in the High Court of Cape Town to force the state to implement international norms and standards in the camps. By then considered a long-term, known researcher in Cape Town, with ties to organizations and key migrant populations, particularly younger migrants, I was consulted by activist and humanitarian groups, government officials, and later UN heads of mission. I attended and contributed to briefings on the crisis.

After the violence, the migrant networks I was studying closed and reconfigured. I struggled for some months to find all of the men I had been working with; a number of them left Cape Town for Johannesburg. My fieldwork thus drew to its close in sad and distressing ways. It brought out anxieties in the men I knew, which they had worked hard until now to keep hidden from me. The 2008 crisis has had the effect of making my project awkwardly timely, but it produced a gulf in my work – a before and an after the crisis – that I have struggled to reconcile.

For a study that opened optimistically, which claimed to offer a non-piteous account of migrants in South Africa and which expresses admiration for the achievements of its subjects, it has been a drawn out process of writing. This is not least because my fieldwork did not accumulate linearly or unfold as an always pleasurable experience. The final chapter stands apart from the others, because, then and now, it has been difficult to connect my research materials and experiences
from before May 2008 with my work that followed. While the youths were not affected in the same publicly-visible ways as other migrants and refugees, I experienced the sense of a research project disintegrating (two of the four networks collapsed completely in the aftermath of the violence). Writing has been affected by the temporal splintering of my project into two parts and from leaving Cape Town with an addendum project unfolding. I remember finding it quite contemptible at the time to see a trough of peer-reviewed journal articles, edited volumes, and multimedia documentaries on the crisis released at such speed, while, in Cape Town at least, the end of the crisis was not then in sight, many thousands remaining homeless. The use of tense in the dissertation is uncomfortable; the bulk of my chapters concern a bygone era.

I present my work with a very deep sense of responsibility to the men who befriended and accompanied me, and who kept me safe in Cape Town. But that has meant finding ways to retain contrasts that abound in my fieldnotes: accounts of violence accompanied by laughter; migrancy as freedom and as loneliness; unique migration narratives that often seemed identical; routines and improvisation; old scars of war on beautiful, young bodies. Faithful ethnography means preserving the joined terror and excitement that makes up the contexts and frames of mind within which these networks flourish.

Writing has been challenged, finally, from realizing that writing up also means writing out, letting go, placing one’s work in the hands of another, unfastening. Writing entails painful revisiting. The depth of this problem was not apparent during fieldwork, a moral, emotional dimension to what Marilyn Strathern has called elsewhere ‘the ethnographic effect’ (Strathern 1999).
An outline of the chapters

**Nightwatching** (Chapter 1) focuses on ways the young migrants navigate Cape Town. Using data I collected while walking with migrants through the city, I chart various travel routes the youths have adopted to move swiftly and safely in Cape Town. I describe sensorial geographies of fear and violence they carry that inform their urban mobility. These constitute a particular portrait and knowledge of the post-apartheid city’s urban form.

This chapter situates my research alongside existing studies of migrants and refugees in South Africa. Using a science-fiction film from South Africa released the year my fieldwork ended, I make special efforts to explain how the subjects of my research are viewed in Cape Town not as displaced victims of political violence to be pitied or as street-savvy entrepreneurs to be commended or learned from, but as a specific, dangerous, and otherworldly type of African outsider.

**Relations as Infrastructure** (Chapter 2) presents one of the commonest ways the young migrants in Cape Town earn money at night: guarding cars. One network of migrants allowed me to accompany them to their main place of work in downtown Cape Town and watch them earn and trade on the streets as they front themselves as car guards. I draw from literatures on economic and social networks in African cities to evaluate this data, centrally the recent work by AbdouMaliq Simone (1998; 2004a; 2004b; 2006), who invites us to study the cultural repertories of performance shared by groups of urban actors, and the ties between them, as generating ‘infrastructures’ of persons. I show how the youths learn particular ways to dress, move, see, and communicate together while working. These stylized, well-

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16 To date, the majority of research on African migrants and refugees in South Africa centers on Johannesburg, where much larger populations of foreign nationals reside.
choreographed, corporate ‘techniques of the body’ (Mauss 1973) allow them to present strength to rival groups of migrants, yet harmlessness and charm to potential customers, and to disguise their work and presence from the gaze of city authorities.

**Houses without Memory** (Chapter 3) turns to the rented houses and apartments the youths occupy in Cape Town. It examines domestic spaces the young male migrants forge and maintain among themselves. Here, the youths face challenges experienced by many other migrants and refugees in the city concerning landlord discrimination, the unaffordability of private housing, and the segregated geography of residential Cape Town. One of the households I studied was a boisterous, lively, and violent center of bachelor pleasure. Most households, however, were tense and bare spaces – far less the relaxed places of privacy and trust I expected to encounter.

By examining the migrants’ households, I present a male form of householding that challenges a dominant image of the household in anthropology as a relational space of memory-making organized by kinship and reproduction, generational and gender divisions, and things. I speculate on why the youths appeared to struggle to inhabit their households comfortably. The chapter is based on survey data collected over a twelve-month period, which compares the compositions and movements of six households.

**National Struggles in Naming Violence** (Chapter 4) focuses on events in Cape Town in May 2008, when anti-immigrant violence erupted across South Africa, leading to the internal displacement of 200,000 African migrants and refugees and the formation of temporary camps for displaced persons. It considers a set of disputes that unfolded in the heat of the crisis and during the prolonged aftermath,
thus attempting to complicate official narratives of events produced quickly by the 
state and non-governmental agencies (and since largely adopted by scholars). I look 
particularly at overlooked rumors and images of violence that circulated in Cape 
Town in the afterwards of the attacks. I feel the crisis provides insights into the 
state of South Africa after apartheid.

This chapter uses ethnographic data collected from my involvement in the 
emergency relief efforts of civil society groups in Cape Town. It also analyzes media 
reports, photographs, political cartoons, speeches and statements from political 
leaders and academic associations, and commissioned reports on the causes of the 
violence and the efficacy of the state’s response.

The Sustenance of Brotherhood (Conclusion) reflects on my study’s 
implications in terms of youth, time, and the future. I relate some findings of my 
research to older and newer writings on youths and others unable to attain the full 
social status of adult, around contemporary African youth especially as ‘stuck’ 
(Sommers 2012). The subjects of my study are delegates of a growing global 
population of young people who cross borders in search of safety, economic 
opportunity, and new possibilities for self-making – which these young men, my 
study shows, do successfully, and against expectations – but there is an emotional, 
personal cost to their mobility and achievement, desperate feelings of abandonment 
and entrapment, which I foreground in finishing.
Chapter 1

Nightwatching:

Fear and flânerie

Alien apartheid

Shortly after I concluded my fieldwork in Cape Town, Neill Blomkamp’s acclaimed film District 9 was released in South African cinemas. Violent, political, and comical, the dystopian film captivated the nation.

The story begins in medias res: A private military company has been hired by the South African government to evict a population of extraterrestrial aliens that crash-landed in Johannesburg during the final years of apartheid and took up residency in a township. Once-amicable relations between the human and alien residents of District 9 have deteriorated to breaking point. Wikus van der Merwe, a wiry, bumbling bureaucrat tasked to relocate the aliens to a new camp outside of the city, narrates the eviction process to the camera as he walks through the township and serves eviction orders (Figure 1). The grunting, insectoid aliens revolt us.

During an eviction, amid protests and scuffles, Wikus is infected by an alien fluid that sparks his dramatic metamorphosis from human to alien. Now an asset to his company – part-alien Wikus has become the first human capable of operating the aliens’ coveted laser weapons, which the aliens brought to Earth, but have not used on others – Wikus is captured by his employers and subjected to experiments.

Fearing for his life, Wikus seizes a gun and escapes. He returns to District 9, joins in the aliens’ resistance efforts, and, moments before his transformation to alien is complete, assists the two surviving aliens depart from Earth.
District 9 engages and carries its audience viscerally. It has depth and emotional pull as well. Midway through the film, our gaze is redirected. Quite brilliantly accomplished, we start seeing District 9 through Wikus’ eyes. Once we grow accustomed to the physical and linguistic ‘other’ of the aliens, we come to realize that Wikus’ biological and physical changes are of secondary significance to his moral, political transformation. Like Wikus, we start seeing the aliens as sentient equals worthy of sanctuary and protection, not as repulsive, unintelligible, and subhuman. Like Wikus too, we come to comprehend the injustice of a new human-alien apartheid that has evolved unnoticed in South Africa.

District 9 has generated an impressive body of criticism (du Toit 2009; Helgesson 2010; Moses et al. 2010; Nel 2012; Smith, Eric 2012:127-158). It has been praised for its original contributions to African cinema, for innovation in science-fiction, and for revisiting themes in South African modern history, such as urban segregation, racialized governance, and the forced removals of metropolitan communities, in ways that provoke fresh debate on the enduring afterlives of apartheid (Besterman 2008; Grunebaum 2011).

Commentary on District 9 in South Africa, however, was dominated initially by one particularly topical interpretation. Released in August 2009, one year after South Africa witnessed atrocious large-scale violence against African migrants and refugees across the country, District 9 was widely interpreted as a film about xenophobia in the post-apartheid nation. Blomkamp’s depiction of an impoverished foreign population taking refuge in South Africa among its poorest communities – greeted with empathy at first, but later resented as a supposed drain on public services – echoes the history of African immigration to South Africa since the mid-1990s and how public attitudes towards African foreign nationals have changed.
The treatment of the aliens by the state and by poor, urban communities, their scapegoating and subjection to violence, and their subsequent displacement and detention in government-run ‘safety camps’ parallel experiences of African migrants and refugees in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and other cities in 2008. 17

Filmed partly in the style of a documentary, the film’s form also reminded South African viewers of the media coverage of the 2008 anti-immigrant violence: its sensational focus on spectacular incidents of interpersonal violence; looped scenes of South African youth chasing migrants out of the townships and looting their homes; the militarization of humanitarian assistance; activist protests at camp closures; the rush of academic analysis. The South African characters’ amusement at the aliens’ seemingly-incomprehensible language and the derogatory, animal terms they use to describe the aliens (‘prawns’) were nuances appreciated especially by local audiences for their uncanny accuracies.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, District 9 has become a common point of reference in anthropological and other scholarly discussions of the lives of African migrants

17 Local writing on District 9 subsequently stress the film’s pedagogical potential. Foregrounding a significant social dimension of post-apartheid history, the film has been used as a tool to help raise awareness of growing xenophobic sentiments in South Africa and to expose the state’s slowness to curb discrimination and violence. The film’s strength in this regard lies in its deliberate appropriation of a prejudiced national gaze. In a tradition of European anti-apartheid cinema, we enter the camps through Wikus’ eyes and share his disgust at first seeing the aliens, before questioning our biases to see humanity in the other; we accompany Wikus on a journey of moral awakening. Yet if District 9 is to be understood, as many critics have argued, as a political project about xenophobia in contemporary South Africa – and Blomkamp’s 2005 6-minute pilot film, which includes documentary footage of South Africans speaking about Zimbabwean migrants in Kliptown, Johannesburg, alongside actors discussing extraterrestrial aliens, suggests this intention – it marks a departure from mainstream approaches. In contrast to the responses by political leaders and civil society groups to the 2008 violence, which stressed commonality between African refugees and their South African hosts under an aegis of Pan-African unity and historical indebtedness (Chapter 4), District 9 generates sympathy for foreign nationals by emphasizing their radical, fixed differences. In fact, Blomkamp goes further: he portrays the aliens as South Africans’ noble, intellectual superiors. The film also implies that violence towards outsiders is the inevitable outcome of South African history, a nation locked in a cycle of apartheid repetition.
and refugees in South Africa, both in and outside of South Africa (e.g. Comaroff 2009; Mbembe et al. 2009). The film has helped me to introduce the broader context of my research to interested parties unfamiliar with the country. In visual terms particularly, the film shows outsiders landscapes of urban poverty in a South African city, the stark divisions of race and wealth that characterize everyday life there, and the more ferocious kinds of tensions that have grown within the country between citizens and African foreigners.

I have to always qualify the relevance of District 9 in discussing my project, however. Mirroring the focus of scholarship on African foreign nationals in South Africa, the film, first, is a distinctly Johannesburger film, while my research took place in Cape Town (see below). The film also relies on binaries that overstate and simplify the order of things – while South Africans are shown as a diverse people, for example, the aliens are presented as homogenous and united. And though the experiences and suffering of the aliens in District 9 connect in very rough strokes to those of many migrants and refugees in South Africa, thus the film helpfully outlays contours of tensions that characterize contemporary South Africa, they do not reflect experiences of the young male migrants I worked with. The youths I worked among do not live in townships. Though their interactions with others are limited, they have found ways to survive in South Africa as residents and economic actors without the assistance of community associations or NGOs. Significantly, they do not see themselves, and are not seen by others, as victims of injustice and xenophobia.
Figure 1 Wikus serves an alien an eviction order (Blomkamp 2009)
Human, aliens, and ‘Nigerians’

Beyond helping visualize wider social and political landscapes of my research project and elucidating frames in which public debates on migrants in South Africa conventionally proceed, District 9 is useful for framing the subjects and urban setting of my fieldwork in one further, very specific respect.

A third of the way through the film, a set of minor characters is introduced: a gang of ‘Nigerian’ men. The ‘Nigerians’ live on the margins of District 9, where they sell tins of cat food to the aliens and run an interspecies prostitution service for alien clients. The ‘Nigerians’ have earned wealth and status from both niche economies, amassing stockpiles of alien weapons from their sales. Clearly profitable businesses, both kinds of trade are however belittled by state authorities and experts as “scams.” The ‘Nigerians’ also serve as a law enforcement agency in the township, paralleling the police and administering justice. Though the state has withdrawn from District 9, leaving both alien and human residents dependent on the ‘Nigerians’ for protection, the ‘Nigerians’ are blamed for its increasing crime levels.

Drawing heavily on urban legends and local stereotypes here – indeed, this is District 9’s least imaginative component18 – the ‘Nigerian’ characters are portrayed both as criminal, violent outsiders engaged in illegal activities and as exotic brutes indulging in malevolent, bestial acts, including cannibalism and blood-drinking. Their bodies are scarred and deformed. They are also the film’s most stylish and well-dressed characters; they wear designer clothes adorned with gold chains, alien

18 The ‘Nigerians’ in District 9 were the cause of a minor controversy. The film was banned in Nigeria for its derogatory depiction of these characters and for how the Nigerian leader in the film (Obesandjo) bears an almost identical name to its former President Olusegun Obasanjo (Bloom 2009).
weapons, python necklaces, pet hyenas, and body parts. At the head of the
‘Nigerian’ gang is a paralyzed warlord leader, Obesandjo (Figures 2 and 3).

The ‘Nigerians’ of District 9 are gloriously in-between – liminal, polluted.
The ‘Nigerians’ are outsiders to both human and alien communities. At the start of
the film, they are shown to be the township’s most powerful figures because they are
the only population who can crisscross human and alien worlds. They are also
shown as a tightly knit assembly of men, strongly united and organized (unlike
other human populations and the state). If the film’s main message is that human
and alien differences can be overcome, the ‘Nigerians’ are ‘others’ of an entirely
different order. The characters (and, incidentally, their network) problematize. In a
sharp analysis of District 9, Andries du Toit describes the ‘Nigerians’ as admirable:

They are the only humans in the film who do not react to the aliens with
squeamishness... They are at home in the landscape that most humans
regard with distaste, and which the MNU [Multi-National United, the state-
hired private military company] can only occupy and traverse with weapons
and armored vehicles. Most importantly, there is an honesty about
‘Obesandojo’s’ lust for power that contrasts very favorably with the MNU’s
heartless machinations (du Toit 2009).¹⁹

The ‘Nigerians’ have been passed over in most analysis of the film (perhaps
because they translate least obviously to international audiences).

My research examines these ambiguous urban figures. Even without
referencing District 9, all South Africans and migrants I met in Cape Town know
what is meant by ‘Nigerian’ – their stereotypes match or sometimes even exceed

¹⁹ Du Toit continues to discuss how these characters’ stereotypes might be racially specific.
“The ‘Nigerians’ are in fact named as such only by the whites in the movie. In other
words, the movie is careful to give us clues that they are ‘Nigerian’ only in the way that
Rwandans, Cameroonians, Senegalese, Somalis and Congolese in South Africa are
‘Nigerian’ – viz. only within a very particularly racist gaze. So it is clear that Blomkamp...
[is] doing something rather complex – not so much offering a racist caricature, as
caricaturing racist stereotypes themselves – which is a different thing entirely” (du Toit
2009).
those presented in Blomkamp’s film. Like the (human) film characters in the film, South Africans call men they see in the city ‘Nigerian’ knowing they are not necessarily from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Rather, South Africa’s ‘Nigerians’ are from a generic, imagined, and South African ‘African’ elsewhere. District 9 is drawing on a stock figure in the South African cultural landscape.

The well-known figure of the ‘Nigerian’ in Cape Town is a foreign African male from beyond the southern African states who is stylish, flush, and gangsterly. He is associated foremost with criminal violence and drug sales. Compared to other figures of foreign Africans in South Africa – the ‘Zimbabwean’ and ‘Somali’ are prominent – they fall outside the category of a victim in need.20 South Africa’s award-winning satirist Jonathan Shapiro, known as Zapiro, produced an insightful cartoon on the imagined geography of Africa held by South Africans (Figure 4). Note Zapiro’s labeling of different regions of Africa, a local, racist geography of the

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20 As part of a government-sponsored research project into the causes of anti-immigrant violence in South Africa in May 2008, entitled “Perceptions from South African communities,” the association of particular migrants with crime was highlighted. Even though the report appears to treat ‘Nigerian’ here as synonymous with citizens from the Republic of Nigeria, I assume that both the researchers and participants were aware of this slip. “In general, there is a widespread perception that Nigerians in particular are involved in high level organized crime, in particular drug trafficking, which draws in young people as partners in this crime and had led to an escalating problem of addiction and drug abuse. However, as one woman pointed out, those who are responsible for organizing these types of crime are in fact affluent and do not live in the townships: “They [South Africans] fight with them [foreign nationals] because they claim that they commit crime. I say they are torturing the wrong people, those who commit crime don’t live here [in townships] they live in town, renting flats. They have money, a lot of money.”... Nigerians involved in organized crime are differentiated from foreign nationals living in townships... “It’s a rumor [that crime is committed by ‘foreigners’] these crimes are performed by locals, if you could only see how poor looking our foreigners from my section are... shame”” (HSRC 2008a:34-35). But maybe not: Owen Sichone mentions in this discussion of the emergency of ‘xenophobia’ as a keyword in the New South Africa the ignorance of Africa among most South Africans (Sichone 2008a:262).

Partly because my project did not center on groups of foreign nationals united by ties of common citizenship, ‘Nigerian’ became an easier way of describing the population I studied to others. Other categories available, such as ‘unaccompanied migrant youth’, were cumbersome and slightly inaccurate. All South Africans and migrants understood immediately what I meant by this term. I faced challenges several times from South African scholars for engaging in research with such subjects. The populations they assumed to inhabit these figures did not appear to qualify as subjects of legitimate anthropological research. More than many times, they suggested I focus instead on poorer and more vulnerable populations of migrants and refugees.

Local scholarly reactions surprised me because, at the time of my fieldwork, research on migrants, immigrants, and refugees in South Africa was a booming endeavor. Such research topics had political resonance and obvious application, delineating a morally-sound post-apartheid anthropology premised on mutuality, anti-essentialist comparison, and an ‘ethics of care’ (Spiegel 2005). ‘Nigerians’ were not deemed a part of that research agenda.

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21 ‘Makwerekwere’ is a slang term for other Africans used widely in South Africa, particularly Africans from southern African countries, such as Mozambique and Zimbabwe (Matsinhe 2011). In Welcome to Our Hillbrow, Phaswane Mpe’s protagonist struggles with the xenophobia of his relatives in Johannesburg. “Cousin would not agree with you, of course. He never agreed with you where black foreigners from African countries, vulgarly referred to as Makwerekwere, were concerned. Makwerekwere was a word derived from kwere-kwere, a sound that that unintelligible foreign languages were supposed to make, according to the locals. Cousin insisted that people should remain in their own countries and try to sort out the problems of these respective countries, rather than fleeing them; South Africa had too many problems of their own” (Mpe 2001:20).
The sparseness of ethnographic work with living populations in South African cities that embody the stereotype of ‘Nigerian’ or research on “the manufacturing of images of [such] criminals and ideas about their genesis” (Siegel 1998:30), as James Siegel has undertaken in Indonesia, is further surprising given an influential local anthropological literature on precisely these kinds of figures.22

Reflecting on economy and society in an era of millennial capitalism and neoliberalism, for example, South African anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have used the figures of the zombie, the alien, the criminal, and the ‘Nigerian’ to describe the growth of what they term ‘occult economies’. Occult economies refer to “the deployment of magical means for material ends or, more expansively, the conjuring of wealth by resort to inherently mysterious techniques, techniques whose principles of operation are neither transparent nor explicable in conventional terms. These techniques, moreover, often involve the destruction of others and their capacity to create value” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999:297). Figures such as zombies, witches, and ‘Nigerians’ are quintessential “nightmare citizens of this parallel, refracted modernity” (ibid.:289). They even use ‘Nigerians’ explicitly in their examples: “In South Africa, a recent case [of an occult economy] involved a well-known physician: she was “turned into a zombie” by a “Nigerian devil-worshipper,” who, having rendered her insensate, took a large sum of money from her bank account. By labeling the accused a Nigerian devil worshipper, the report

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22 Such a project is hinted at by Mbembe and Nuttall in their discussion of the centrality of the figures of the migrants, the stranger, and the criminal, which “now assume, more than ever, greater prominence” in the South African imagination of the city. “The criminal, we would say, moves between the surface and the underneath... He navigates the ordinary surfaced of life by attacking from a darker, more underneath place. He partakes of the vocabulary of the stranger but also of the familiar: many crimes occur between people who are known to each other. Thus the man who performs this inhuman and therefore strange act is also an uncle, a father, a neighbor, a workman” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008:23).
ties the menace of the satanic to the flow of immigrants across national borders”

(Comaroff and Comaroff 2001a:20-21).

**District 9** is a new referent in their reflections:

[**District 9**] urges us to ask why, in an era that has seen the ever more global flow of goods, images, currency, and knowledge, the migration of human beings should be a matter of hyper-ambivalence; why international frontiers are such sensitive sites of dis-ease about security; why they should be the object of contradictory efforts to ensure their openness, thus to facilitate the free passage of capital and commodities, and their closure, to protect national polities from the loss of scarce jobs and the unrestricted inflow of undesirable people; why, also, the meaning of identity, belonging, and citizenship should pose such urgent challenges in everyday life and in scholarship; why global efforts to protect the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers should exist alongside xenophobia and the abuse of aliens. It urges us to understand why it is that the treatment of strangers emerges as a yardstick of universal human rights and social justice (Comaroff 2009:34).

I did not need to spend a long time in Cape Town before hearing or seeing statements on ‘Nigerians’ frequently. Fresh headlines of the national tabloid newspapers announcing scoops about eyeballs for sale in townships, alien landings at border-crossings, and ‘Nigerians’ eating babies were spectacular texts posted each morning on lampposts throughout Cape Town (see Jones, Vanderhaeghen, and Viney 2008 for analysis of the work of these tabloid newspapers). They capture a sinister quality that denotes how the young migrants I worked with are framed and

\[23\] “The film has garnered great praise for making a high-tech thriller speak poignantly of some of the paradoxes of our late modern world, a world of porous frontiers and abject refugees, of expansive but inconstant humanitarian sympathy; of anxieties about borders and strangers that grow in proportion to global integration... But I would argue that the film exemplifies an enduring feature of “enlightenment” in its broadest sense: the importance of estrangement from received wisdom and reigning pieties in the way we interrogate the human condition. Estrangement is a necessary component of the production of new, questioning insight into the familiar and the taken-for-granted... The unsettling impact of District 9, then, stems from the fact that it estranges us in a double sense, offering “other worldly” insight of two distinct, but not unrelated kinds. The first is the critical dislocation of the extraterrestrial. The second the instructive disorientation that comes of looking at our own world from what, following Homi Bhabha, I would term an ex-centric location, a place beyond the traditional heartland of Euro-America” (Comaroff 2009:32-33).
interpellated by Capetonians of all social and economic classes, and by state officials. As District 9 suggests, these youths – who are assumed to be criminals, live in the shadows of city, and represent a new, powerful, and unfair kind of economic vitality – summon a different mode of urban engagement.

A way of first reframing my project, then, is to state I sought out young migrants that were identified as ‘Nigerians’ in contemporary Cape Town. Contrary to my expectations, I found networks of young West and Central African migrants embracing the figure at every opportunity. They were keen to reap in the ‘Nigerian’s’ possibilities.

This chapter explores the young migrants’ mobility in Cape Town foremost in terms of how they negotiate an urban landscape that is fast-changing, unfamiliar to them, and risky, and which, through these stereotypes, images, and urban legends, assumes to know a lot about them already. I show how the figure of the ‘Nigerian’ is woven across the urban stage and saturates every milieu. I also aim to describe how young migrants have learned to move together in response to this figure.
Figure 2 Wikus is captured by the ‘Nigerians’ (Blomkamp 2009)
Figure 3 ‘Nigerian’ gang leader, Obesandjo (Blomkamp 2009)
Figure 4 The ‘South African’ Map of Africa, June 16 (Zapiro 2008d)\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{24} Figures 4, 9, 11, and 12 © 2012 Zapiro (All Rights Reserved). Used with permission from www.zapiro.com
Mobility, space, and transgression

African youth prove capable, dexterous actors in cities across the historical record. Scholars have documented the ways young Africans support themselves and others in cities, showing youths’ typically unacknowledged resiliency (Brown, Lyons, and Dankoco 2010; Davis 2008; de Boeck and Plissart 2004; Greenburg 2010; Lockhart 2002). Studies of gangs provide one set of concepts used frequently to examine the urban activities of youth and their relational modes of engaging others (Becker 1986; Sullivan 1989; Vigil 2003).

My fieldwork traced strategies young migrants employ to subsist and survive in Cape Town. The youths strongly rejected my suggestions that they fared quite well in Cape Town despite the negativities directed towards them. They were quick to remind themselves and others that Cape Town is a hostile city and that they, as others, face daily threats of violence. The ethnographic challenge of this chapter is thus to meld an account of migrant youths’ careful and extensive mobility in the city, and their outward projections of confidence in public, with descriptions of their inward fears and nervousness. Data on walking was obtained by walking the city with the young men, learning the often cumbersome pathways they elected to use, and listening to the statements and stories they divulged in passing as we crossed particular places and intersections (see Guyer 2011 on ‘walking the city’ as a method to ‘write the city’). This helped me to register a sensory geography of fear and risk the youths carry inside themselves, which I could not easily extract through conversation. It reveals a dissonance between the men’s bravado and fear. It also helped me understand the kinds of ‘threats’ the men believe they face.

Mobility is at the core of urban experience. Anthropologists of space have forged concepts to explain how certain places come to bear characteristics of specific
groups and are known to belong to some individuals, even if they are desolate. Setha Low (2000:156) noticed such identifications in contrasting plazas in San José, Costa Rica, which were appropriated by different groups in terms of age, class, and gender. Ambiances maintained by symbolic boundaries in these two places were so strong that people would not go from one plaza to the other, and some avoided crossing them; their different representations of cultural life were mutually exclusive and seen to be in competition. The two plazas represented different dimensions of Costa Rican culture, one of which was traditional, Spanish, hierarchical, masculine, and Catholic, while the other represented youth, the modern, masculinity and femininity, and discernible openness. Low refers to the physical, historical, and conceptual localization of relationships and social practices in space as “spatialization,” which links “experience, practice, and structure” (Low 1996:863). This affects how people are distributed and behave. Mobility can thus be thought of as a mean of transgressing power structures and, a point I indulge, as having emancipatory power.

This chapter focuses on migrant youths’ urban mobility – a crucial part of their survival in the city and a prominent inquiry in new literatures on African cities. Curious about their strategies for making incomes in the face of risks and resentment, I spent considerable time tracking, discussing, and accompanying young migrants’ in Cape Town, composing maps of place they hold and make, and listening for knowledge that informs their shared navigations. I ask what their mobility, knowledge, and practice of place might tell us about the urban landscape of contemporary Cape Town – a particularly disorienting and divided city, hard to
place within regional literatures. The chapter builds on the established figures of the ‘Nigerian’ and the ‘flâneur’ – two figures of resonance in the South African city, both seen as modern and mobile.

Let me give an example of how hard this task proved.

Sensorial geographies

I met Gerard (A1) on an early morning train to Cape Town in August 2007. He poked my leg and grinned and asked me what I thought of the book I was reading. “That’s about my country,” he pointed.

I was beginning a book by a British journalist who claimed to have retraced Stanley’s three-year expedition along the course of the Congo River (Butcher 2007). I passed him the book so he could look at the cover, which featured colonial maps of the Belgian Congo alongside bloody photographs of recent conflict in the DRC. The book was jacketed with salacious quotations that emphasized the supposedly herculean qualities of its author for venturing there.

Gerard said he’d been watching me on the trains for a few days. This made me nervous. It was a possible claim because my routine for the first weeks of my fieldwork in Cape Town was repetitive as I trailed migrant artists and art sellers from a Southern suburb into the city each day to meet and talk with those they knew. I thought of his comment later as an important instruction in doing urban ethnography: Gerard considers careful observations of other people a necessary skill for people to learn. To survive as a migrant in Cape Town, one must know how to

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25 I am cautious of extending claims I offer on Cape Town to ‘South African cities’ or South Africa in general, not least because I left the city’s limits only twice in my stay and for eleven days in total.
read public spaces well and assess how the space and its varied occupants, as Gerard always said, “should be played.”

As Gerard looked through the book, I gave the ethnographic sell. I told him I knew a few Congolese men in Cape Town and was interested in learning more about their country and experiences in South Africa. He read carefully as I mumbled on about not having been to the DRC but wanting to go one day and how I thought the book was likely unreliable.

Gerard asked to borrow it overnight, and then, suddenly, as our train was arriving in the central station, “You know Etienne Kabila lives in Cape Town?”

I asked if he meant the President’s brother.

“Yes,” Gerard replied, “I know him. I can take you to his house.”

I knew little about Congolese politics at the time, only vague outlines of the claims about the false parentage of the President being made by his exiled brother. At the time, I remember reasoning that the little I knew – the next line of a popular urban rumor – had been enough to continue a discussion and show my interests were sincere.

Gerard found me in St. George’s Street the next morning, as we arranged, returned the book with a lengthy critique of it. He offered me an entry into his ways of moving around the city that began with exchanges of phone numbers and, if I bought him coffees, promises of more conversation.

We started to meet regularly in the city center and other places to walk and share stories about life in Cape Town. We talked about our mutual newness and confusion with the city. Over time, I came to hear about and meet the men, most from the DRC, who Gerard considers friends, brothers, working associates, and acquaintances. His network (Network A) became one of four groups of young male
migrants in Cape Town I came to study. After a dozen first meetings, devoted to this and other matters, I had some reasonably coherent sketches of the fifteen young men Gerard described as his core group of friends, including the three that share his apartment, another twenty men he regularly works with, and a further eight who fell into other categories he said were significant, including a casual friendship with a man from Burundi he had crossed the Angolan-Namibian border with five years ago, two men he knows from his church, and a European student he met at an advice center for refugees, who he sees around from time to time.

Gerard’s multiple and different kinds of ties with others and the mobile nature of my exchanges with him and his friends helps capture some of the complexity raised for me in thinking about a sense of urban living in Cape Town among younger men who come from places outside of South Africa. He helped me appreciate the particular kinds of mobility the city makes possible and less possible, and ethnography as a method to document and write urban movement, in which one has to learn how to read space, time, and relationship, as Gerard taught me, through careful instruction and by gauging the actions of strangers.

In plotting precise routes, I started to notice that the migrants’ regular travelling patterns between places were unnecessarily cumbersome and indirect, particularly in journeys made alone. Their urban mobility was extensive, but it was both precise and indirect.

Gerard, for example, explained and showed me how he traverses the city with zones of safety and risk in mind that demarcate places that he has learned or has been taught to avoid, sometimes at great costs of time and money. He spoke of dangerous places – precise corners and underpasses colored by a personal experience of violence or a passed-on story of a brother in distress – as “cold.” His words
became mine one night as I walked through the same central district with an American friend and found myself insisting we took a longer route between two otherwise arbitrary streets because I had attached one of his anxious stories to a juncture ahead. My meetings with Gerard were strictly marked with cell phone messages about expected arrival times. His insistence of virtual contact-keeping with others and me (with what effect, I often wondered) was also part of a nervous outsiders’ routine I also incorporated. I learned how street-knowledge is thus informed by relations as much as it is mobilized by them. Matters of safety and risk were felt and shared by equivalence by all of the migrants, themselves as homonyms. Concerned for my safety in Cape Town too, the migrants were instructing me on how to walk the city.

Fiona Ross (2004) reminds anthropologists that “engaging spatiality involves an engagement with emotion and the sensual in everyday life” (Ross 2004:35). Describing her attempts to map an informal settlement in Cape Town with one of her informants to note buildings, people, households, and pathways people encounter in their daily lives, she describes how difficult it can be to understand how others comprehend, inhabit, and ‘feel’ space:

The mapping and introductory process, which I had anticipated would take us a day, took four to complete. At times I found myself in the settlement easily, aligned to roads, the small stream, the larger stream that intersected it, a house that I recognized. At other times I could not understand how we had come to be where we were at a given time and my carefully drawn and annotated map did not help in the least. I felt foolish: it is a small space and ridiculous to be ‘lost’ in it, especially when the railway line and road were only a hundred meters in either direction and could easily be found by orienting oneself in relation to the wider landscape...

My sense of being lost was thus clearly not geographic – I could orient myself in relation to the wider geography of the landscape quite easily – but
cognitive and emotional. I was disoriented as the familiar slipped past me (Ross 2004:36).  

I struggled in similar exercises with Gerard and the other young migrants he knew. Beyond the confusion Ross describes in attempting to transpose oral and affective topographies of place onto standardized maps and street-plans, I found it hard to follow Gerard’s directions. We seemed to know different spatial, temporal, visual, and sensorial versions of the city. Gerard rarely used the large natural and civic landmarks to orient himself as I often did, such as Table Mountain. Instead, his signposts were more pedestrian, such as gas stations and churches; they assume good familiarity with selective suburbs and particular transport routes. It was not uncommon for our meetings to be delayed due to my inability to spot the signposts I had been given to follow or because he was unfamiliar with a place I knew, even though it have been just meters away from a place he goes to often. I played with the notion of a visual ‘eye-line economy’ for a while as it seemed a reasonable conclusion to draw to account for our differences, but the directions I received still expressed some sort of obliviousness with entire sections of the city that are inimitable to Cape Town or, I thought, otherwise well-known.

I began to rethink how urban landscapes might be seen so differently after a friend of Gerard’s later told me how parts of Cape Town resembled Congolese towns and cities, and how migrants were reminded of other places they know from elsewhere, all within Cape Town. This is not too hard to imagine given Cape Town

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26 Ross calls on us to take “seriously the ways that we engage in and with space/place, filling it with activity, relations, sensual engagements, interpretive activity, emotions and experience over time. In both familiar and unfamiliar terrain, we do not move as automatons but as lively, engaged social beings – as both agentive and constrained by convention... This means that ‘cognitive maps’ are likely to change over time as routines change and relations alter, as life-cycle processes and the cultural conventions by which they are marked shape and produce the experience of sociability in place” (Ross 2004:41).
contains many different social, political, economic, and racial worlds within it. Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall frame such a practice as ‘worldliness’ – “The capacity to generate one’s own cultural forms, institutions, and lifeways, but also with the ability to foreground, translate, fragment and disrupt realities and imaginaries originating elsewhere, and in the process place these forms and processes in the service of one’s own making” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008:1). On trying to plot these comparisons, I was struck by how compass coordinates that order localities up and across maps fitted quite neatly onto spots of their Congolese-resembling counter-places, and how vast distances between places in the two maps spoke to temporal distances in travel times in Cape Town. I came to think, therefore, of urban mobility as matters that ask interlocutors to look in two directions and orders of place at once: of multiple geographies; of walking worldliness.

I was faced by the selective telling of relationships by place throughout my fieldwork – by codes of talking and reading urban mobility that I needed training in. Consent to ethnographic and other knowledge is mutually asked for, and my consent with Gerard and his friends was tested repeatedly to ensure I understood the challenges they faced in maintaining a livelihood and getting by each day unharmed. In documenting city movements, much of what I know came through patience, waiting, and listening attentively – from avoiding the temptation to rush to clarify details that were repeated slightly differently each time, or did not match the accounts of others. I had to train myself in knowing what to leave unasked.

Flâneurs and their doubles
Classical studies of the city and urban life draw frequently on the figure of the flâneur, most famously theorized by Walter Benjamin (1983, 1999), who built off a figure presented in the poetry and essays of Charles Baudelaire. The flâneur “can be associated with a form of looking, observing (of people, social types, social contexts and constellations), a form of reading the city and its population (its spatial images, its architecture, its human configurations), and a form of reading written texts” (Frisby 1994:82-83). Appropriate for how I learned to re-see and re-experience the city with the migrants, and how the migrants are seen by others, the wandering, observing, loitering flâneur appeared an appropriate starting figure.

Baudelaire “celebrated the paradoxical idea of the flâneur as both a ‘passionate spectator’ and a participant in urban life” (Smith, P.D. 2012:167). The wandering, free, sensing, and male flâneur represented, for Baudelaire, “the idealized spirit of the city, [who] experienced the ebb and flow of urban life, yet [was] never quite... swept away by its flood of impressions. He is part of events but also apart, a watchful stranger in the street... [personifying] the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” (Smith, P.D. 2012:167). Baudelaire saw the flâneur as “the man of the crowd as opposed to the man in the crowd” (Tester 1994:3, 6).

For Benjamin, however, modern street-life in Paris was more fleeting, fragmentary, alienating, and disorienting. The nature of the city affects change in those who walk it. “Intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of bistros, of shops, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street corner, of a distance square in the fog, of the back of a woman walking before him” (Benjamin 1999:417). Writing later of the flâneur as a hero of detachment, “the flâneur is that character who retains his
individuality while all around are losing theirs and derives pleasure from his location within the crowd, but simultaneously regards it with contempt... The flâneur is exactly that figure who heroically resists incorporation into the milieu in which he moves (Benjamin 1983:175).

Benjamin predicted the demise of the flâneur through time. “As the city became more crowded, the flâneur was afforded less and less elbow room in the city and was swallowed up by the crowd” (Benjamin 1983:121). Changes in the city changed the nature of flânerie. “The rationality of capitalism and, especially, commodification and the circulation of commodities, itself defined the meaning of existence in the city so that there remained no spaces of mystery for the flâneur to expose” (Tester 1994:13). The flâneur thus becomes an invariably passive spectator, challenged by the ever-rationalization of space and ever constrained by time and maps.

In an important essay on Johannesburg, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall argue that the flâneur in urban theory, “which holds that the most revelatory facets of modern metropolitan life lie on the surface, in the ephemeral and the visible,” needs an African counterpart (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008:22). This is because Johannesburg and contemporary African metropolises have a crucial “underneath.” Such an “underneath” is spatial, but “also made up of lower classes, the trash heap of the world above, and subterranean utopias... The vertical and racial segmentation of the Johannesburg urban world was given structure and order by what it relegated beneath... The underground seems to hold the keys to unlocking the secrets of its modernity” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008:22-23). Mbembe and Nuttall thus forward the figure of the migrant over the flâneur, “the one who is both beneath the city and outside of its orders of visibility” (ibid.:23).
Perhaps it was me who was the flâneur here, not the migrants I worked with. As I have shown, by contrast, young male migrants are seen prominently in the city moving and wandering, but their actions are interpreted otherwise – loitering and observing others for the purposes of ‘Nigerian’ crime, no doubt. The migrants, to survive, were unable to fully surrender themselves to the total intoxication of flânerie. Mbembe and Nuttall suggest the migrant is also a sensorial figure, but he is a flâneur who senses through fear, and best in the underworld of the city. My migrants walk not wander, with purpose and clarity.

Nightwatching

Reviewing recent literatures on the African city, Jane Guyer (2011:486) suggests that “the imperative to ‘walk the [African] city’ precedes the imperative to ‘write the city’… This is not only a ‘mapping’ exercise... walking is a temporal process as well as a geographical one. The temporal sequence in our own narratives of discovery may turn out to be as important as the geographical or aesthetic juxtapositions that we traverse.”

Cape Town may or may not be an ‘African’ city in terms of the qualities used by scholars to currently think the African metropolis. It was a creole city far before any other in South Africa. It remains the most unchanged city in the country since democratization. It is the least black city. Giving his inaugural address as Premier of the Western Cape in 2005, Ebrahim Rasool claimed Cape Town has “the most complex demographic make-up, the most pernicious implementation of apartheid, and the most resilient persistence of privilege and the residue of race” (quoted in Field, Meyer, and Swanson 2007:15n.6). Though it is beyond my ability to evaluate the eligibility of Cape Town as a candidate city for these debates, suffice to say that
the study of African migrants and refugees in Johannesburg dwarfs the literature from Cape Town.

This chapter has tried to show ways young African migrants negotiate a hostile cityscape. From walking through Cape Town with the migrants, I learned how the youths draw extensively on shared and sensory knowledge to negotiate risks carefully. Such knowledge is not easy to gauge through questions and conversations, but needed to be shown to me as a walking, looking, and sensing partner.
Chapter 2

Relations as infrastructure:
Guarding, selling, dancing, switching

“Night eyes”

It’s long past 2am. A brisk March morning in Green Point. Shivering in my car, writing fieldnotes in darkness, I am waiting for Marc (B13) to finish work so we can finally leave the city. Bo (B14) and Brando (B15), Marc’s younger brothers, are racing loudly through conversation topics on the backseat and crunching yesterday’s newspapers for stories. Brando joined us an hour ago when his shift ended, but Bo’s been with me since the evening started. Earlier tonight, Bo asked to come with me to Green Point to also observe the migrants as they work, even though he’s worked a full day elsewhere. His request is not unusual. Like other migrants I work with in Cape Town, Bo much prefers being outside at night – “dancing the streets,” he grins, “making sales” – to spending time in his house without his brothers there. One of the youngest in his network (Network B), Bo hopes to work in Green Point in the future, the group’s most profitable working location in the city. He considers our joined observations tonight a chance to hone his professional skills.

We’re spending the evening watching the migrants Bo works and lives with guard cars belonging to locals and tourists who patronize the restaurants and nightclubs in this expensive suburb (see Map 2). Parked high off of Somerset Road, with a vista below us of the intersections that demarcate the network’s “territory” in Green Point, we study the migrants as they earn small cash sums together by guiding cars into parking spots on the streets and watching them until the owners
return. It’s the classic occupational niche for male migrants in Cape Town: an informal security service built from personal contacts; a line of work that demands charisma, patience, and an imposing physique more than permits or qualifications. The slight sums migrants earn from guarding cars mask and enable their concurrent and considerably more profitable sales in “SIM cards.”

Bo provides a commentary on what we are seeing. He’s less cogent at explaining the activities beneath us than youths usually delegated as my “night eyes” for such occasions, but he’s alert and energized. Chatting away, at least Bo keeps me focused on the migrants, rather than the more colorful ensembles of revelers, rent boys, drunks, and private security workers that wander the streets here as well. He cheers at a migrant’s hand signal for an “A sale” (R100 or more has been earned) and laughs if a car drives off before its guard sprints back in time. He “flashes” (miss calls) a brother’s cell phone if he sees one of them breaking “the law” (rules and codes of conduct the youths have trained themselves to follow).

It’s difficult to reconcile the different intensities in Bo’s behavior, however. Bo’s enthusiasm jars with remarks he makes about Cape Town as an unsafe city. It is hard to comprehend his passion for street-work in a place that reminds him, he says, of “a [war] zone.” He tells me incessantly how much he longs to work alongside his brothers in this notoriously risky location, yet his confidence unmoors instantly when I tell Bo I need to leave the car for a few minutes to get more coffee from the nearby garage.

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27 Bo worked during the daytimes in the parking lot of an upmarket gym I frequented in Constantia, a safer, less profitable, and far less interesting location for the migrants to work. The migrants negotiated an arrangement to work in this location with the gym owners. Other, less formal, but more profitable places the men guard cars, such as their “territory” in Green Point, are competitively sourced, earned by challenging rival groups of South Africans and migrants.
I have been accompanying the migrants to their various sites of work at night and observing them from the remove of my car since late January 2008, two months ago. Wesley Snipes (B6), an older youth in the network who co-supervises their operations in Cape Town, then proposed I join the men at night. Too difficult by this stage of our discussions to continue explaining the details of their work through diagrams and role-play – work viewed by many others in Cape Town as perfunctory and “unskilled,” but which, I have since learned, is intricate, taxing, and requires remarkable organization and teamwork – he said it would be better if I now join the men at night in Green Point and see for myself what takes place.

Of course, the real substance of what is happening below me is far from observable and self-explanatory. As in their other lines of work, the migrants’ successfulness as car guards here depends on the men always varying their roles and approaches, on “staying fast” (alert, unseen) in the city, on knowing when to use charm and when to show muscle, and on hiding their individual identities to present themselves publicly as an indistinguishable mass. These well-practiced, unspoken, collaborative actions are swift and minute. The men dress deliberately in ways that make it hard to tell one migrant from another. Anticipating these challenges, I was to be accompanied at night by an experienced migrant who could interpret the men’s choreography for me and explain it afterwards. I am given specific rules too on how I should behave. My “night eyes” and I, for example, were to rotate between the back and front of my car each half-hour to make ourselves less conspicuous. I was not to approach the men when they are working for any reason, Wesley Snipes said sternly, “even if things go bad” (police arrive, fighting breaks out). Six weeks into our nighttime stakeouts, however, it remains unclear as to what I am supposedly seeing.
Watching me, watching them – who watch each other and those around them, all under the unsteady gaze of the city and its authorities – the youths were initiating me in a complex relational surveillance system. I had become its newest participant.

Practices of collaboration, relational networks

Urban life in South Africa poses myriad challenges for African migrants who work there. Migrants’ means of generating livelihoods depend overwhelmingly on distinct ways of reading and acting in concert with others – on effective and timely collaborations that takes place across a fluid landscape. Such challenges are perceived to be particularly acute for migrants detached from family complexes and supportive migrant communities, those persons excluded from classic relational domains imagined to best provide dislocated, vulnerable actors with care, guidance, and prospects.

This chapter presents a contrasting case. It shows outcast, seemingly unattached young migrants in Cape Town demonstrating successfulness as economic actors amid risks and challenges. It focuses on one of these migrants’ most frequent means of earning incomes – car guarding and the concurrent trade of “SIM cards” –
to show how the youths, enmeshed in webs of ties with peers and peer kinsmen, have learned to act together in this specific urban economy.\textsuperscript{28}

The chapter examines the migrants’ economic collaborations by considering a selection of strategies the youths employ on the streets together to generate income.

\textsuperscript{28} Car guards offer a cheap, informal protection service to car owners parking on street sides in South African towns and cities. They are omnipresent figures in the urban landscape. Car guards in Cape Town are typically black men, South Africans or migrants. South African guards tend to be prevalent at high-earning, touristic sites in the city, such as national parks and near famous landmarks. Long Street at night, a central strip of bars and shops a mile from Green Point, has been famously dominated by West and Central African car guards since the 1990s. Newcomers commonly mistake car guards to be state employees on grounds of the fluorescent bibs they wear, which replicate the uniforms of traffic wardens. Payments to car guards are voluntary, but expected. Some owners pay car guards out of fear that their car might be stolen. Others pay because they believe guards will scratch or damage their car otherwise. (All of this begs a question as to whether ‘guarding’ is an appropriate description for their labor). There is no fixed fee for having one’s car guarded. R2-R5 was the commonest amount earned per vehicle. As car owners sometimes drive off without paying, guards always attempt to secure guarantee of future payment in advance by approaching drivers as they park. During the day, car owners who park in Green Point or on Long Street must feed official parking meters or risk fines. At night, meters expire and car guards take over. In places without meters, car guards work at day and night. The amount migrants earned per car is extremely small. This sum is typical across the city, even though Green Point is affluent. However, Green Point is a particularly busy location, thus highly prized by the migrants. On a weekend evening, as I verified through observation, a team of 10 migrants could guard 150-200 cars in a six-hour period. The migrants in Green Point made average amounts of R45-R60 each through guarding per weekend night. Calculated by hour, this sum is slightly short of the average income of black South African males (StatsSA 2010:viii).

“SIM cards” was the codename the migrants and I used for illicit items (principally illegal drugs) the migrants sold under the pretense of guarding and in their economic activities, which I requested not to know about (see Introduction). Many people in Cape Town know these transactions take place in Green Point and that car guards are likely “SIM card” vendors (Bernstein 2003). Some items the migrants resold while guarding were not prohibited, such as cell-phone top-up cards, belts and watches, and umbrellas.

On a typical Friday or Saturday night, the migrants estimated they made three times as much from “SIM card” sales than guarding. I noted these boasts as they were regular topics of discussion, but did not pursue them in too much detail. Migrants said they could each take R200 total from a weekend night’s work in Green Point, suddenly a remarkably high income.

The car guard is an established character in South African popular culture, featuring frequently in TV soaps, advertisements, tourist guides, film, literature, and political satire. There is a small social scientific literature on car guards in South Africa (Eligon 2012; Crone 2011; McEwen and Leiman 2008). Deeper reflections on the figuration of the car guard are needed. Contrary to other South African figures (the ‘AIDS orphan’ is an obvious example), the car guard is polyvalent and evokes multiple sentiments and reactions from the public concurrently: as a piteous underclass; as possible thugs or criminals to treat cautiously; as unavoidable, but harmless nuisances and hustlers to be paid off for a quieter life.
These depend as much on careful acting as an undifferentiated group as on recognizing and using the skills and capacities of different individuals. Secrecy, role-switching, and outward displays of strength and wholeness are especially crucial elements. Bodies and faces are trained rigorously. They offer insights into the youths’ broader experiences as economic actors in South Africa and further help parse out the multiple relations between them: peer bonds that have endured over time and space; ties denoting shared histories of displacement and conflict; lateral relations marking loyalty, closeness, and kinship.

We see a migrant network here, in the specific context of work, operating as a tightly-ordered business-minded organization. Internally structured by a set of clearly-understood roles, duties, and positions that make up a working whole, the network deploys carefully-planned, rehearsed techniques and strategies with corporate consistency. A smorgasbord of ingredients makes up these activities. I offer a cultural reading of such an organization.

I take particular inspiration here from the recent work of AbdouMaliq Simone and other writers on heterogeneous networks and the informal economy in African cities. In an important article, Simone theorizes the joined modes of economic and social activity particular to marginalized actors in African cities as “people as infrastructure” (Simone 2004a). Detailing various collaborative markets he observes in Johannesburg involving migrants and South Africans – sales in cigarettes, designer sunglasses, stolen goods, and narcotics, for example, services in remittance couriering and personal protection, etc.; trades that have become attached to specific groups of migrants by nationality, but interlink immigrant and citizen populations in practice – Simone draws attention to new commercial
ventures that have formed organically between disparate groups and persons.  
Simone argues these interdependent, methodical collaborations, which he claims constitute novel forms of urban economic “infrastructure,” are made possible by contemporary and chaotic transformations in cities such as inner-city Johannesburg—growing urban worlds that are growingly fragmented, diverse and divided, and have been “let go” by state and civil institutions (411). He claims these otherwise unlikely transactions emerge because “residents’ reciprocal efforts are radically open, flexible, and provisional” (408). He suggests we need new ways of seeing and spatializing “acts and contexts of social collaboration [as] inscribed with multiple identities rather than [as]... modulated transactions among discrete population groups” (419).

Several scholars have worked at mapping Cape Town’s informal economy at large scales similar to those Simone proposes, showing African migrants to be increasingly central actors. Studies show how collaborations are also citywide and

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29 Simone describes the content of these economies with indifference. He does not give contraband, illicit, or high-value objects and services greater significance or urgency in his writing to those which are lawful, ordinary, and of lower value. I particularly like this aspect of Simone’s descriptions. While I will refer later to the force surrounding particular actions, relationships, and configurations of relationships among the migrants, I do not attribute such force or magic to items that readers or the state may see as particularly dangerous or exciting. The migrants’ choice to code illegal drugs and banned items as “SIM cards” reflects their disinterest, I think, in the objects with which they traded.

30 Summarizing AbdouMaliq Simone’s important contributions to the study and understanding of African cities, Mbembe and Nuttall write, “Forms of social collaborations and people’s repertoires of action are constantly shifting. Civil life appears as an inchoate mix of ruthlessness and kindness, cruelly and tenderness, indifferent and generosity. Faint signals, flashes of creativity in otherwise desperate maneuvers, and small eruptions in the social fabric all provide texture to city life and are increasingly the norm. This is what Simone calls a micropolitics of alignment, interdependency, and exuberance. For him, a wide range of provisional, highly fluid, yet coordinated and collective actions are generated by African city residents that run parallel to, yet intersect with, a growing proliferation of decentralized local authorities, small-scale enterprises, community associations, and civil society organizations... The framing notions of his analysis are informality, invisibility, spectrality, and movement” (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008:6-7).
fast-changing in form, capable too of producing regularity from the precarious and piecemeal. But the current scholarship typically tells us very little about the lives and experiences of the actors involved in collaborative networks beyond the broad demographic categories they fall into and the localities they inhabit. Studies fall short, for example, in describing how such collaborations come into being, or come to break up, and what they mean for those who participate. Rendering the informal economy so functional and describing the participants as always “open” also implies that it is both a rational, yet desperate helplessness that fosters economic collaborations among the urban poor, even between sworn enemies. Furthermore, though research shows economic activities in the ‘informal’ economy are highly, perhaps increasingly ‘formalized’ in nature and arrangement (and contemporary South Africa is a prime example of this), involving and shadowing institutions, individuals, and items from the ‘formal’ sector, a conventional distinction of ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ economy is maintained in most literature. Given that only a fraction of the urban poor in African cities presently work inside the ‘formal’ economy – a very small number of the sum of African migrants in Cape Town, for instance – reflection is needed on the intense pressure the concept of ‘informal economy’ is being placed under.

31 The best example for both Cape Town and Johannesburg, though concerning black South Africans and not migrants, is the informal taxi-bus franchise.

32 “No matter how much Nigerians and South Africans express their mutual hatred, this does not really stop them from doing business with each other, sharing residences, or engaging in other interpersonal relations. The dissipation of once-relied-upon modes of solidarity, the uprooting of individuals from familiar domains, and the ghettoization of individuals within highly circumscribed identity-enclaves constitute an explosive mix of amorphous urban conflict. Residents can orient themselves in this conflict and discover profitable opportunities... through constant interactions with real and potential antagonists” (Simone 2004a:419).
Simone’s article proves representative of contemporary research on African social and economic networks: it holds out ‘the network’ as a key object of emergent informal economies (slippery, malleable, robust in character), and as especially significant for economic practices of the vulnerable and marginalized, but it lacks substantial descriptions of networks themselves. Networks of collaboration, we learn, exist in abundance in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and other cities – in name, in function; their contributors and contents are listed – but details that might tell us what they look like or stand for for the subjects they touch and how they operate (and crucially succeed) in the day-to-day are missing. Such networks, furthermore, are studied foremost through ‘people’. My data aims to address some of these gaps.

Simone’s examples of pan-African economic partnerships between migrants in Johannesburg bear similarities to some strands of the young migrants’ work in Cape Town, such as their acquisition and trading of “SIM cards.” Car guarding is an apt example of the collaborations Simone describes also, though in a qualified form for Cape Town. However, I found few similarly grand, transnational practices at work among the young migrants I worked with. I also found less need or eagerness for “radical openness” among the young migrants I worked with; despite the challenges they were cognizant of facing, they showed reluctance and hesitancy about involving themselves with others in the city, even informally. Their unwillingness to extend their collaborations further or draw other persons into them

33 Simone helps us draw attention to the interplay of guard networks with local business owners, who may come to informal agreements with groups of guards over locations and behavior. This was the case at the gym’s car park in Constantia where Bo worked; the management supplied these migrants with white polo shirts. I suspect an arrangement or understanding existed between migrants and police officers in Green Point. Car guard ‘uniforms’ (fluorescent bibs, sometimes branded with ‘guard’ or ‘security’) are found easily in flea markets, which Simone mentions, deliberately resembling the uniforms worn by the official traffic wardens who work in the same locations during business hours.
might be due to the young ages of the migrants I worked with. It might also be to do with the differences between Johannesburg and Cape Town; Cape Town is not as clearly an ‘African city’ as Johannesburg, based on Simone’s criteria.34

I share a strong interest in explaining how groups of vulnerable actors forge workable livelihoods in divided, dangerous cities. But I think we can gauge much more about the operability and significance of the collaborations these young migrants devise by looking slightly less (or less exclusively) at the distinct, individual, different ‘people’ who make up such collaborative infrastructures and more at the relationships they comprise and deploy, and the actions they undertake.

While descriptions of individuals feature across the ethnography and reflect my experiences of conducting fieldwork, I focus also on the arrangements and very careful use of relations by and within one network. Individual migrants hold distinct places in its history and life – among themselves, each youth is known within the network for his distinct portfolio of skills, knowledge, and characteristics – but, at work on the streets, all of the migrants ultimately always prove substitutable and secondary to the welfare and work of the network as a whole. They recognize their own and each other’s mutuality, accepting this (at times reluctantly) as part of the maintaining of the network. This network works in Cape

34 “African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used” (Simone 2004a:407). My previous chapter on Cape Town challenges this description of an ‘African city’. 
Town, I argue, from its relational infrastructure, not only (and, in my view, not principally) from the sum of individual contributions by its different members.  

The ethnography thus tries to complicate contemporary studies of urban economies by displacing the stable notion of ‘person’ at the core of its thinking about collaboration, who is seen as making rational choices, yet is also constrained by circumstances. It shows these collaborative relations to be more than the outcome of either haphazard or logical improvisation demanded by the everyday. I present migrants instead entering into collaborations and experimenting with a relational nexus that is crystallized through the coming together of various contingent economic and social factors.

This chapter considers the nature of migrants’ economic collaborations in Cape Town by studying strategies employed by one migrant network for whom guarding cars and its accompanying trade in contraband items has become a workable vocation. My closeness to the young migrants allows me to differentiate these youths within the ethnography (named and lettered; Table 2). Individualizing the migrants shows diversity in an otherwise homogeneous network; its details should address some of the deficits in current flyover scholarship on economic and

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35 A further literature of relevance here is the anthropology and sociology of gangs (Vigil 2003). Drug sales are central to these migrants’ survival in Cape Town, but were not my object of focus. To over-frame the migrants’ work in guarding cars and beyond as solely a pretense for this does not reflect how my fieldwork developed. It also fuels rumors about young black migrants as primarily criminals.

36 All of the migrants are members of a larger migrant network based in Johannesburg comprising mostly Congolese men and youth. These youths (B1-B20) formed a satellite branch of the larger network in Cape Town, which B1 and B6 co-supervised. The migrants were recruited in Johannesburg and assigned to work in Cape Town. Few migrants knew each other prior to arriving in South Africa. However, the youths matured in similar circumstances. They all grew up in government-held regions of the two Congos during the heaviest phases of civil war. (All said they were in Kinshasa when President Laurent Kabila was assassinated, January 2001). Network B was the most homogeneous I worked with.
social networks. But the following four descriptive sections on different aspects of the network’s work also highlight the arrangements, histories, idioms, and work of relationships that organize these migrants as an adept, productive corporate entity.

The migrants’ collaborative economic strategies rely on particular ways of acting collectively and separately – as a group and as individuals, as parts and wholes. Relations are resources these networks have learned to discipline and deploy in economic operations in the city.

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37 The ethnography further shows that the youths are deftly articulate on these issues. Cobbled together from languages of sport, popular culture, war, and ritual, almost every minutia of the migrants’ working roles and gestures had names and terms.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Migrant</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Arrived in South Africa</th>
<th>Arrived in Cape Town</th>
<th>Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Brad Pitt</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>02-05</td>
<td>04-07</td>
<td>First cousins (paternal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Jacky C.</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>02-05</td>
<td>04-07</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>Rocky</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Matadi, DRC</td>
<td>06-03</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>Close friends with B5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Brazzaville, Congo</td>
<td>12-04</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>Brother of B12 and B18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B5</td>
<td></td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Matadi, DRC</td>
<td>10-04</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B6</td>
<td>Wesley Snipes</td>
<td>1981</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Brazzaville, Congo</td>
<td>04-06</td>
<td>04-07</td>
<td>Half-brothers (same father)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B7</td>
<td>Zorro</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Brazzaville, Congo</td>
<td>04-06</td>
<td>04-07</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B8</td>
<td>Caprio</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>09-05</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>B8 and B9 are brothers. B10 and B11 are first cousins (paternal).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B9</td>
<td>Callixte</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>09-05</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>The two pairs have travelled together since 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B10</td>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>09-05</td>
<td>07-07</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B11</td>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>09-05</td>
<td>07-07</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B12</td>
<td></td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Brazzaville, Congo</td>
<td>12-04</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>Adopted by B4's father in 1991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B13</td>
<td>Marc</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>06-06</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>First cousins (paternal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B14</td>
<td>Bo</td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>06-06</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B15</td>
<td>Brando</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>06-06</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>First cousins (paternal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B16</td>
<td>Soldier</td>
<td>1982</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>01-06</td>
<td>06-07</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B17</td>
<td></td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>01-06</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>Brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B18</td>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Brazzaville, Congo</td>
<td>12-04</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>Cousin in Johannesburg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B19</td>
<td>Rembrandt</td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>06-07</td>
<td>07-07</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B20</td>
<td>X-Man</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>06-07</td>
<td>07-07</td>
<td>First cousins (paternal)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lessons in posture and posturing

“First off, we’ll need to give you a new face.”

Brad Pitt (B1) is instructing me on how I would need to change my appearance and behavior if I were to work with the men in Green Point. It comes near the beginning of a long, serialized conversation (starting September 2007) between Brad Pitt, his brothers, and me on the physical and facial movements, deportment, and interpersonal skills migrants must master if they want to do well as car guards. Brad Pitt is a first-rate teacher for the interested anthropologist. The ‘techniques of the body’ he begins with prove a sensible starting point in developing my understanding of the migrants’ collective actions as car guards (Mauss 1973). Within this economy, above all, migrants’ bodies are their “first and most natural instrument” (ibid.:75). These lessons aim to recalibrate and better harmonize the migrants’ physiology (bodies, faces, eyes) to the specific sociological circumstances they must negotiate in Cape Town. Education indeed, the men are learning new “techniques [that consist] of an adaptation of the body to their use” (ibid.:86). There are high stakes in mastering them effectively.38

To start with, he says, I’d need to learn three facial expressions the migrants use when they work: friendliness, intimidation (“rebel face”), and what Brad Pitt calls his “dead body face” (blankness, disinterest). Faces are demonstrated in turn by the young group I’m sitting with. I try not to giggle at their embellished expressions. They show how the youths have been instructed to engage productively

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38 What is significant is how many of these techniques rely on previous skills, actions, and reactions the migrants learned elsewhere. The relative cultural homogeneity of the network – members of Network B come from a concentrated region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo, maturing in similar circumstances – allowed the network to internally reference other experiences, traditions, and historical events in their work and training. The use of a language of warfare to talk of their tactics and practices is particularly uniform (brought out in this and the following sections).
with potential customers on the streets and how payments should be attempted from all car owners returning to their vehicles (“Always show nice at first, but switch to rebel face if the Boss looks like he’ll run…”). There is a remarkable uniformity among them. Lecturing the group loudly, he underscores how “strong nigga eyes” are vital to their success. In contrast, the migrants should feign disinterest if they are approached by policemen.

We turn to role-playing common scenarios migrants experience. Brad Pitt plays himself, X-Man (B20) acts out all of the clients the men will likely meet, and Jacky C. (B2) is a police officer. Cognizant of the various perceptions of themselves held by different populations in the city (as thugs, as scammers, as harmless nuisances), the technique here is to match the faces to an appropriate body and voice. For female customers and for “men without muscles,” I learn, car guards should make enticing eye-contact with possible patrons and use long, elegant arm-motions and coy smiles. For “white Boss” customers, however, which the youths clarify to mean stronger, older men with “[bad] attitude and wallet,” Brad Pitt raises the pitch of his voice and scampers behind X-Man as though he is now a young boy, complimenting him on his car and promising to take good care of it, and making sure to use “Sir” and “Boss” several times at the start and end of each sentence. Jacky C.’s turn as a policeman is illuminating: he is sluggish, risible, and unable to use his weapons or radio, yet he is impulsive enough to cause problems for a migrant if he chooses to. Here, Brad Pitt stands motionless as the officer walks past. Brad Pitt then pretends not to speak English when the policeman spits on him and slaps him violently for “papers.” Each scene in the playlet evinces hoots from the audience.

39 ‘Eyes’ are referenced frequently. This comment refers in part to Brad Pitt’s claims the migrants can see in the dark and into other “time zones” (the significance of seeing dangers ahead of time).
I laugh along too, suspecting the lesson has been caricatured slightly for my benefit and that Brad Pitt is likely trying again to impress and shock me. But he knows I know a lot more about their work as car guards by now having spent long periods in their company and from having lived in the city intermittently for over a year, and thus that I’m not convinced that facial and bodily gestures and different voices are all there is to it. Brad Pitt dashes off to find some props and paper to draw up a list of topics he wants to go over.

“Don’t you have to get the guy’s permission when they park?” I ask. (This is an unwritten rule with car guards, Capetonians tell me. One is only required to pay a guard if you have agreed so in advance, though some will pay out of fear or pity and others will refuse to do so regardless). “How much is enough?”

X-Man ducks my questions. I suspect he does not want to upstage Brad Pitt in front of the others. Instead, he tells me how I confused the men when I first met them as being an unclear amalgam of a “white Boss” and a “man without muscles.” Finding this hard to put into words, he imitates how I walk confidently and hurriedly in the city at night, wrapped up and swaggering – he reminds me how doing fieldwork in a South African city has retrained the ways I too make use of my own body – but shows me that my eyes are still too “womanly [nervous] for a real Boss” and that I’m too quick to return a guard’s grins with a smile or a head-raise (a helpful clue, he explains, in distinguishing types of male customers). These deficiencies, he flirts, require work. They also all know of my introduction to the network from the time during my preliminary fieldwork when two migrants in the network (B16, B17), then scouting in Cape Town for new sites, rescued me in Green Point at gunpoint; the incident may explain why the men are keen to pass on to me knowledge and techniques on how I can inhabit the city more safely.
“How much is not really important,” Brad Pitt explains, trotting back into the living area. “But I say less than R10 for a whole night is a bastardish score!” (“Score” is used for car guard earnings, “sale” for other transactions). “Permission is always guaranteed” – the men all laugh at this – “so what matters most is that you get the ammo [coins] off them.” The men laughed because they know that few of their potential customers in Green Point bother to look at their faces closely when they’re parking or when they nod or grunt consent to a guard offering service. They claimed frequently that white people can’t tell any of them apart anyway, and so it is not usually a problem if the men have rotated guarding posts during the evening and the original guard has “switched [places].”

To make his longer latter point on the ways of ensuring customers pay, Brad Pitt spreads out newspapers and draws a street-grid of a section of Green Point with cars parked along one side. “Eye control,” he snaps. Using glass Coke bottles for the migrants and a tub of Vaseline for a customer, he shows a car owner returning to their car. “First off, what matters is that you spot the moving targets [car owners] in the dark. It’s why we’re always in these big groups. So we have lots of eyes scanning and looking.” He arranges the Cokes meticulously at intersections, in passageways, and opposite building entrances. “There!” Rotating bottles in turn, he shows me how large areas can be simultaneously monitored by few migrants. (Though he says the men work in “big groups,” the Green Point location is only patrolled by 6-10 migrants at a time). Almost shouting now, “And these are fucking easy [predictable] targets. We know what they’re doing before they do!” I later start to see what he meant as I begin scrutinizing people in Cape Town at night as I’ve

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40 Though Green Point is profitable, R10 per vehicle was a very optimistic amount to ask for. I suspect his comment was directed towards others present, reminding them of his status as the group’s highest earner.
been taught to, watching targets leave a building in the dark to stride directly to their cars, looking ahead and clutching (and highlighting) their valuables, trying to disguise their nervousness. Connected by discreet hand signals and whistling, it takes just one migrant spotting a potential customer for the entire stationary group to soon see them.

“What scares our targets most is if we move up behind them,” Jacky C. continues. A single youth should thus make himself visible to a target when they start returning, but unthreateningly and by keeping as still as possible, maybe smiling or flattering them from a distance. Jacky C. says many customers prefer to get inside their vehicles, start the engine, and roll down a window to pay a guard, though this presents the possibility of non-payment (why coyness and compliments must be used). Ideally, the migrant who obtained permission for guarding at the start will “score.” Only in instances where negotiations for “SIM cards” have also been discussed during the parking stage is it imperative that the initial youth returns.  

As incomes from “scores” and “sales” are pooled collectively, and because the migrants watch each other, there seemed no possibility of one migrant or a pair of migrants cheating the others.

One October evening, after a meal, nine in the network take me outside my apartment to exhibit their surveillance skills around the beach huts and municipal buildings on Muizenberg beach. Bo and I drink tea in my kitchen while the other eight plot their sentry sites – it’s an unfamiliar site for them and less lit than Green Point. Despite these challenges, the migrants successfully track Bo and me as we

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41 I did not study or ask about “SIM cards” during fieldwork. However, the migrants’ point was clear. It is commonplace in central Cape Town for a car guard to approach a car owner when they are parking and inquire discreetly as to whether they wish to purchase from them. Green Point is a location where car guards are also sought out for drug sales from club patrons or pedestrians.
dart different routes across the beach. They later recounted behaviors I made I didn’t remember making. It’s a learning moment for me in gauging the demanding physicality of the men’s work. I’m impressed too by their visual fitness in being able to follow dark, moving bodies in near total evening blackness. Though he cut his leg by not quite jumping a fence, Bo found the evening so thrilling he was unable to settle down to sleep. “That was like being back in Bukavu,” Wesley Snipes remembered to a smiling Zorro (B7) in bed, wistfully air-loading an AK-47.42

My weekly lessons in guarding cars continued through the months that followed, held at my apartment in afternoons or in one of the two apartments in Woodstock the migrants shared. Lessons focused on stature, appearance, demeanor, techniques in handling “patrons,” and ideal negotiation scenarios. Brad Pitt used a small blackboard a few times to sketch out some of their more complex group maneuvers for me involving cars, targets, and migrants, several of which were pointed out to me later from the car. I was mindful that the lessons served a secondary purpose of reinforcing “the law” to other members of the audience, though the supervisors never called out an individual migrant’s slip or poor performance in front of the group. When I started observing the migrants at work, however – an arrangement Wesley Snipes and Brad Pitt devised, I think, because they enjoyed my questions and found them useful – I started noticing gaps between how the migrants spoke of their work together and how it unfolded in practice. Life in Cape Town was inconsistent and not without crises.

I ask Brad Pitt later whether he thinks migrants make better car guards than South Africans. I tried to frame my question in a way that wouldn’t open the

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42 Several of the youths in the network participated in the ‘Bukavu offensive’ in eastern DRC in 2004 as underage participants in government forces.
floodgates of complaints about South Africans, though the xenophobic responses I expected – South Africans are lazy, ignorant, “broken,” weak – made up his immediate answer. But Brad Pitt often came back to this question over time in the conversations between us that followed, supplementing his thesis with increasingly unscripted and original answers. Once he told me that South African guards can’t work like the Congolese because “they don’t know what it means to love thy brother,” suggesting a commitment and exclusivity that lies in the bonds between the men he works, lives, and has traveled with, which makes for efficient working relationships. After the urban violence in 2008, which this network weathered best, he exclaimed that youths like him do not wait for “government” and “bosses” to help them. Sitting together in my car one evening, he pointed out one migrant’s poor performance on the street. “We [also] know when to let dead weight go.”

“Dancing” and “switching”

The first working movement I am shown from my car in Green Point – “following” – refers to how the migrants watch each other on the streets. Each youth is assigned another youth to “follow” throughout a night’s work, who follows another in turn. The web of surveillances forms a circuit among the migrants, designed to ensure every potential target is “caught” by the network. I sketch down the sightlines.

“Following” means the migrants have to keep track of two stations at once. As well as working their own corner or stretch of street in Green Point, the men

43 Though such comments are almost totally absent in the large literature on xenophobia, migrants, and refugees in South Africa, I do not think it is particularly surprising to reveal that xenophobic sentiments and statements were also expressed by migrants towards black South Africans.
must also ensure that the brother they are following has registered possible clients nearby, whistling them if they appear distracted. It means each migrant watches more than people; they must “follow” what has happened in an entire environment and what is happening now, but also what might possibly happen to come. It is quite challenging in practice because targets are not always easy to categorize. Even close up, it can be hard to decipher between a customer returning to their car, a shopper looking for a “salesman,” and a passerby, each of which requires a different body, face, and style of approach. The men use every clue available to help classify targets and assess situations, including, clothing, walking patterns and speeds, sounds, eye movements, and the size, race, age, and sex of bodies. Green Point can be swarming at its busiest times. As many visitors to Cape Town will experience, however, car guards are almost always standing at an owner’s car by the time they return. This feels uncanny the first time you visit; unbeknown to you, you have been watched.

Soldier (B16) escorts me in Green Point for the first weeks of my car-bound observations. He worked in Green Point for six months before transferring to Constantia, so he understands the migrants’ street maneuvers here and the demands of guarding and selling in the city center.

Soldier’s an excellent guide in describing a technique or operation, pointing it out beneath us, and going over its parts and purposes for me again. He also puts their operations and the names the migrants have given them into historical context. Though some of them have been devised in Cape Town or copied or adapted from others there – for example, they have duplicated an investment strategy they observed from Zimbabwean migrants (see later) – most practices they employ in Green Point were first learned elsewhere. The majority have been transplanted into
Cape Town, where they have found new utility. Some names of these practices hold meaning from their pasts; they resonate from times of war (dancing, switching, targets, tracking, bullets, etc.). The migrants are articulate on this.

The migrants’ maneuvers, I concluded, proved reasonable, no-nonsense ways of addressing practical challenges, but I needed an elevated vantage point and a good teacher at my side before I could ‘see’ them myself and appreciate their effectiveness; what gives their assemblages agency. I also required someone to explain what the maneuvers mean to them. Placid and suave, Soldier endured over forty hours of being my “night eyes” without complaint.

We start with “following,” says Soldier, because it will help me to start to see the working group as a coordinated, interdependent team. He says I been focusing too much on the specific transactions different migrants make. Soldier instead wants me to recognize “how we [the network] see everything.” He said boys at home in Kinshasa learn to trust each other this way. At street level, it’s simply not possible to grasp all of their lines of vision from any single place, even to see all the migrants. Soldier is pushing me to see the network beyond its people: to take into account the street, the cars, the clothes of others, lights and shadows in Green Point, and sounds of traffic, sirens, migrants’ whistles, and laughter; to see the network itself as an system or assemblage that is directing these various “actants” to act (Bennett 2005; Latour 2005). The men trust ‘the network’ to see on their behalf.

He shows me the migrants “dancing” next – a range of arm gestures and hand signals that convey information to the others. These can alert the network to an excess of customers to deal with a particular location (rapidly opening and closing

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44 Once more, Soldier is showing me how the minutiae and meanings of seemingly perfunctory labors – guarding cars, for instance – vary from one group of migrants to the next. Other actions derive from languages of sport, popular culture, and business.
both hands), a significant sale that’s been made (a fist is punched into the other hand; this alerts a supervisor that a migrant is carrying a large amount of cash), or a near-shortage of “SIM cards” (reloading a machine gun against the stomach). Dancing gestures are relayed from migrant to migrant until either Brad Pitt or Wesley Snipes, whichever supervisor is roaming Green Point that night, is informed. The communication chain is faster than using cell phones, which are avoided for the costs and attention they incur.\textsuperscript{45}

Asking the men why they called their quirky repertoire of coded gestures and body signals “dancing” opened a story about their pasts I would have probably found too farfetched to believe had it not been for a past fieldwork experience in a similar world to the one in which these migrants matured, and for how the migrants agreed on it so consistently. Soldier said that the migrants learned to “dance” during their time in one of Joseph Kabila’s shadow armies, assembled to reinforce Kinshasa after his father’s assassination.\textsuperscript{46} Government training of young soldiers, he explained, mixed aerobic exercise with lessons in gunmanship set to musical accompaniment. Soldier described how he had learned to fight and track back home by dancing to 2Pac and the Cha Cha Slide. The gestures they use in Cape Town come straight from the songs they best remember. Soldier suggested I fix the cassette-player in my car so I could listen along.

One of the more surreal moments of my pre-preliminary fieldwork in Liberia in 2004 took place in Ganta town, Nimba, an outpost into Guinea, then not secured

\textsuperscript{45} Cell phones are held by all the migrants, though rarely for calls. It was more common to keep a small amount of credit on them to keep them operational, from which they could “flash” each other.

\textsuperscript{46} This is where a number of the network had first met. Even though he would have been very young at the time, Wesley Snipes had apparently been real a “kadogo” from the Kabila’s’ ousting of Mobutu in 1997.
by the UN-MIL peacekeeping mission. Staff from an international NGO invited me to attend a two-day workshop on promoting disarmament among young members of the MODEL rebel group. After supper one evening, our Liberian drivers, the American manager of the Ganta field office, and two US marines broke military curfew to take me out around the town. They said they wanted me to see behind the façade of disarmament interventions. We visited a church hall packed with dancing women, rebel soldiers, and Ghanaian peacekeepers. Crackling speakers blasted Afrobeat, hip-hop, and Coupé-Décalé. Swinging bulbs intermittently lit up rows of AK-47s and machetes stacked neatly against the walls. Each track of music came with its own choreography, strictly observed by all of the soldiers and girls there. Amid pandemonium, the dancing was militarized and precise. Above everything else, our small group stood out because we didn’t know the routines.

These men loved hearing about my short time in Liberia. The oldest among them had participated in a different conflict some 3,000 miles away, but news of this particular concurrent war in West Africa reached them over airwaves and through international agencies, and they had followed it closely. West Africans’ wars were more “bad ass” than the drawn-out conflict in their respective countries, they said. Attempting to help me make sense of their signals’ names, they encouraged me to draw connections when I described this night to them. I’d called it “war-dancing.” They enjoyed the implication of being placed in the same category as West African soldiers.

As Soldier and I observed and discussed the network’s work on the Green Point streets, I realized that legendary-like stories and mementos recited through bodies and words were attached to many parts of the men’s work. The precision with which they worked mirrored a precision in language the men used to speak
about it. The names and parts of some of their maneuvers used in guarding and
selling reached far back into their pasts. “Switching,” for example – the sensible
process of changing migrants between guarding posts periodically to prevent one
migrant’s face gaining unnecessary recognition by the police or patrons – was
devised, they said, after masked Bakongo hunting rituals the youths had seen as
children, in which the identities of masked men performing (men they knew) were
concealed from spectators (a network of actants even Latour might struggle to
describe).47 Presenting themselves as identical shells of persons, but concealing and
changing the individual inside, this practice partly addressed their security concerns
in Green Point.

Other maneuvers had been learned within South Africa. They copied
Zimbabwean migrants’ pragmatic habits of storing the takings of their work as
sellable commodities. During an evening’s work, for example, every hour or so, up to
1am, the supervisors would gather coins earned from the men and snake over to
Long Street to exchange them into US bills, cigarettes, or “SIM cards,” which they
could sell immediately. Such items were redistributed among the migrants to
ensure no single migrant held the entire proceeds of their work at once.

Migrants’ actions in guarding and selling together proved coordinated,
interdependent, and remarkably effective. The small gestures and tactics they
comprised were neither automated actions nor original inventions produced by
contingencies or challenges of working in this particular inner-city. Rather, the men

47 “No science of the social can even begin if the questions of who and what participates in the
action is not first of all thoroughly explored, even though it might mean letting elements
in which, for lack of a better term, we would call non-humans... To extent the list and
modify the shapes and figures of those assembled as participants and to design a way to
make them act as a durable whole” (Latour 2005:72).
had assembled strategies to use in Green Point by copying others or importing them from elsewhere, cognizant of and sometimes making use of non-human actors in the milieu. Growing up amid conflict in DR Congo and Congo-Brazzaville, then living in Kinshasa as boys, provided the men with skills and experiences they found ways to deploy productively in a new social and economic setting. Shared, private terms personalized and dramatized their work, reminding themselves of themselves. Past operations found fresh use in this new urban “[war] zone.”

Reshuffling

November comes to a close, the busy summer starts, and Marc and Brando learn they have been “transferred” to work in Green Point, the network’s most profitable car guarding location in Cape Town. This is where the migrants make nine-tenths of their total earnings and almost all of their conversations about work revolve around this location. Marc, Brando, and Bo are thrilled with the news and “flash” my phone repeatedly. I meet Marc and Bo at a shopping center out in “Zimbabwe” the following morning to buy them breakfast at Burger King.48 They’re carrying plastic bags filled with pricey new clothes when they arrive, still bouncing. This is not the first time I have found the migrants suddenly possessing unexplainably expensive purchases.

“IT’s not a promotion,” Marc corrects me, laughing. “We’ve been transferred.”

I seem to have misunderstood the cause of the brothers’ celebrations.

“It’s just a transfer, James,” Marc insists more seriously, reading my confusion. Drawing from one of the languages the men use to talk of their working

48 On grounds of the high numbers of Zimbabwean migrants and refugees living there, Bellville, east of Cape Town, is frequently referred to as “Zimbabwe” or “New Zimbabwe.”
roles and maneuvers to try to explain his use of the term (see notes 35-36), “It’s like... I was a midfielder, now I’m an attacker. Same job, different place! Tomorrow, I might be in defense. Or a midfielder again.” The brothers are concerned I have gotten wrong ideas from them. They are particularly troubled by my calling their reassignment to Green Point a promotion. Perhaps I am not following their football metaphor appropriately.

Since moving to Cape Town from Johannesburg in May 2007, the three brothers have worked as guards in the car park of a large gym in the lush suburb of Constantia. A small team of six migrants work this location in shifts from 6am to 10pm. Car flow is steady there, the patrons are pleasant, and I could take up a lot of the migrants’ time to talk with them without it interfering with their work. They work efficiently at guiding drivers in and out parking spaces, at bowing and chatting subserviently, and at holding back other vehicles while a driver is reversing. They learn to associate car owners with cars so that they are always standing near the right vehicle by the time its owner returns. Gym management lets them use the bathrooms and sometimes provides the migrants with sandwiches. “It’s a secure site in Cape Town,” said Brad Pitt, which means the migrants are confident that they can keep hold of this location for now, unlike the other places they work. Though the constant stream of cars through the day ensured a steady income, it was the least profitable site for the network. This is because “sales” were almost never possible there (see note 26).49

49 At any point in time, 6 migrants worked in Constantia (three per 8-hour shift), 4 worked in Woodstock (close to the migrants’ apartments), and 6-10 worked in Green Point.
50 Working shifts in Constantia were also very long. The great annoyance of working there was the lack of nearby public transportation. From Constantia, the migrants either had a long walk to Wynberg to the taxis and railway station, or they had to coax a patron for a lift to town.
Two of the brothers will now be working in Green Point at night. It is clearly exciting for them. I always underestimated the exhilaration for the youths that comes with working and watching in Green Point. The young migrants were much more stimulated by an environment filled with lights, women, club music, and spectacles of violence and consumption than a staid, picturesque, and safe workplace in the suburbs. The mostly white professionals and families at the Constantia gym always paid and were friendly, but the pace of work there was slow, it was “too safe,” the men often said, and it was almost impossible to return home from Constantia with anything interesting to share with the others. Green Point, in contrast, gave migrants means to differentiate themselves from each other. Individual migrants there could brag about a high sale they had made during at night, a girl they had courted, or a tense moment they had handled skillfully. The brothers will also now earn a lot more money for the network.

Even though the profits of their total earnings are distributed equally, in view of each other, I long assumed that working in Green Point equated to higher status in the network. Given the hazards entailed in working there, the chance to make a larger financial contribution to the group, and the excitement of the migrants this morning, I was convinced that moving the men between the worksites was a carefully planned decision and a source of internal competitiveness, not just, as they said, a “transfer.”

Despite their delight, Marc and Bo continue to implore me not to interpret their reassignment as a promotion. They tell me that transferring the migrants through the worksites is standard practice in the network. “It keeps us fresh,” Marc recites. The brothers repeat that they must work in the places “where they are most needed,” as I have heard from Brad Pitt, Wesley Snipes, and others several times.
before. Though they eventually concede that working in Green Point is preferable at an individual level, they are eager I do not interpret their excitement today as though they think they have increased their rank within the network. If such a view gets back to the other migrants, I understand, it could create problems for them.

I started to note the migrants’ movements between their three worksites after this confusing exchange. All of the youths craved opportunities to show themselves performing well as strong earners to their peers, but they seemed to crave other kinds of recognition from each other too – reputation, anecdotal valor, being the subject of a good story. As I became closer to the men, I heard a few semi-complaining statements from individuals about not being in Green Point or about being moved from there, though these fell short of criticisms of people. One migrant (B12) once asked me to talk to Brad Pitt and Wesley Snipes on his behalf about why he had never been allowed to work in Green Point. It was the first time I wondered whether underperformance within the network could lead to a migrant’s expulsion.

Overwhelmingly, however, the migrants appeared to accept that the economic welfare of the whole network necessarily had to supersede the working preferences or capacities of individuals. This generally meant that their older, swiftest, and more experienced members went to work in Green Point. One of the most interesting patterns I took from my nighttime observations was the quite deliberate splitting up of closely bonded migrants in Green Point specifically. Pairs of brothers, cousins, and close friends, for example, never worked alongside each other in Green Point, which they might be allowed to do elsewhere. (If they worked there together, such as Marc and Brando after December 2007, they would be stationed in non-adjacent posts). I was told this was a strategy to keep the men alert and focused in a location where the thresholds for errors were small. It also
reinforced how the relational distribution of the migrants across the worksites took priority over an individual’s earning potential. Similar to the positions that make up teamwork in a football game, to follow the brothers’ metaphor, the migrants saw their various spatial and occupational positions as producing an operative division of labor that created a successful corporate whole. Working in a less exciting worksite is a price one pays for being kept part of the group.

There were exceptions to this practice, however. Regardless of a migrant’s skillfulness in sales negotiations and violence, I learned through observing the distribution of the migrants systematically that the most physically distinctive migrants did not work in Green Point. These kinds of individual differences were not unutilized; they sometimes proved valuable. Bo, for example, was kept in family-friendly Constantia because his gawkiness “made children laugh.” Soldier’s (B16) deep-set eyes and “nice teeth” made him an asset, the supervisors thought, in charming the white, female gym clients. Another migrant (B12), who had been burned as a toddler and has a patch of dark skin on his face, was not allowed to work in Green Point because it was felt his slight deformity could attract unwanted attention; he could be recognized. X-Man, meanwhile, one of the youngest, went to Green Point. Though his effeminacy was considered an asset in negotiating sales with gay clientele, he bore sufficient physical resemblances to the others to not otherwise stand out.

Marc and Brando give their new assignments in Green Point serious preparation, focusing on their appearance in detail. The men are given identical security bibs to wear in Green Point, but they wear their own under-clothes, which must be “sharp” (stylish), in dark colors, and uniform. Identifying marks, such as scars, must be hidden, hoods or hats are required, and migrants must be
exceptionally clean and “not smell” there. Deep inside pockets are needed for the large quantities of coins they could build up during an evening’s work and for other supplies they will carry.

The network’s effectiveness across Cape Town thus drew on how they worked and arranged themselves in relational formations based on mutuality and sameness. The great irony to this was that working in Green Point – where physical similarity is vital, and where behavioral and bodily synchronicity in action is required and given extensive training – allowed Marc, Brando, and the other migrants working there to become individuals.

Confrontations

An SMS wakes me: “X-Man is bleeding.” Rembrandt (B19) sent the message, but his phone rings off when I call it back. I manage to reach Wesley Snipes. X-Man has been beaten, he says. “They bottled him in the face.” I should come to Green Point quickly and bring Rocky (B3) and “reserves” (a large sum of money). It’s uncommon at night to receive such direct requests for assistance from the migrants.

Early May now, and tensions are building in Cape Town. Lawyers at the legal aid clinic recently defended two Somali youths charged with shooting a South African boy in Worcester after fifty migrants were chased from their homes (Breytenbach 2008). A spate of attacks on the migrants’ Congolese brothers in Johannesburg has concerned the network. An emergency summit of the DHA, NGOs, and UNHRC was convened in Pretoria last month. President Mbeki is now calling for a meeting of the National House of Traditional Leaders to address the
“wave of xenophobia sweeping South Africa” (Breytenbach et al. 2008).51 Migrants in Cape Town are being detained frequently on dubious charges regarding absent or improper papers.52 I imagine worst-case scenarios waiting for us in the city as I grab car keys and clothes.

It takes us almost an hour to get to Green Point. I take Main Road the whole way because Rocky, who I pick up in Wynberg, needs to go to “the bank” first in Mowbray. I’ve only driven to the house where the migrants’ supervisors keep valuable items, money, what I think could be substitute identity documents, and stockpiles of “SIM cards” twice before. “A real Nigerian lives there,” Brad Pitt had told me.53

Rocky leaps from the car as we turn into Green Point at 1am. He sprints uphill to relieve one of the younger migrants (B5) from the corner of Napier and Jarvis. Busy streets still, it takes me time to find a parking space. I rush to Wesley Snipes at the side of the garage. He’s got coffee in his hands and is laughing with two white girls who are smoking. He sees I’m harried and walks me away.

Wesley Snipes talks me through the night. He speaks calmly. X-Man was working on Cobern Street, followed by Marc and Zorro, but “slipped” (lost focus)
around 10.30pm. He failed to notice a vehicle circling the block. Four men got out of the car, rushed at him, and chased him into Somerset. He points out the route. “They kicked him down the pavement and started bottling [throwing bottles at] him,” one of which hit his head. Police sirens frightened the men away. After a pause, he says that X-Man and Rembrandt have “fled… which is good.” After another pause, he says he doesn’t know where they are now. Shifting registers suddenly, Wesley Snipes then thanks me for bringing Rocky to him because the area is very busy tonight and, smiling, “We need more men on the field.”

Different migrants go over the same events with me. They had all seen the assault. Embellishments notwithstanding, they concurred with Wesley Snipes’ account. Only Marc seemed upset. None of them knew what had caused it. Two thought X-Man had been misrecognized for another migrant. “We’ve always told him he’s pretty,” Marc remarked. Most, however, believed the attack was “a –roach hunt,” the migrants’ term for a routine assault on migrants by a local gang, something they believe gangs do for amusement. The migrants are reminding me of the risks they face each night at work. As we talk, I’m taken aback by how normal everything seems in Green Point. Many people would have witnessed the incident.

When “trouble” occurs on the streets – confrontations involving police, rival gangs, fights, arrests, and injuries, not the occasional skirmishes involving burly customers – the network’s priority is to return to car guarding as soon as possible. Brad Pitt and Wesley Snipes have warned us many times before that their territory in Green Point could be lost to other migrant groups instantaneously. Migrants also know that the police will not intervene in fights between migrants or between migrants and local youths, unlike incidents involving tourists and bar-goers in Green Point, when police or private security contractors respond rapidly. “We’re
alone out here,” Wesley Snipes has said, emphasizing the vulnerability of the migrants in the inner-city and how they cannot rely on the state or the public for support (though this also allows them to work in full view of authorities with relatively little interference). Rembrandt and X-Man are praised in absentia for following protocol: they left the streets quickly tonight and the police have not been involved. An inconvenient glitch; more importantly, work has continued.

The network gathers an hour later to talk and redistribute monies earned and assets leftover. (Income from the night is counted by Wesley Snipes at lightning speed, and then handed back to the men in handfuls. For security reasons, money is stored over as many bodies as possible. Likewise, at this time of night, anticipating arrests or violence, migrants travel home in pairs, not as a group). The grouping signals the end of a working night. Somehow our discussions here break down. Tired, I want to know where the two men are and if X-Man needs medical care. “His [immigration] papers are not right” is Wesley Snipes’ reply to this. Though all foreign nationals are eligible for medical care in South Africa, the men never visit hospitals or clinics. My concerns are dampening the mood. I am upset by how X-Man is being spoken of as a disposable resource and by how they appear to be prioritizing their financial interests over the health of one of their own. Wesley Snipes says it will be fine. “They will come back.”

An argument is growing. I have images in my head of X-Man bleeding in the city. I ask again if there is something I can be doing to help them. Wesley Snipes, exasperated, pushes me hard and challenges me to go find them myself. I say I will. “You won’t find them, bitch,” he calls after me. I drive aimlessly up and down empty streets, realizing Wesley Snipes is right. The city has become foreign to me again.
Brad Pitt flashes me mid-morning the next day. I call him back. “All is fine, our brother James,” he says, warmly. Both men have returned. They had rested two blocks from the “territory” for a few hours, and then walked back to Woodstock on side streets and along the railway line. X-Man’s face is swollen when I go to see him, but Brad Pitt and Zorro have bandaged him up neatly. “Kabila’s men taught us how to do dressings in the bush,” Zorro explains. I’ve learned the migrants have good first aid skills.

Relations as infrastructure

The extracts above show young migrants working as a disciplined corporate entity in a competitive niche economy. It shows the migrants reading moving landscapes collaboratively, arranging themselves in and across different working locations to boost their economic opportunities, and using their bodies and voices to communicate with customers and each other. It highlights how the men attend to their appearances, store and exchange money and valuable objects, and operate in the presence of surveillance, suspicion, and violence.

The ethnography conveys the youths’ exuberance in car guarding. Yet it also shows an organization and seriousness the migrants bring to their work. The precision of their actions and the orderliness with which migrants approach and speak of guarding and selling shows formality. The ethnography further shows how the network proves capable of weathering crises and anticipating risks, but this is surely possible only because of the network’s relational robustness and their clarity of roles and responsibilities. Their collective potential is prioritized consistently by the migrants.
The ethnography shows the migrants to be deftly articulate on their economic roles, tasks, and actions. However incommensurate and jumbled the languages migrants use to speak about work, their terms provide glimpses into the shared experiences the migrants fold into their work and how they understand the entity they are a part of. This contrasts with descriptive challenges entailed in writing young migrants’ economic collaborations in Cape Town, comprising deeply embodied knowledge and techniques, and multilayered presentations of self.

The chapter extends AbdouMaliq Simone’s important work on how marginalized urban actors cultivate possibilities for livelihood by entering into collaborative associations and relationships. It likewise takes geography seriously. The ethnography shows how networks prove malleable, dynamic entities capable of generating income from scarce resources, with limited support from formal institutions.

But the chapter builds on Simone’s research by considering in more detail what economic collaborations mean and make possible for those who participate. It questions Simone’s claim that collaborative economic networks exist among the urban poor because these are desperate persons willing to enter into relations with anyone. My chapter instead shows strict relational exclusivity; given how much of the migrants’ work is habituated in words and bodies and relies on shared frames of reference, it seems impossible that others, even similar migrants, could be incorporated easily into the network without rigorous training in both skills and history. The ethnography shows, obviously, that we cannot separate the economic activities of people in networks from other aspects of people’s collaborations.

The chapter finally tries to better explore Simone’s concept of “infrastructure” by considering the interplay of both persons, relationships, and other resources that
comprise the life of an economic network. Ethnographic research can complement such lines of inquiry by bringing details, personalities, statements, and feelings to bear on collaborative economic practices. But these literatures and conclusions inevitably keep us to thinking about economic collaborations in terms of discrete, different persons, and tensions between individual members and the groups they comprise.

Given the migrants prioritize the well-being and “rules” of the network over their individual desires, preferences, and even personal safety – I found few instances of migrants doing or saying otherwise – it is tempting, following Simone, to interpret the youths’ motives to work as a collaborative unit and to read the strategies they devise and deploy in the city as rational or inevitable outcomes of life in this particular social context. These male migrants do not exist singularly as junior businessmen allied in associations or as vulnerable youths ‘getting by’ and coping.

I trust my ethnography has suggested ways or needs for moving beyond the individual-versus-group dynamics or compromise that much literature on social and economic networks supposes and investigates, and think more about the work and wealth of relationships and the complexities of personhood within the network and within the network’s work (Guyer 1993; Strathern 1988). This may help explain the relative successfullness of these particular migrants in Cape Town, whose achievements are denigrated by local communities (who assume the migrants’ successfullness in the city must be due solely to illicit and deceitful methods) and local scholars (who struggle to situate these migrants within their conventional, comfortable categories based on an insular moral economy of suffering specific to the post-apartheid era).
Foregrounding relations and relatedness finally opens a new vocabulary to think differently about the textures and tensions of economic operations and processes: how migrants in Cape Town operate in concert with others to earn money, keep safe, and maintain territory. It offers a freedom to inverse perspective, not always easy to do in writing on South Africa. It also foregrounds how relations should be thought of in multiple directions, as and as not hierarchical, and both actual and potential. Beginning ethnography in the richness of the everyday helps to roll back assumptions that emerge from a too-direct focus on persons. They can be considered strategies of display and concealment, alliance and individuation, which young migrants learn as matters of survival. Such studies help question the underlying ‘person’ at the core of writing on economic collaboration.
Chapter 3

Houses without memory:

Kinship in search of a household

Leaving the streets

Studying the young migrants’ working lives in Cape Town proved more feasible than I had expected. Knowing their activities entail concealment and secrecy, I anticipated evasiveness from the men as I broached the subjects of work and employment with them. Given their vulnerabilities in the city, thus mindful of the unwanted attention my presence among them in public could provoke, I envisioned devising oblique, discreet ways of collecting data on the migrants’ patterns and practices of work, conducting fieldwork only in private spaces, one-on-one, and out of public view.

As the previous chapter described, however, studying migrants’ work unfolded differently. Countering my expectations, the men opened quickly to me together on their joined work operations. They willingly offered detailed descriptions of the methods and tactics they employ to craft incomes in the city. They spoke articulately about the risks migrants face working in Cape Town, despite it bringing out experiences of fear and violence and elucidating darker domains of city and personal life. I first attributed the migrants’ openness on work to safeguards we negotiated at the start of my project – the IRB restrictions placed on my study met my informants’ demands for discretion at a productive place of
understanding, thus we protected each other from sharing dangerous knowledge.\footnote{On IRB unexpectedly making possible constructive and safe conditions for fieldwork, see Introduction.} I credited their candidness to respect I had earned among the youths, if naively on reflection, by beginning relations with them on the streets. I later learned that the migrants’ eagerness to talk with me about work did not stem from steps or actions I had taken. Rather, my inquiries tapped into ongoing conversations the men were having between themselves, from which they took great pleasure and were keen to draw me into (which they could only do fully by my part-participation).\footnote{On the ways in which my inquiries recurrently paralleled questions asked also by my informants of themselves, and how this benefited my research, even if these questions also resembled those asked about migrants by the state, see Maurice Bloch on ‘Zafirmaniry questions’ (Astuti, Parry, and Stafford 2007, especially the contributions by Cannell and Parry).} Profitable transactions, tales of shrewdness and bravado, and narrow escapes in the city were staple ingredients of the migrants’ daily discussions. Stories of work were recounted constantly on corners and side-streets, embellished with laughter. Despite their recurrently gruesome contents, these accounts were filled with rivalries, humor, spectacle, and commendations and criticisms of each other’s performances. Our discussions were lucid partly because terms for working roles and activities were already available to the migrants.

My greater challenge, in fact, was to manage the scores of data yielded from very preliminary questions on work: migrants’ many connections in the city; the myriad rules they claimed to follow; their encyclopedic knowledge of economic possibilities; an “openness” and dynamism to their network’s work coupled with an intricate, organic division of labor. This methodological challenge has been noted by past generations of African anthropologists that led the study of social and economic networks in urban situations (Mitchell et al. 1969).
The first two chapters presented my data on migrants and work and the distrustful gaze of the city and its feel of life: the kinds of work young migrants engage in; the ways they navigate Cape Town with zones of opportunity and safety in mind; how working roles and routines are choreographed laterally through networks; strategies migrants employ to interact with others, evade authorities, and mitigate risk. I tried to retain the animated tenor of these parts of my fieldwork in the ethnography.

While I pursued my studies on work and mobility, I also researched the migrants’ domestic lives: houses and apartments the men stayed in; the households they made and kept together. I wanted to learn how the migrants negotiated obstacles pertaining to finding a place to live within in Cape Town, where living costs are very high, housing is limited, and animosity towards foreign Africans renders some neighborhoods particularly unwelcoming places. I sought to understand the extent to which the youths’ houses and households provided privacy and respite from the dramas of life on the streets of the city. I also aimed to learn how the migrants arranged themselves into household units, to note the forms and moods these units assumed.56

Home-life and housing feature centrally in the large literature on migrants in South Africa. They provide empirical and imaginative frames through which inquiries into migrants’ living conditions frequently proceed. My research tried partly to gauge how these youths’ experiences with housing and householding

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56 By proceeding to the migrants’ households from the streets, I came to see the household as a much more peripheral and deviant site and project in migrant’s lives than the existing literature presents – neither a necessarily central institution for migrants, or a natural and neutral starting place for beginning research.
compared with other populations in Cape Town, particularly other migrant populations.

During the period of my fieldwork, furthermore, loud debates were unfolding in South Africa on the lack of affordable housing in metropolitan areas. By 2006, these debates had started intersecting with equally charged discussions on the presence of migrants and refugees in South Africa. Debates on public housing thus soon began including allegations that African migrants were depriving homes to black South Africans, augmenting the problem of housing. The most vociferous of these claims concerned the illegal subleasing to migrants of new, subsidized houses intended for poor South Africans constructed through a development program launched in 1994 as cornerstone ANC legislation (Ross 2010). The subsequent anti-immigrant violence these debates helped provoke and rationalize made studying the migrants’ houses and households especially timely.

**Surfeits and silence**

This chapter describes and reflects on the young migrants’ ventures and struggles with houses and householding in Cape Town. It takes six households I studied in detail as case-studies.  

It first discusses some aspects of the labors and risks entailed in finding and keeping a household, which these migrants, in most cases, compared to other migrants in Cape Town I learned about, accomplished well. In several instances, the

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57 The six households I refer to are denoted H1 to H6 in Table 1. These households are examples of households in the four networks I worked with. Networks A and B, the largest networks, of which I have partial data, divided into numerous households (H1, H2, H4, H5). Network C, the smallest and least stable network, blurred different households, including H3. All members of Network D lived in H6. Of my 72 close informants (Table 1), 62 lived or stayed in these households during the period of my fieldwork.
migrants showed themselves adept finders and keepers of houses. They rented, leased, and subleased properties and moved frequently between them to minimize expenses and locate themselves strategically across the city, serving the network as a corporate whole. As physical spaces, the migrants’ houses and apartments could be plotted and charted frankly. Through narratives of houses, they talked to me and each other about the risks and challenges involved in living in Cape Town.

The chapter also attempts to describe and consider the compositions and tones of the migrant’s households: the occupants of their houses; the activities, activities, and processes of the house. This proved more challenging.

I approached studying the house as a site which, through household activities and domesticity, relations between the migrants of the networks coalesce, hub, rest, and renew. Households make visible particular relations between the men – different aspects and histories of relations between the men to those we have seen elsewhere, such as intimate ties grown from joining a network together or from sharing an apartment or bed in Cape Town, and older bonds that predate their recruitment in the networks in South Africa, such as siblingships and shared tribal origins.

The central challenge of studying the migrants’ households, therefore, derived from how their households held and were traversed by many different kinds of relations and numerous forms and intensities of relatedness. These relational surfeits – together with what took place and did not take place in the household – styled formal, awkward, and mutually confusing modes of domesticity. They created tensions too: a migrant’s place at work, for example, can be usurped momentarily by an additional status they assume in the household, or vice versa; moral codes pertaining to appropriate domestic behaviors learned from their houses of childhood.
brotherly discretion, the respecting of elders, and unqualified hospitality, for instance – conflicted with strict codes of generally impersonal conduct demanded at work and with the modes of survival instilled from learning to live as a migrant in South Africa. The tensions all structure domestic life profoundly.

Households thus found special spaces where the migrants rest and sit with each other as more than economic partners or street soldiers. On one hand, the migrants’ households allowed for greater visibility and acknowledgement of relations and identities between the migrants from their previous lives than in any of the more ‘public’ other domains the men also inhabit; central to these relations are those of kinship, family ties, longer friendships, and village and tribal connections. But on the other hand, as the migrants were assigned places to live in Cape Town by the supervisors of their networks, and in household formations usually intended to limit and discourage domestic amiability (see later), and as the households, while partially apart from the world of the city, remained inside the networks’ internal circuits of surveillance and were policed by each other in the service of the network, relations that gain life and prominence inside the household always coexist with the relations and responsibilities of work which brought their households into being.

I expected the migrants’ households to provide a counterpoint to the hazardousness and typical mania of street work and life. I was right to not approach migrants’ households as given, natural objects. But I wrongly assumed also that the privacy and calmness of the home would produce a warm and reflective domesticity between its young occupants. The migrants’ households, in contrast, were typically somber and uncomfortable places to visit. Bar one household, which was boisterous and convivial, all others I entered were silent and bare. While dramas around finding and keeping a place to live in in Cape Town were shared frequently –
comprising cudgeling neighbors, discriminatory landlords, and exorbitant rents, these accounts of unfairness and violence fitted narrative molds the youths were using already to talk about life in South Africa – it was far harder to ignite discussions on life inside their households and especially difficult to capture standardized data on them.

The absence of statements about households further corresponded to bareness inside their houses, both of which jarred with the otherwise richness of the migrants' lives and with their tendencies to talk and talk.58 These households are striking too for what they appear to lack: women, elders, children, intergenerational divisions, common living areas, privacy, shared homely experiences such as meals, mementos and objects, memories. The youths were aware of these gaps and omissions – it fuelled their domestic awkwardness. The men considered my inquiries on work clear, engaging, and reasonable, but I encountered confusion and reluctance when I started asking about the houses the men returned to at the end of a working day.

Janet Carsten notes the “extraordinary evocative power” of homes we remember as special, such as our homes of childhood. Carsten suggests this power is not generated primarily from the physical, political, or aesthetic dimensions to a house or household, but from “the dense and myriad connections that link together what goes on in [these] houses – processes of feeding and nurturance, the emotionally charged social relations of close kinship, and repetitive bodily practice through which many rules of social life are encoded (Carsten 2004:31). People maintain such memories as they mature and move, drawing from them amid

58 Households lacked force too; the migrants never spoke of the clandestine forces, evil spirits, and specters they associated with the city in any discussion of their houses and households.
uprooting and dislocation; “What is created and learned in the house also takes us beyond the house” (ibid.:37). Challenging a diminished place of the house in early anthropological, analytical studies of kinship, and problematizing the relation between the house and the household, she argues that the “processes involved in living in houses, taken together, make kinship” (ibid.:55, emphasis added).

My ethnography concerns households that struggle with a form of domesticity that is demanded of them in South Africa (by the challenges of living discreetly there; by the network) and are composed of different men who struggle to practice householding together. Though these households certainly are saturated with “dense and myriad connections that link together what goes on in [these] houses,” the migrants cannot “make kinship” in these households, as Carsten suggests. Rather, here we see kinship in search of a household and householding, and a domesticity devoid of kinship. I suggest this is at the core of their awkwardness.

The migrants’ households also present the networks from a strikingly different viewpoint. Compared to their operability and incompleteness at work on the streets, an organic solidarity, the network is shown as more mechanically structured, far less clear of itself in terms of roles and the division of labor, and closed off, bounded, and, in terms of things, empty. The network’s vitality appeared to be missing in the space of the house or from the standpoint of the household.

Proceeding from the street to the house reflects a direction my fieldwork took; I doubt the relations I came to make with the youths would have been as lucrative had I started my research in reverse. I underestimated how the affect of the household would be so different to the affect of the street. Invoking the title of Tobias Hecht’s ethnography (1998), embodied and interpersonal, the street came across as more ‘homelike’ than the household. It was as though households were
serving as a binary ‘other’ for the network: interiority for its otherwise exteriority, a system of ‘dual organization’ to “maintain complex relationships… with which various forms of rivalry and cooperation are usually associated” (Levi Strauss 1969:69).

My fieldwork on migrant households contrasts with my studies of migrants’ work. Only one of these six households I studied was welcoming to visit and open for me to study in a possibly customary way. It is an exception in my project, but useful to start with because it captures rhythms and patterns documented in many other migrants’ households in Cape Town. It thus helps discern the relative distinctiveness of the others. It was also the sole household in my project located in a suburb of Cape Town known for its distinctly large migrant population. My favorite fieldsite, this was the only place I witnessed violence between youths I worked with.

“The hell-pit” (H6)

Joshua (D5) and Babatunde (D11) acquired the lease to 19 Church Street, Muizenberg, in February 2002, an old, sand-swept brick terrace tucked one street behind the scruffy coastal suburb’s main road. They lived in Church Street together until March 2008, sharing the house with large numbers of young male migrants they called “sauvage [wild] boys,” who they spoke of as both employing and helping out.

In 2002, when they negotiated the lease to the Church Street house, Muizenberg was a thriving and greatly preferred place of residence for scores of African migrants and refugees new to South Africa. Large and small migrant families moved into cheap, rundown, vacant houses and apartments in the area.
Newcomers sought bed-space in the homes of fellow nationals. Sensing opportunity, Joshua and Babatunde left their small apartment in the city center to rent the larger property in Muizenberg and take in young tenants on a short-term basis, particularly youths they deemed had earning potential. They reasoned the move would formalize their fledgling odd-job business in the Muizenberg area and enhance their statuses as connected, benevolent patrons and big men. Joshua told me that over sixty boys had stayed with them since 2002.

In late 2006, when I met Joshua and Babatunde through three youths they employed, the Church Street household held a dozen, longer-term occupants. This occurred at a time when many migrants were starting to move out of Muizenberg to suburbs in the north or into townships, priced and pushed out by community efforts to regenerate and more strictly police the neighborhood. Joshua and Babatunde’s enterprises waned thereafter. In March 2008, unable to pay the rent they owed and fearing the interventions that would ensue through a formal eviction process, the men and the boys moved out.

The Muizenberg household was the largest in my study (Household 6, H6). Between December 2006 and March 2008, after which the occupants left the property and the household and network disbanded, the household comprised 12 permanent members, the full membership of the fourth and smallest network I worked with (Network D, a self-contained group; Table 3). Joshua and Babatunde co-managed the men’s work and the affairs of the household. It was unusual among the six households I documented for its large and very diverse membership. Unlike other networks, its members came from different regions of Africa (Map 4) and, except for one pair of cousins (D1, D2) and a three-man village friendship that reached back to Katanga (D6, D7, D8), the householders were otherwise alone in the
city. It was unusual too for the fact that all members lived together. There were large age gaps between Joshua, Babatunde, and the other members.

Church Street was two streets walk from where I lived during the period of my fieldwork. It had an infamous status in the area and beyond. Church Street was singled out as the “epicenter of crime and antisocial behavior” in the community and police forums in Muizenberg I attended at the start of my fieldwork. The street was described as “the hell-pit of Muizenberg” by one enraged resident, describing its mostly Congolese occupants “Nigerian drug-pimps and criminals.” I spent many long evenings in the Church Street household – I based myself in Muizenberg because I knew of its large migrant population – but, in the shameful way in which the fear of violence in South Africa incurs paralysis, I found myself avoiding the street for months after arriving, despite suspecting its residents fitted the profile of migrant my project aimed to study.

My relations with the household began in October 2006, when I met three of its West African occupants after a church service downtown that drew large migrant congregations: two cousins from Sierra Leone (D1, D2) and their Liberian friend, Simbah (D3). I had seen Simbah’s Lone Star football shirt on Muizenberg’s beach several times before – he owned two of the shirts and was almost always wearing one of them – and that gave me a friendly comment to make as the four of us walked off in the direction of the train station. The three were impressed when I told them I had been to Liberia and had met several refugees in Cape Town from Simbah’s home county. We continued talking for most of the rest of the daytime – on the train, then over takeout coffee and chips on the beach, and later on the steps leading up to the Church Street house. I was struck again then by the ease with which migrants poured out entire life stories to me at first meetings. I remember also noting their
puzzled reactions to my suggestion that their housemates’ consent was gained before I accepted their invitation to enter their home, particularly as I had made my research intentions known. Invitations to migrants’ houses had not come quickly or freely with other youths, many guarding precise details of where they stayed in Cape Town long into our relationships.

The number of people and sheer amount of activity in Church Street struck me most of all when I first visited the household in the last week of October: boys clambering over saucepans of rice and stew Joshua had laid out on the floor for dinner; clothes and blankets strewn over floors and the backs of chairs; fast music coming from a stereo in one corner and a London football match relayed from a radio in another, each on full volume; garbage and beer-bottles in piles; newspapers; more boxes than I could count; a cracked TV on mute; the shuffling body of “mad Mukanzi” (D12) beneath the action. The dirty living room, where eight youths also slept, was crammed and cluttered. My entrance interrupted a meal time, causing only a marginal disturbance. Bypassing formal introductions, I was greeted by the men inside like a close friend, told to step or sit where I wanted, then given a bowl and instructed to eat and drink. Dinner prefaced a typical evening in Church Street of talking and dancing and drinking that ended only when Babatunde decided to sleep and demanded quiet, or when the beer had finished, or when the Congolese pastor down the road knocked the door to plead with his sons for noise restraint.

Calm conversation was an alien mode of speech in this household. You shouted over others to communicate. For discrete conversations, youths and I stepped onto the steps outside or into the storeroom off of the kitchen, which doubled as the bedroom for Mukanzi and Saeed (D8), who had the worst nightmares of the
group and needed darkness to sleep.\footnote{The men called Mukanzi (D12) “mad” for his occasional violent outbursts towards others and himself. At night, then men strapped him in between a wall and table to stop him from banging and punching his head. They had once tried to get him to sleep wearing a motorcycle helmet.} Or we left the house altogether. Only Joshua and Babatunde had the capacities to guarantee stillness – Joshua through an idiosyncratic “Well, well, well...” that indicated an important statement would follow; Babatunde by punching a wall or a boy – but a compelling story or a song or a hymn from one of the youths could sometimes hush the household, particularly one from childhood.

One fought to be heard in Church Street as one also fought for things. A loose organizing system for personal possessions existed via the myriad boxes stacked in the living room and hallway, and clothes were never shared, but what one found on the floor or down the side of a sofa was otherwise yours to keep. Their sharing of personal things was not something I saw between migrants elsewhere.

After a month of visits, I had become a familiar guest in the household and was accordingly treated less respectfully, though always given food and expected to eat if I called by during a mealtime. I was not the household’s only regular visitor. The men had lots of friends and girlfriends from Muizenberg and further afar who stopped in frequently, sometimes overnight – other migrants, lost whites in the area searching for drinking or smoking partners, many young girls, and a few black South Africans. I enjoyed my uninteresting presence in their dilapidated house. The ebullient, rowdy atmosphere was a refreshing contrast to the seriousness and restlessness of other sites in my project. Despite the squalor, Babatunde’s moodiness, and the declining state of the network’s operations (a growing concern for Joshua and Babatunde; it took me time to appreciate the seriousness of this), it
was a fun and animated space, where stories of the day and tales from home supplied ample material for rubbing and teasing. Joshua encouraged raucous behavior. Fagin-like, Joshua held court on his worn armchair as the men played cards through the nights, paraded girlfriends in and out, and smoked, drank, and scuffled. Lines between a playful argument and violence were sometimes hard to decipher, but tensions and sulkiness never stayed in the air for long. There were comical moments in Church Street too, such as the occasional group prayers with the pastor, who prayed for the men’s souls and good fortune in their deal-makings, while also imploring with them to behave with more neighborly courtesy, citing scripture. A memorable pastime was the youths’ reenactments of scenes from their favorite films. *Titanic* was a particularly popular choice; Saeed and Davis (D1) could perform its dialogues of courtship and drowning from memory, which had everyone laughing and calling out for encores.

My familiarity in Church Street meant the householders’ behavior was less censored around me. I learned of Babatunde’s volatile temper quickly, for example. Within six weeks of short and all-night drop-ins, I started seeing him behave more roughly towards the men, which he had restrained during my first visits. On several occasions, his anger frightened me. Once, after receiving news from Johannesburg of an overdue utility bill, he lost his temper with Mohammed and Ibrahim (D9, D10) and shattered four glass bottles by their feet. I reacted hysterically. The boys put their heads down and drank on in silence, giggling once he left the room.

I watched the household start to struggle financially month by month. Each member was expected to contribute to the upkeep of the house – money, labor, cleaning – but this rule had since relaxed, Joshua admitted. Now, because their business operations were reducing, limited to some informal trading and a few
contract jobs (delivering, hunting down spare parts for local electricians and mechanics in rougher parts of Cape Town, odd gardening), householders’ income was increasingly scarce. The shared evening meal was sometimes their only meal of the day. The men were less confident in Muizenberg today than in past years too, I was told, and, by October 2007, almost always back at the house before nightfall. The youngest boys, the three I met first especially and who claimed me childishly as their primary friend, started spending more time in my apartment at night; they would return home in the early hours after a text message was sent to them saying Babatunde was asleep. Simbah and the Leoneans visited me if they had been unable to earn during the day, which was common by late 2007. Joshua explained to me that the pressures of making ends meet in the house were affecting Babatunde’s mood negatively. It accounted for his rages and “new love of drinking,” Joshua explained. Simbah said he had heard Babatunde was to be arrested in Nigeria and could not return home, a final option most migrants I worked with had left available to them.

As well as the household’s struggles with money and their quarrels with Babatunde, Church Street was the least discreet household I knew. As other bachelor migrant households on Church Street, it achieved notoriety in Muizenberg for its loudness and many visitors, and because the migrant population there had depleted significantly by 2007, it was blamed more openly and specifically for crime and drug sales. As Muizenberg residents and the police became more confident in approaching and confronting the migrants, reflecting the growth of intolerance towards migrants and refugees across the city by this time, household members tried turning their increasingly anomalous status in Muizenberg into a story of themselves as a vanguard group.
Feuding between the household and their neighbors intensified. Bricks were thrown through windows on weekends and the men faced harassment on the streets. These struggles peaked in January 2008 when the youngest members (D9, D10) were assaulted by a group of young residents with broken glass and a spade, after which their pastor, rather than condemning the action and intervening with the community, pleaded they find a new house. A new property was hard to secure given the network’s size and limited finances. The house they finally found in Retreat, three stops along the train line towards Cape Town, was smaller, more expensive, and in a suburb with fewer migrants. The extent of the household’s poverty was revealed to me on the day of their move in late January when the cabinets and dining table fell apart as we lifted their furniture onto a pick-up truck I had hired for them.

Joshua and Babatunde tried hard to recreate an atmosphere of dormitory playfulness in the new property, but they had lost their remaining trading posts during the move and struggled to build up new sales partners. Men were often left stranded in Muizenberg late into the night from where journeying home alone was terrifying. Girlfriends stayed longer and more often, partly to provide the men with walking escorts. I tried reassuring the youngest they were still close to Muizenberg, as they missed the openness of the beach and where they liked their invented status as stalwarts.

Unable to maintain itself, the household dissolved in May 2008, even though there was no violence nearby. (This was a common occurrence of many migrant families in Cape Town after hearing of the violence in the city). Alternative places to live had become better options or only options; for some of the migrants, these places included the government camps for displaced persons. In January 2009, when I
concluded my fieldwork, Joshua, Babatunde, and four other migrants (D6, D7, D8, D12) were living in a single room of a shared building in Woodstock. Simbah and the Leoneans moved to Johannesburg. The others moved first to the camp in Wynberg, later to the camp in Harmony Park, after which I lost contact with them. Two eventually elected to take UNHCR repatriation (D5, D10) and left South Africa.
Table 3 Network D, Household 6, Membership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Migrant</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Year of birth</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Place of birth</th>
<th>Arrived in South Africa (month, year)</th>
<th>Arrived in Cape Town (month, year)</th>
<th>Relationships among 72 migrants</th>
<th>Other family members in South Africa, not within the network</th>
<th>Relations among 72 migrants prior to arriving in Cape Town</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>Davis</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Kailahun, Sierra Leone</td>
<td>05-04</td>
<td>06-06</td>
<td>First-cousins</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Met in Johannesburg, travelled to Cape Town together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D2</td>
<td>Wilson</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Kailahun, Sierra Leone</td>
<td>05-04</td>
<td>06-06</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D3</td>
<td>Simbah</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Nimba, Liberia</td>
<td>05-04</td>
<td>06-06</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Lagos, Nigeria</td>
<td>03-06</td>
<td>12-06</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D5</td>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Brazzaville, Congo</td>
<td>10-98</td>
<td>06-00</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D6</td>
<td></td>
<td>1987</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Katanga, DRC</td>
<td>08-06</td>
<td>08-06</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>From same village, travelled together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D7</td>
<td></td>
<td>1986</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Katanga, DRC</td>
<td>08-06</td>
<td>08-06</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D8</td>
<td>Saeed</td>
<td>1983</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Katanga, DRC</td>
<td>08-06</td>
<td>08-06</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D9</td>
<td>Mohammed</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>? N. Kivu, DRC</td>
<td>01-07</td>
<td>05-07</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D10</td>
<td>Ibrahim</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>? Kinshasa, DRC</td>
<td>10-06</td>
<td>01-07</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D11</td>
<td>Babatunde</td>
<td>1973</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Lagos, Nigeria</td>
<td>01-00</td>
<td>06-00</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D12</td>
<td>Mukanzi</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>? Kenya</td>
<td>05-06</td>
<td>01-07</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
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Map 4 Network D, Household 6, Places of birth
Threads of similarity

Joshua and Babatunde’s household (H6) was different to the other migrant households I worked with for numerous reasons: it was large and diverse in membership; guests came by freely and frequently; household relations mapped conterminously on working ties; it was fixed in one location for the bulk of its existence; it failed to withstand the financial and social pressures migrants face in Cape Town.

Despite its unusualness within my sample, however, the Muizenberg household (H6) resembles many West and Central African migrant households in Cape Town in three respects, particularly the households of large migrant families studied more frequently by scholars. Aside from the peculiarly buoyant ambiance the men had created in Church Street, its composition and the narrative of its formation and dissolution connects to broader accounts of migrants’ housing in Cape Town.

I had chances to learn about the home-lives of African migrants in South Africa more widely through my volunteer work at the law clinic and from busying myself in the city during several years of fieldwork. The following similarities help elaborate contexts for the other households I studied (H1, H2, H4, H5), and thus strategies other migrant youths used to reside in the city unharmed and unnoticed, even if their different modes of householding compromised the possibilities for the unusual domestic pleasure I saw and enjoyed so often in Church Street.

First, all of the members of Joshua’s household spoke openly and at length about the efforts entailed in keeping and funding a house. In doing so, they participated in one of the most ubiquitous standing conversations among African migrants in South Africa.
Migrants’ sojourns in South Africa are told frequently through houses. Drawn-out housing sagas form storylines and chapter-breaks in many migrant biographies. The latest episodes – a dispute with a neighbor, a violent event outside the house, another pending move – were common beginnings of my first conversations with other migrants and migrant families. Recalling their lives in Cape Town through the often various houses in which they have stayed, usually in different parts of the city and with different people (strangers), migrants describe regularly how keeping a property can be as trying as finding one. They lament how conflicts with neighbors are frequent, evictions are expected, and rent payments, inflated routinely by the landlords who accept migrants as tenants, are hard to meet. Exploitation and prejudice are common motifs. Migrants usually lack the connections needed to learn of cheaper rentals available in safer neighborhoods or make contact with landlords with whom they might negotiate reasonable deals.  

Houses allow African migrants in South Africa to speak in forums with others. In a city of guarded speech, in which day-to-day life is elusive, in flux, and otherwise hard to put into words, houses become speakable anchor-points for African migrants in their attempts to articulate what living is like in South Africa. They provide common ground for different migrants to connect, converse, and commiserate. The story of the Church Street migrants – their struggles with their neighbors, the discrimination they faced, and their eviction – offered these migrants, unexpectedly, a way to insert themselves within speech communities they were otherwise excluded from. They could use their household to briefly inhabit a

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60 Most migrants took informal leases on properties directly from home owners or used the services offered by older West African patron-figures who sublease large numbers of properties to other migrants (for commission). Network A had a South African figure in Johannesburg who periodically traveled to Cape Town to sign papers if needed. Rarely were leases in the own migrants’ names.
standard depiction of migrants in South Africa as victims of xenophobia – a category all of the men in my project tried hard to embrace in forums with others.

I obtained few dramatic narratives of houses and households from other youths. Houses were distinctly ordinary spaces for most of them, householding unremarkable and inaudible. Because most coped well in terms of finding and keeping a house, the absence of discussions on housing distanced most youths I worked with from their peers and fellow nationals in the city.

Second, the story of Joshua’s household reveals once more how migrants are entangled in a miscellany of racial, social, economic, and political tensions that characterize contemporary South Africa. Affordable housing is another especially prominent intersection. The threats faced by the Muizenberg household underscore the tenseness of the urban landscape in which migrants live and how they are treated by various residential communities of South Africans in sometimes compassionate, sometimes deadly ways. An inquiry into the outbreak of violence

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61 Sarah Nuttall’s notion of ‘entanglement’ suggests a frame for understanding how African migrants have been woven into myriad debates, economies, identities, and imaginaries in contemporary South Africa. Entanglement, Nuttall writes, “is a term which may gesture toward a relationship or set of social relationships that is complicated, ensnaring, in a tangle, but which also implies a human foldness,” and which stands in contraindication to the human apartness of apartheid (Nuttall 2009:1). Entanglement here foregrounds the joinedness of houses and black foreign African migrants in trajectories that characterize the post-apartheid era: how the arrival of large numbers of African migrants in South African cities in the 1990s coincided with high rates of black urbanization and the growth of the urban poor, both of which produced voluble demands for affordable public housing.

62 These tensions provide common scholarly and popular explanations for the rise of xenophobia in South Africa – how deepening degrees of social and economic insecurity at large scales in South Africa augment belonging as a source of dispute and a political peril, thus rendering outsiders targets of animosity and harm (Geschiere 2009, Neocosmos 2005). Housing is cited repeatedly as a key factor and cause. Chapter 4 challenges these broad explanations by exploring local dynamics and histories in relation to the violence. Even though its consequences and panic were widespread and catastrophic, the violence against migrants and refugees in 2008 was isolated and limited, and unfolded in precise, non-random localities. Interestingly, the intense episodes of violence occurred in the oldest Cape Town townships, long extolled for their deep-rooted sense of community and comradeship (Wilson and Mafeje 1963).
against foreign nationals in South African cities in 2008, for example, cited the
state’s scant provision of low-cost housing and the ability of migrants to rent
property in sensitive areas of urban development as the two most significant factors
contributing to growing anti-immigrant sentiments. Migrants, in short, occupy
houses many South Africans consider their own, but which South Africans cannot
afford to rent or buy (HSRC 2008).63 The growing presence of migrants as urban
tenants has thus become loaded with political significance. It reminded the nation
of the slow-pace of wealth redistribution since democratization, for example. It
reinforces a sore, past precedent concerning the limited prospects for poor, black
South Africans to claim the city of Cape Town as theirs.64

The targeting of Church Street by its formerly friendly neighbors thus shows
how migrants were embroiled in disputes and dramas extending far beyond personal
neighborliness or matters of immigration. It shows the particularly sensitive
firestorm of housing that has center-staged itself in South African politics.

Cognizant of these entanglements, other migrant households I studied took great
efforts to minimize their presence around others and draw negligible attention to

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63 The disputed HSRC survey only focused on township populations (Thornton, Sharp, and
Pillay, n.d.). It did not extend itself across the city equally or consider the wealthier,
cosmopolitan locations in Cape Town where the migrants I worked with lived.

64 The population of Cape Town (3.497m, 2007) grew dramatically after the 1991 repeal of
the 1950 Group Areas Act, which restricted access to city residency by race: by 20.9%
since 2001, by 36.4% since 1996. Black populations show the largest increase in this
period (89.4%, CT 2008). The proportion of the city’s population living in informal housing
rose from 25% to 33% from 2002 and 2007 (CI 2009). Despite constitutional rights to
adequate housing and the provision of 2.5m RDP houses since 1994, large numbers of new
residents in cities have been unable to secure permanent homes (Saff 1998). Urban
growth has been greatest in informal settlements (townships), among populations over
half of whom live in dwelling deemed inadequate for health and nearly all of whom are
black (StatsSA 2008). These statistics help emphasize the centrality of housing in popular
imaginations of South Africa’s change – indexing the extent and limits of material
progress and wealth redistribution since democratization; representing ideals of
respectability, inclusivity, and empowerment. Fiona Ross captures these figurations in
her recent ethnography, where she shows how many South Africans grounded their hopes
for a new nation in the hope for a new house (Ross 2010).
themselves. They regulated the flow of visitors to their houses, for example, even if that made for hard moral moments in terms of turning away kinsmen or close friends needing help. Cautious practices of steadfast unfriendliness may help explain why the other households survived; I show some parts of these domestic aesthetics the other migrants cultivated in the ethnography that follows.

Third, finally, the household’s location in Muizenberg demonstrates the patchwork geography of wealth, tolerance, and risk that characterizes Cape Town, which migrants need to learn if they are to live safely. This geography changes very quickly. The emergence and decline of Muizenberg as a popular site for African migrants and refugees between the late 1990s and late 2000s is a well-known example in Cape Town, and four of the six migrant households I documented (as many others) were based once in Muizenberg (H1, H2, H3, H6). Yet only Joshua’s household remained there after 2007, despite the rise in housing costs and the growing occurrences of violence towards migrants, which ultimately rendered this once-preferred, once-friendly neighborhood unlivable. The household’s failure to respond to a change in neighborly mood accounts to a degree for its later misfortunes. (Other migrants I worked with coldly called households such as Joshua’s foolish “for holding out in Muizenberg too long”). As Muizenberg changed, others (H1, H2, H3) worked at searching for housing in expensive, mixed, and safer neighborhoods closer to the city center: in raggedy parts of central districts, such as Green Point and Sea Point (Map 5, Zone 1); on the margins of the Southern suburbs (Zone 2); in working-class neighborhoods around Bellville, Cape Town’s sub-city
wedged between the exiting highways (Zone 3). These new locations are ambiguous places in the city, now hard to classify using the apartheid-era racial zones most Capetonians still use to describe its parts. Most proved affordable and safe places. By mid-2007, all but one of the four households in Muizenberg had left the suburb (Map 6). By April 2008, none remained there (Map 7).

I worked with groups of migrants that knew about one another, but were not united by globally amicable relations. I later realized that households like Joshua’s were the subject of gossip by the other migrants I worked with. Others did not find it especially difficult to theorize why this household (H6) proved the least stable in my sample and the most inept at “riding the city”: its indiscreetness; its lax policy in allowing others entry; the household’s unwieldy size; its steadfastness in Muizenberg; the lack of common bonds; the age-gaps between household members; the continuities of work-life and home-life; that “the bosses lived with their men.” The other migrants, in other words, put forward a suggestion that it was not just the city that led to this particular household’s demise, but also the sloppy, loose, too-open behavior of its members, and, a subject they dwelt on frequently, this household’s composition. Furthermore, few ‘strong’ relations existed between members prior to their arrival in Cape Town, possibly shown in the ways household

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65 African migrants in Cape Town live alongside South Africans in all instances, but some populations cluster as national groups. Migrants from Zimbabwe and Mozambique, for example – the largest groups by nationality, most of whom are very poor and have lived in South Africa the least time – live in townships. I did not actively consider these populations in my study (see Introduction).

66 A future study might overlap large data-sets on migrant residency in Cape Town on dynamic maps of the city to document trends in migrant households’ movements – layering households by nationality, type, and length of time in South Africa, for example, on zones of the city elaborated in terms of neighborhood socio-economic compositions. I expect that the households in my study would match others in terms of indicating a household’s economic wellbeing and its potential for enduring the displacement of 2008. Correlations should not be over-read. The existing literature too strongly supposes that household location serves as a reliable proxy for migrants’ safety and for charting hotspots of intolerance.
affinities and friendships frequently oscillated. Membership was also not granted through rigorous selection procedures like those I had seen elsewhere. By contrast, in other households I studied, who lived with whom was a carefully thought-through decision taken by migrants in supervisory positions in the service of forming strong, durable units; this involved breaking up strong working ties, and keeping kinship ties intact. Ultimately, household members in Church Street were only thinly joined by single bonds of work compared to the migrants in the other households, where the men were bound together several times over, by nationality, kinship, or places of birth, for example (Map 3).

Resembling a fraternity house, especially through the dual work of domestic violence in arbitrating arguments and providing its entertainment, the household lacked internal safeguard mechanisms (as well as capital, contacts, and foresight) to ensure its long-term stability. Such mechanisms, other migrants put forward, might have held it together when external urban pressures increased to impossible levels.

Despite bearing similarities to many other migrant households in Cape Town, Joshua and Babatunde’s household was the least discreet and sturdy in my study. It was easy for its members to speak of, but it was practically, conceptually, and experientially simpler than all of the others. Perhaps it was too conventional in form and practice for the deadliness of urban life in South Africa that young migrants need to eschew with skill. It is to one of these unspeakable other households I now turn.
Map 5 Residential areas sought by migrant youths I worked with, circa 2007
Map 6 Movements of households, 2003-2008

Dates in Muizenberg

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>January 2005 to March 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>March 2006 to January 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>December 2004 to March 2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>February 2002 to January 2008</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

67 H2 moved ten times between 2005 and 2008 (Map 8), discussed later. Its position here denotes its place in April 2008, one month before the outbreak of violence against foreign nationals.
Map 7 Locations of households, April 2008
Four and a half men (H1)

The apartment of migrants in Lansdowne, where two pairs of brothers lived with one of the men’s very young cousins, was regarded as a model household by the members of their network (Network A). It proved a robust and capable entity in a city known for its high costs of living and inhospitality to African migrants. However, this household differed significantly to Joshua’s household (H6) and to households of migrants studied typically by scholars in South Africa. Its composition, location, and temperament query a concept of household in anthropology.

Gerard’s (A1) household was a “cobra-house,” the migrants’ commanders told me, because, “like a snake in the grass,” it was unseen, solitary, and self-sufficient. It had never once created problems for the network in terms of erupting as a site of unanticipated intensity. The occupants work hard to ensure that bills were paid on time. Relations with neighbors were positive to negligible. It also moved between properties intuitively and frequently, responding to, even anticipating the changing mood of the city (usually measured in terms of clusters of violence). The household, in fact, had moved twice within Cape Town since January 2005 – from Muizenberg to Athlone in April 2006; from Athlone to Lansdowne in December 2006 (Map 6). Before others (e.g. H6), these youths correctly sensed a shift of neighborhood dynamics in Muizenberg and got out before the troubles started, even if relocating northwards entailed renting a smaller, more expensive property.

The men further formed a household structure the migrants described as “strong” and “balanced.” Its two pairs of brothers – Gerard and John (A2), Robert and his brother (A17, A18) – complemented each other in age and relationship. The pairs had been assigned to live together by the commanders quite deliberately
because they were not natural friends and kinsmen, a pattern of hierarchy and
dualism replicated elsewhere (see below). Once the men showed me their
hometowns on a map and explained the tensions between DR Congo and Uganda
and how these tensions had impacted their families, the strains between the pairs
were remarkable.

This pattern was reflected in most of the households in this large network,
containing over seventy youths of similar ages. The commanders took time and care
to place their soldiers into small household groupings, each featuring competing
pairs of duos or trios of brothers or close friends. They did this to keep the migrants
from relaxing too much in their home and “losing focus.” Gerard’s household was
admired for not letting household dramas or jollities interfere with work. Mbamba
(A21) told me that Cape Town was too perilous to let the migrants decide for
themselves with whom they lived. Perhaps appropriating a classic African practice
of institutionalizing internal conflict in the service of maintaining group stability
and domestic order (Gluckman 1956), or keeping the network’s dual organization
moving, migrants’ households’ designs prevented tribal or national favoritisms from
poisoning the wider network. Mbamba organized biannual football tournaments for
the network to “glue” the migrants together. In practice, as he must have known,
the matches became forums to allow tensions within the network and between
household members to air. Migrants invariably formed teams based on national and
tribal bonds (Mitchell 1956).

Figure 5 depicts a segment of Gerard and John’s network. The migrants I
worked with closely in this network, a selection of its total members, are shown
inside the various households they were part of. It situates these migrants and
households along a time-axis to show how long they had lived in South Africa.
Newer households (e.g. H5) received closer supervision from the commanders of the network (A15, A21, A22) than those who had been in the network for longer (e.g. H1, H2). Figure 5 also shows kinship ties or strong friendships between the individual migrants (straight joining lines). It shows the households almost always comprised migrants from adversarial groups and regions (see Table 1). (Overlaying ties of friendship between the migrants onto Figure 5 would emphasize these conflicts; A1 and A2 were best friends with A12 and A13, for example).

Gerard, John, and the Ugandan brothers were productive at work and “good cobras” at home. The commanders they worked for used their grand management strategy to organize their large network into “strong” and “balanced” household units that fostered continuity between work and home-life. It appeared a method to control a large network comprising different youths from a broad, divided region of Central Africa.

But while the household was admired by members of the network – it was excelled only by Abelo’s household (H2) in terms of its mobility – the four-member domestic unit did not produce a happy household. In contrast to the playfulness and sense of solidarity I saw between migrant youths in Muizenberg, the Lansdowne apartment was a tense and cold place to visit. Its two bedrooms were distributed between each pair of brothers to form strictly separate living and sleeping spaces. Internal doors were always shut. Apart from essential discussions over pending bills or issues with neighbors, the two pairs of householders kept their interactions to a minimum. Brothers cooked and ate separately, used different furniture and food items, and split up the things in their shared bathroom into two collections (absurdly doubling-up on basic commodities such as hand soap and bleach). While their bedrooms were each stacked high and wide with possessions the brothers’ had
acquired in South Africa (suitcases, televisions, electronics, clothes), the living area was entirely bare. Domesticity had to be concealed from the commons of the household. Silence prevailed.

The household was silent partly because it was rare that all of the migrants would be present at any one point in time. This large network engaged in many entrepreneurial operations, including market-selling, couriering, guarding cars, caretaking properties, and some semi-formal work in haulage and removal services, and the youths were deployed on different assignments with different working schedules. I rarely observed joined activities within the household. I noticed too that when the migrants were not working, the youths would regularly avoid returning to the apartment if their brother was not there. If a girlfriend was unavailable, the men preferred to visit their brother or a migrant they were friends with at their place of work, or go play football or go to church. My apartment became a further place to hang out. I learned to make appointments before visiting the men in Lansdowne to save myself a wasted journey.

Gerard’s household was hostel-like, arranged by the commanders as a place of rest and privacy for working men. The householders created a solid boundary between the outside and inside urban world. The migrants prevented the dramas and tensions of the city seeping into the home and threatening its existence; calm and controlled, it proved an apt household model in this regard for migrants in Cape Town.

Yet, though the men learned to cooperate with all of the migrants at work, they seemed unable to put their personal divisions aside at home for the sake of a friendlier household. Working identities and relationships (and assets and profits) forged the household, and followed the migrants back inside; competing personal
and other identities and relationships then took precedent. Internal divisions, while giving the householders clarity of purpose, economic strength, and prospects for sustainability, augmented personal tensions and produced a negative atmosphere. Counter to other descriptions of migrant hostels (e.g. Ramphele 1993), furthermore, the household lacked the visual, material, and social reminders of a migrant’s ‘real’ home elsewhere. Indeed, ‘homely’ activities among the men, such as the sharing of meals, intimate moments with kinsmen and close friends, and remembrances of the past, took place on the streets.

I came to revisit expectations I held about migrants’ households as spaces of friendship, care, and common, mutual support when I found similarly tense ambiances in the others I knew in the network (H2, H5). I was naïve to have presumed otherwise: all households are based on divisions and tensions. Contrasts were striking, however, between how the migrants spoke of and behaved in their household and in other places they lived and visited. Something very specific about the household here was blocking and disorienting to domesticity. These were false ‘households’, with no reproductive, cyclical future. They were ‘households’ masquerading as households. The migrants were aware of their fallaciousness.

An incident occurred during my fieldwork with the migrants that threatened to destabilize Gerard’s “balanced” household. In October 2007, a younger Congolese migrant, Shabaan (A23), came to live with Gerard and John, his older relatives, and the brothers they lived with. After arriving, Shabaan was always present in the household. Because he was young and lacked papers, he rarely left the apartment. His arrival enacted an emotional scene of reunion I had heard about through my work with the lawyers, but had not seen first-hand until then – a scared child arriving alone at the train station having spent eight months with strangers
travelling the continent to find estranged relatives. John and Gerard were attending Gerard’s father’s funeral in Johannesburg when a letter arrived from John’s mother informing them of Shabaan’s itinerary. They had been unable to stop or delay Shabaan’s departure from the refugee camp in Goma where John’s relatives were living. Shabaan had not seen his cousins in five years.

Shabaan’s arrival posed a dilemma for John and others in the household. It activated an ancient ethic of supporting close kinsmen in need – a responsibility all of the men respected. At the same time, however, the men did not welcome the labor of hosting and supporting a minor who could not work in the network. It called on Gerard and John to negotiate diplomatically with their housemates, eventually resolving that Shabaan could stay if he slept in the kitchen and contributed by cleaning and hand-washing all of the men’s clothes. He silently tolerated the status of a domestic shadow.

Several arguments broke out between the pairs of brothers over a missing pair of trousers which Shabaan was assumed to have taken. One of Robert’s girlfriends complained the boy looked at her inappropriately. Even Gerard expressed concerns to me. Though he knew he must assist his kinsman, he talked privately about Shabaan intruding into his relationship with his closest cousin, who he considered his best friend and brother, and the unwanted attention to the apartment Shabaan could draw. He seemed to be recalling how the kinship of brothers has a right to enter the household – and real households must show hospitality to kinsmen – but here in only a qualified form. The four men kept Shabaan’s presence hidden for several months from others in their network.

Even after a year’s residency in the household, Shabaan never attained the status of ‘member’ (as the migrants’ defined this term). This came out during the
various household surveys I conducted among the migrants. The absence of shared activities in the household and the lack of the migrants’ continuous presence in the apartment further confounded my sustained attempts to plot or record activities there. The household’s “balanced” composition, the migrants’ ideas of who belonged there, and how both its occupancy and membership differed from who actually slept in the house on a regular schedule posed methodological challenges taken up below. The migrants’ broader dissatisfaction and discomfort with the space, idea, and temporality of household presents a portrait of male householding I explore in the final section.
The figure is a partial depiction of migrants in Network A. The x-axis denotes a household’s length of time in the network by yearly intervals (e.g. H5 was three years old in 2007). Close monitoring of the households declined in time. Links between the migrants in household denote kinship ties or extremely close friendships modeled on kinship ties. Households in Network A were small, closely-supervised units organized around sets of sibling bonds (or relations modeled on sibling bonds). The households hosted few guests and visitors. Admitting strangers was discouraged by their commanders. The households remained closed and well-guarded, even after May 2008 when the men accommodated displaced migrants.
Securing a place of safety, negotiating tenancy, and meeting rent each month, houses and housing were determined, easily-broached discussion topics. But while all of the migrants in Networks A and B spoke of their houses with ease and color – placing them precisely in space and time, charting their sojourns in South Africa through the places where they had lived, and using the efforts entailed in keeping a house to talk about life in the city – the men struggled to speak about the lives and relations their houses held.

Household composition and domestic life were hard topics to stay focused on in conversation. I wondered if it was simply not interesting enough for the men to talk about, as not good material for storytelling, or if the household was a site where they felt little happened. Coupled with their material sparseness, these households distinguish the men in my project from broader migrant populations.69

By calling these households unspeakable, I refer in this section to a series of methodological hurdles I faced in conducting this part of my research and thus to the challenges of presenting data on household compositions and practices in straightforward ways. Especially at the start, we lacked words to record and plot these households in terms of form and composition. In contrast to work relationships, where clear terms for people, roles, and activities existed, we had to forge our own ways to name, count, and distinguish between their various kinds of household members, occupants, and visitors. As all households members were “brothers” – all associated through work, but related in other ways too – we were

69 These types of households also appear infrequently in the literature on migrants in South Africa, perhaps because they might not been seen to be ‘households’ at all. I rather suspect their absence in the scholarship is more from an avoidance of research on the migrants my project examines (see Introduction).
often left with only personal names to use. I needed a temperament for improvisation as patterns and categories emerged.

Each migrant could tell me about the house in which he lived, for example, though I could not predict exactly where he stayed or with whom – given most networks’ dispersals across the city, the men did not necessarily live close to their places of work and they often moved frequently. But follow-up questions usually called for clarification or produced lists of persons that did not match who I saw in the houses on a regular basis. Even after I became involved in household life, attuned to their cadences, I was never sure who would be there during a visit.

The compositions of these households were not overwhelmingly unstable or fluid, though most changed, expanded, or divided up slightly over time. Rather, household presence alternated from being packed with traffics of people flowing through, staying over, and moving on to almost total emptiness and bouts of prolonged silence. The men worked irregular hours and often in rotations, coming back to sleep at different times of the day or week. There were few regularized householding activities here I could attend, such as meals. Eating tended to be an antisocial domestic activity, in fact. Meals were prepared and consumed privately, in shifts or pacts.
Household censuses help illustrate the major features of these households. These are presented in the four following tables (Tables 4, 5, 6, 7).\(^7\) A collection is included because no single method could hold all of the attributes of the households I considered to be important. For example, there were often great differences between the number of persons present in the houses and household membership. Joshua’s household (H6) was continuously full of migrants, their girlfriends and friends. The tables show the number of persons present (e.g. 22 at T3) was always higher than its reported membership (12). Table 4 serves this household well because it captures the volume of visitors to the Muizenberg house; this table was also the only tool that could capture the constant company of the many different women traversing the migrants’ household.

Standard surveys thus ended up omitting persons and relationships, frustratingly always giving more emphasis to what young male migrants’ households lack.

\(^7\) Of 68 close informants who are members of the networks I worked with, 59 lived in rented houses or apartments with other young male migrants, 1 lived alone (A21), and 8 lived in households comprising family units. The 8 family units connect to conventional notions of the household as organized by vertical genealogical ties denoting parentage and generational difference, but are not considered here. Of them, 4 lived in extended family units comprising men, women, and children related by family ties, including at least one relative in a parental or grandparental position in relation to the youth (C4, C6, C8, C11), 2 lived as appendages of a relative’s family (A11, C10), and 2 headed their own households, living with a wife, one or more of his own children, and others – with two younger sisters (A10); with a cousin and his wife and daughter (A14). I visited migrants in their homes, met those they lived with, and listened for remarks on houses and households throughout my fieldwork. Work, residency, and patterns of association were axes I used to map relationships. I returned from South Africa with systematized sets of data on six migrant houses and households. Household censuses were conducted over the first three days of each month. Data is presented at four time-intervals between August 2007 and May 2008 (T1 to T4). On May 22, 2008, anti-immigrant violence broke out in Cape Town, which led directly and indirectly to the displacement, relocation, and reconstitution of five of the households; H3 and H6 dissolved in the aftermath of the violence. I conducted a final census (T5) at the start of December 2008 – the official ‘end’ of the crisis – and include T5 data here, but extensive description is required for this and for the changes to the surviving households (H1, H2, H4, H5). This is touched on in the next chapter.
The surveys show other kinds of discrepancies between occupancy, membership, and presence in the other households (H1, H2, H5). As described above, for instance, Shabaan (A23) was never elevated to the status of a household member in Gerard and John’s household (H1), despite living in the household for over a year. The tables show how membership was usually greater than physical presence, except after the anti-immigrant violence in May 2008, following which two households (H1, H5) became refuges for other migrants. Because the migrants worked around the clock, at different times of day and night, as well as noting nocturnal sleeping patterns, I started also recording physical presence at particular points in time.

Even less tidy correlations between membership and occupancy come out of data on the other two households (H3, H4). The tables show that though membership was agreed on in every case – household members were those the migrants believed had permission or legitimacy to be there from making financial contributions to property’s upkeep – several migrants who belonged in these two households would be absent for long periods of time and slept elsewhere. The number of migrants present in Household 4 (Network B, below) differs significantly from membership. While fairly constant in number for nine months in terms of membership (T1, T2, T3), presence varied in terms of individuals over time because these migrants reassigned themselves frequently between the network’s three houses, all located next to each other in Mowbray.

Safety and discretion were important matters to the migrants – numerous migrants kept their addresses from me for months after they had given me details of their work. Most implemented tight security procedures concerning who could be allowed to enter their households, particularly males from outside of their networks.
I thus found it useful to document other persons who stayed in the houses and who
visited the households overnight on a regular basis.

In time, I also started distinguishing between the numbers of visitors each
household received and the types of visitors; other members of their networks may
stay overnight during the week if they worked nearby. I devised two further
descriptive categories of household members. I considered permanent members to
be those who resided there on a continuous basis (the house is their sole residency,
where they kept property and slept for all or most of the time), thus recording
Shabaan (A23, T3) a permanent member. I also listed temporary members of
households as persons who moved into the house during the month (typically
individuals in the process of looking for a house and newly-arrived migrants). I did
not codify visitors who were not members of the networks. The men asked me not to
study their girlfriends.

Taken together, the surveys provide a fuller impression of the households’
compositions and dynamics (Table 7). They show how houses were inhabited as
containers or vessels for an entire network’s operations, cooperative places of rest in
working weeks or months. Household size swelled at the times they were located in
buildings in convenient places. One reason why the migrants’ households were hard
to talk about, therefore, was because they were obviously non-private spaces.

Migrants’ households were not havens divorced from the risks and passions
of city life or the energies and responsibilities of working relations; they were not
concealed retreats that might allow marginal actors means to cultivate a ‘divided
self’ between public and private (Day 2007). For smaller households, Abelo’s
household particularly (H2), almost no male outsiders were allowed to stay
overnight.
Survey instruments go some way in illustrating the complex compositions of the migrants’ households, but they leave out details I consider important. They omit how certain migrants and others were always present in the household but were not considered members, and how others were never present but widely agreed on as belonging there. They further make clear how the young migrants’ households lacked components classically associated with households and domestic units: intergenerational divisions; parent-child ties; women; elders; vertical lines of hierarchy and dependence assumed to organize domestic relatedness. In contrast to how working relations were defined and organized clearly, household relations were many things together and harder to articulate. Most households comprised men of similar ages joined by lateral relations that were multiply-drawn simultaneously. They lacked persons, relations, and familiar kinds of hierarchy, even though they

71 Household membership proved a straightforward question in our discussions, but they excluded the various guests, visitors, and temporary residents to the households. By looking at numbers and then categories of persons, we start to learn how migrant households are entered, left, and used as physical spaces, what kinds of containers households are, and what notions of householder circulate. Insights into migrants’ understanding and practices of belonging and hospitality can be gauged by considering the distinctions between different kinds of residents and reasons why some residents were considered legitimate household members over others. Migrants may present an alternative model of householding through membership and hospitality that departs from the image of household in the literature on migrants and refugees, where the household, even in the context of the refugee camp, is still modeled on family membership. In exploring migrants’ understandings of hospitality and membership, I learned how torn migrants were between the kinds of households they inhabited in Cape Town (in which they were often frightened or prevented from accommodating strangers and visitors) and an ideal household remembered from childhood, which they missed, desired, and considered appropriate. Further, follow-up questions complicated more than clarified. We might have ascertained six household members at a moment in time, for example, but it was hard to find words for others who stayed and visited (“Do you mean my brothers on the lease? Or the people who Home Affairs thinks live here?”). I established some degree of comfort and respect by this point in my project, trusted that I would not take such data forward. The names listed on leases, for example, did not reveal much about who lived there – migrants’ houses were often leased by a patron on their behalf (H4), or by a member who was considered to have the clearest kind of legal status in the country (H1, H2, H5). Migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees are required to lodge their addresses with the Department of Home Affairs, though I knew no migrants whose addresses matched up.
were also saturated by persons, relations, and confusing surfeits of relatedness. In some instances, householders were too closely and too multiply related. It raised questions for me about how the households operated.
**Table 4 Household census, Physical presence**

Question: Who was present in the house at 00h00 last night?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>3♂</td>
<td>4♂ 2♀</td>
<td>1♂</td>
<td>3♂ 2♀</td>
<td>14♂ 26♀ 3c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>2♂ 1♀</td>
<td>2♂ 1♀</td>
<td>3♂ 1♀</td>
<td>2♂</td>
<td>6♂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>4♂ 3♀</td>
<td>6♂ 3♀</td>
<td>7♂ 4♀</td>
<td>8♂ 3♀</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>5♂ 2♀</td>
<td>12♂ 3♀</td>
<td>12♂ 4♀</td>
<td>9♂ 3♀</td>
<td>27♂ 10♀</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>3♂</td>
<td>4♂</td>
<td>4♂ 1♀</td>
<td>6♂</td>
<td>16♂ 7♀ 1c</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>13♂ 4♀</td>
<td>12♂ 5♀</td>
<td>15♂ 7♀</td>
<td>11♂ 6♀</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Key: ♂ male, ♀ female, c child. ‘Who slept in the house last night?’ proved a confusing question as night-work was common and sleeping patterns varied and were irregular. Overnight presence in H1, H2, and H4, for example, is significantly lower than in Table 3.3 as work patterns were structured in sequence (to share a job or a bed). Some householders also spent days out of the house at a time due to work locations. The table captures the presence of women in the houses.
Table 5 Household census, Membership

Question asked to all in present in the household as part of a group discussion: Who is a member of the household?73

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Household</th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
<th>T4</th>
<th>T5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>H1</th>
<th>A1 A2 A16 A17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>A3 A4 A12 A13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>C1 C2 C3 C5 C7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>B1 B2 B8 B9 B13 B14 B15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>A5 A6 A7 A8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>D1 D2 D3 D4 D5 D6 D7 D9 D10 D11 D12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

73 There were few disagreements on the definition of membership: the men named other men they considered to belong in the house, which usually denoted those making financial contributions to its upkeep. The data here, however, under presents the number of persons physically present. A young cousin of two men in H1 (A23) had lived in the house since January 2007, but was not considered a member. The data also exaggerates the presence of members who often sleep elsewhere to maintain employment.
The table records two types of household members (P and T) and the recurring visitors (V) using the criteria below. Data refers to occupancy in the previous month. All are ♂ unless noted otherwise.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
<th>T4</th>
<th>T5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H1</td>
<td>4P 3V (3♀)</td>
<td>4P 1T 5V (5♀)</td>
<td>5P 4V (3♀)</td>
<td>5P 4V (2♀)</td>
<td>5P 21T (15♀, 3c)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>24V (5♀)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2</td>
<td>4P 1V (1♀)</td>
<td>4P 3V (3♀)</td>
<td>4P 1T 12V (6♀)</td>
<td>4P 9V (7♀)</td>
<td>4P 2T 5V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H3</td>
<td>4P 3T 6V (3♀)</td>
<td>5P 3T 6V (2♀)</td>
<td>6P 2T (2♀) 4V (2♀)</td>
<td>6P 3T (1♀) 8V (4♀)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H4</td>
<td>7P 1T 11V (5♀)</td>
<td>10P 10V (5♀)</td>
<td>10P 16V (6♀)</td>
<td>5P 26V (12♀)</td>
<td>7P 25T (5♀) 23V (6♀)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H5</td>
<td>4P 2T 3V</td>
<td>4P 2T 2V</td>
<td>5P 4T (1♀) 1V</td>
<td>5P 2T 1V (1♀)</td>
<td>5P 18T (10♀, 1c)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>17V (8♀)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H6</td>
<td>11P 3T (2♀) 24V (21♀)</td>
<td>11P 4T (3♀) 25V (20♀)</td>
<td>12P 6T (6♀) 22V (18♀)</td>
<td>12P 1T (1♀) 27V (24♀)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

74 P: Permanent members resided in the house on a continuous basis during the previous month (the house is their sole residency, where they keep property, where they slept for all or most of the time). Thus, A23 in H1 is a P after T3. T: Temporary members moved into the house during the previous month and do not have another house in Cape Town. Ts were typically individuals in the process of looking for a house: newly-arrived migrants; individuals moving house following an eviction or change of employment (both frequent scenarios). Many individuals claimed to be living in houses temporarily, but stayed there for a long time (especially in H4). Ts become Ps, in my analysis, after a month of continuous residency in the house. V: Visitors are individuals who have spent more than two nights in the house per month, but do not reside there on a permanent basis. Vs include girlfriends, friends, and work colleagues. In January 2008, for example, H2 moved to an apartment close to a major transport hub and thus accommodated many overnight visitors.
### Table 7 Household census, Overview

Tables 4, 5, 6 overlaid, with placement of close informants (A1 to D12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T1</th>
<th>T2</th>
<th>T3</th>
<th>T4</th>
<th>T5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| H1| **Members:** 4 A1 A2 A16 A17  
Present: 3♂ 2♀  
inc. A1 A17 A23  
Occupancy: 4P, 3V (3♀)  
inc. A23 (T) | **Members:** 4 A1 A2 A16 A17  
Present: 1♂  
inc. A23  
Occupancy: 5P, 4V (3♀)  
inc. A20 (V) A23 (P) | **Members:** 4 A1 A2 A16 A17  
Present: 3♂ 2♀  
inc. A1 A16 A23  
Occupancy: 5P, 4V (2♀)  
inc. A20 (V) A23 (P) | **Members:** 4 A1 A2 A16 A17  
Present: 1♂  
inc. A1 A17 A23  
Occupancy: 4P, 1T, 5V (5♀)  
inc. A23 (V) | **Members:** 4 A1 A2 A16 A17  
Present: 1♂  
inc. A1 A17 A23  
Occupancy: 4P, 3V (3♀)  
inc. A20 (V) A23 (P) |
| H2| **Members:** 4 A3 A4 A12 A13  
Present: 2♂ 1♀  
inc. A3 A13  
Occupancy: 4P, 1V (1♀) | **Members:** 4 A3 A4 A12 A13  
Present: 3♂ 1♀  
inc. A3 A12 A20  
Occupancy: 4P, 3V (3♀) | **Members:** 4 A3 A4 A12 A13  
Present: 2♂  
inc. A3 A12  
Occupancy: 4P, 9V (7♀)  
inc. A10 (V) A18 (V) A20 (T) A24 (V) A25 (V) | **Members:** 4 A3 A4 A12 A13  
Present: 2♂  
inc. A3 A12  
Occupancy: 4P, 1V (1♀) | **Members:** 4 A3 A4 A12 A13  
Present: 2♂  
inc. A3 A12 A18  
Occupancy: 4P, 2T, 5V (4♀)  
inc. A14 (T) A18 (T) A21 (T) A24 (V) A25 (V) |
| H3| **Members:** 4 C1 C2 C3 C5  
Present: 4♂ 3♀  
inc. C1 C2 C3 C5 C7  
Occupancy: 4P, 3T, 6V (3♀)  
inc. C7 (T) | **Members:** 5 C1 C2 C3 C5 C7  
Present: 6♂ 3♀  
inc. C1 C2 C3 C5 C7 C9  
Occupancy: 5P, 3T, 6V (2♀)  
inc. C9 (T) C11 (V) | **Members:** 6 C1 C2 C3 C5 C7 C9  
Present: 7♂ 4♀  
inc. C1 C2 C3 C5 C7 C9  
Occupancy: 6P, 2T (2♀), 4V (2♀) | **Members:** 6 C1 C2 C3 C5 C7 C9  
Present: 8♂ 3♀  
inc. C1 C2 C3 C5 C7 C9  
Occupancy: 6P, 3T (1♀), 8V (4♀) |  |
| H4   | Members: 7  
|      | B1 B2 B8 B9 B13 B14 B15  
|      | Present: 5♂ 2♀  
|      | inc. B1 B3 B4 B5 B11  
|      | Occupancy: 7P, 1T, 11V (5♀)  
|      | inc. B3 (V) B4 (V) B5 (V) B6 (V) B7 (V) B10 (T) B11 (V)  
| Members: 9  
| B1 B2 B3 B5 B10 B11 B13 B14 B15  
| Present: 12♂ 3♀  
| inc. B1 B2 B3 B4 B5 B8 B9 B11  
| Occupancy: 10P, 10V (5♀)  
| inc. B4 (V) B6 (V) B7 (V) B8 (V) B9 (V) B12 (V) B16 (V) B17 (V) B18 (V) B19 (V) B20 (V)  
| Members: 10  
| B1 B2 B5 B8 B9 B10 B11 B13 B14 B15  
| Present: 12♂ 4♀  
| inc. B1 B2 B3 B4 B5 B8 B9 B11  
| Occupancy: 10P, 16V (6♀) inc. B3 (V) B4 (V) B6 (V) B7 (V) B8 (V) B9 (V) B10 (V) B11 (V) B12 (V) B13 (V) B14 (V) B15 (V) B16 (V) B17 (V) B18 (V) B19 (V) B20 (V)  
| Members: 4  
| B1 B2 B19 B20  
| Present: 9♂ 3♀  
| inc. B1 B2 B3 B4  
| Occupancy: 5P, 26V (12♀)  
| inc. B3 (V) B4 (V) B6 (V) B7 (V) B8 (V) B9 (V) B10 (V) B11 (V) B12 (V) B13 (V) B14 (V) B15 (V) B16 (V) B17 (P) B18 (V)  
| Members: 7  
| B1 B2 B3 B10 B13 B14 B15  
| Present: 27♂ 10♀  
| inc. B1 B2 B3 B4 B5 B9 B19  
| inc. B4 (T) B5 (T) B8 (T) B9 (T) B17 (T) B18 (T) B19 (T) B20 (T)  
| H5   | Members: 4  
| A5 A6 A7 A8  
| Present: 3♂  
| A5 A6 A8  
| Occupancy: 4P, 2T, 3V  
| Members: 4  
| A5 A6 A7 A8  
| Present: 4♂  
| A6 A7 A8 A9  
| Occupancy: 4P, 2T, 2V inc. A9 (T)  
| Members: 5  
| A5 A6 A7 A8 A9  
| Present: 4♂ 1♀  
| inc. A5 A7 A8 A9  
| Occupancy: 5P, 4T (1♀), 1V  
| Members: 5  
| A5 A6 A7 A8 A9  
| Present: 6♂  
| inc. A5 A6 A7 A8 A9  
| Occupancy: 5P, 2T, 1V (1♀)  
| Members: 5  
| A5 A6 A7 A8 A9  
| Present: 16♂ 7♀ 1c  
| Occupancy: 5P, 18T (10♀, 1c), 17V (8♀) inc. A24 (T) A25 (T) D12 (T)  
| H6   | Members: 11  
| D1 D2 D3 D4 D5 D6 D7 D9 D10 D11 D12  
| Present: 13♂ 4♀  
| inc. D1 D2 D5 D6 D7 D8 D9  
| Occupancy: 11P, 3T (2♀), 24V (21♀) inc. D8 (V)  
| Members: 11  
| D1 D2 D3 D4 D5 D6 D7 D9 D10 D11 D12  
| Present: 12♂ 5♀  
| inc. D1 D2 D3 D8 D9 D10 D11  
| Occupancy: 11P, 4T (3♀), 25V (20♀) inc. D8 (T)  
| Members: 12  
| D1 D2 D3 D4 D5 D6 D7 D8 D9 D10 D11 D12  
| Present: 15♂ 7♀  
| inc. D1 D2 D3 D4 D5 D6 D7 D8 D9 D10 D11 D12  
| Occupancy: 12P, 6T (6♀), 22V (18♀)  
| Members: 12  
| D1 D2 D3 D4 D5 D6 D7 D8 D9 D10 D11 D12  
| Present: 11♂ 6♀  
| inc. D1 D2 D3 D4 D5 D6 D7 D11 D12  
| Occupancy: 12P, 1T (1♀), 27V (24♀)  
| Members: 7  
| B1 B2 B3 B10 B13 B14 B15  
| Present: 27♂ 10♀  
| inc. B1 B2 B3 B4 B5 B9 B19  
| inc. B4 (T) B5 (T) B8 (T) B9 (T) B17 (T) B18 (T) B19 (T) B20 (T)
Households in suitcases (H2, H5)

The fastidiousness and self-discipline of Network A’s selling and security operations crossed over into the migrants’ domestic lives: their formations, routines, and thriftiness. These small, uniform, corporate, and serious households were devised and populated under Mbamba’s (A21) direction. Newly inducted migrants left the barracks in Senator Park to be placed in their own households. As well as membership, Mbamba negotiated a first property on a new household’s behalf, stepped in to cover initial expenses, and called by frequently and unannounced to ensure security measures had been followed, mostly meaning the houses were clean, unapproved guests were not visiting, and valuables were hidden. Men received guidance on minute aspects of their domesticity. Such monitoring was not out of care, Mbamba lectured. Rather, he held the responsibility of assuring the commanders (A15, A22) that the migrants were always alert (though his concern for a particular domestic composition, aesthetic, and affect could be considered pastoral). Spontaneous household inspections declined in time (Figure 5). The households lacked corporate autonomy.

The most seriously taken aspect of the network’s householding concerned house composition, a task Mbamba explained to me slightly differently each time. Recognizing the stresses their men faced at work and the temptations of the city, all of which, Mbamba said, could lead to “loneliness, anger, silliness, greed, and evildoings,” he took efforts to engineer household units that functioned efficiently and quietly. “Strong houses makes for strong soldiers,” he said. As shown for Gerard’s household (H1), Mbamba considered stable households to be those formed around tensions. There needed to be a degree of distrust and hate in the houses, he once explained. Not too much, but enough to ensure the men’s households did not
“turn wild.” Even when households comprised men from similar countries, they were often from different ethnic, religious, or language groups.

But the network also saw value and strength in family relationships – appropriate only for the home, I was told repeatedly, not for the streets. The commanders preferred recruiting fresh migrants who had come to South Africa as pairs or trios, rather than loose, single migrants. Speaking of these kinds of bonds as sacrosanct and revered in the specific realm of the domestic (“God’s bonds”), siblingships and family bonds were kept intact in forming households. Most households I met in the network thus comprised one or more close set of family ties.

At the core of Abelo’s household (H2), for example, were two pairs of brothers – two brothers from Kibuye and two twins from central Katanga. Abelo (A3) and Gael (A4) were Tutsi refugees from Rwanda who matured in South Kivu and joined a fringe militia of Kabila’s AFDL. Luba men, Jean-Marc (A12) and Donat (A13) stood outside of the conflict that Abelo and Gael matured through, but they were not considered their natural allies either. The household thus comprised a complementary set of dyadic bonds that provided the household with a strong structure. These close kin ties were respected within the household and by the network as a whole, though they held little significance at work. The commanders viewed sets of central kin ties as building blocks to appropriate in forming households – kinship they could collate – but only as pairs held in tense balance, in which neither band of brothers could “outmaneuver the other.” Kinship seemed to make good households, but only in moderation. Kinship was spoken of in quantitative terms. I found this point interesting: too much kinship could turn the households into domestic units the commanders of the network could not govern.
There were obvious reasons for discouraging households to host visitors, especially men outside of the network. Migrant households must stay camouflaged in the city to ensure safety and stability, “secrets needed protecting,” and domesticity had to be disciplined to promote successful cooperation on the streets. Hospitality was tightly controlled and conditioned; clear lengths of stay were determined in advance. Situations where membership changed were delicately negotiated to avoid disruptions.

However, one household (H5) gained a new member during my fieldwork. In October 2007, Michael (A5) was instructed to accommodate an older migrant. Eko (A9) was a veteran of the network – he arrived in South Africa with Mbamba in 2001 – but left in 2005 to find his family members in Rwanda and Uganda for reasons he described to me as “spiritual healing.” The commanders determined H5 most suitable for Eko to join.

Eko’s assignment to the household was a crucial event for the younger men already living together. Based out in Bellville, the household was not especially easy for Mbamba and the commanders to supervise. “It’s our outpost,” Mbamba explained. Though the men worked with the others in the network in the center of Cape Town, the commanders felt it was wise to base several households in this outer suburb, which housed significant migrant populations. Eko was considered an appropriate additional member here for his impressive work skills and “muscle.” The decision was delivered to the household by Mbamba with some weeks’ notice. The existing members had to decide how to rearrange the house for a new, unrelated, and more senior member. They were aware that Eko had history with the network’s leadership. Michael and Michel (A6) made the lounge their sleeping
room to give Eko a bedroom, considering it appropriate for an older man to have more privacy.

Eko’s arrival was also colored by ominous stories the men had heard about him. Eko’s younger brother had died in Cape Town in 2004 in a stabbing, after which he received a communiqué from his uncles reprimanding him for the death. It reopened a silence with his family that had first started when Eko and his brother enlisted as young Interahamwe in 1993. After the genocide, the brothers fled to Kivu and joined RDR and then AFDL forces, before traveling to Kisangi and eventually South Africa. Most of Eko’s family sought safety as refugees in Uganda. The sudden line of communication from elder kinsmen after his brother’s death proved immensely distressing and Eko was admitted to hospital for hearing voices. He returned to Rwanda to find his family and carry home his brother’s remains.

Eko was a hard worker, but he was thuggish, angry, and drank heavily. His admission to the household shows how loyalty and working value may sometimes surpass kinship as the basis for households.

Strong, small households in Network A, furthermore, moved in space and time. Abelo’s household (H2) was liked by the network for its stability, but also for its initiative and mobility. Its four members had lived together since March 2005. Their first house was close to Mbamba’s in Mowbray, a small flat above Main Road (Map 8, House 1), which made it possible for Mbamba to monitor the men as they found their feet and settled into household life together. Migrants had a year to find a new house for themselves after Mbamba’s initial assistance. Donat found a place for the household in Sea Point in less than six months (House 2), which earned the householders rewards and praise. Contrary to movement being considered a sign of weakness or misfortune – the case for other households, such as Joshua and
Babatunde’s – households that relocated by themselves were congratulated by the commanders: it demonstrated the men were building contacts and identifying opportunities. Abelo’s household moved ten times between March 2005 and April 2008. The household even learned to profit from moving by agreeing to protect houses as live-in security guards when owners were away (Houses 3 and 5) or to stay in properties under development (Houses 7, 8, 9; House 9 was a restaurant undergoing renovation). The household returned to Mowbray between January and April 2008 (House 10), where it hosted other migrants in the network as overnight guests given Mowbray’s closeness to transport routes. Other times, including after its final move to Ottery in April 2008 (House 11), the household received few visitors. Since 2007, Abelo and Gael have not unpacked their suitcases.

Abelo accorded the household’s opportunistic mobility and relative absence of neighborly problems to its composition. The brothers’ similar ages and length of time in the city and network prevented either pair claiming superior status at work and internalizing the tension at home. “Brothers [furthermore] think like one man,” Abelo said. “Gael looks [out] for me and I look for him. So our house is balanced out.” By balanced, I took Abelo to mean the pairing of relationships between the set of brothers, which safeguarded the household from internal disputes and ensured its collective wellbeing did not give out to self-interest. The pairs did not need to get along as friends (and they didn’t seem to), but arguments would be futile as brothers took the same side and no one pair could win. Fast decisions could be made without all members needing to be there. Despite their insignificance at work, he spoke of kin relations playing a crucial role in the smooth functioning of households.
Map 8 Movements of Household 2, 2005-2008

1. Mowbray: March 2005 to September 2005
2. Sea Point: September 2005 to December 2005
4. Ottery: January 2006 to March 2006
5. Muizenberg: March 2006 to January 2007
7. Sea Point: March 2007 to October 2007
10. Mowbray: January 2008 to April 2008
11. Ottery: April 2008 –
Acephalous households (H4)

A final model of household, briefly, came from Brad Pitt’s network (Network B). These households were less tense, empty, and eventless than Gerard’s, Abelo’s and Michael’s, more organized and discreet than Joshua’s.

The twenty men in this network rented three apartments very near to each other in Mowbray. The men spread themselves between these three, linked apartments. Survey data show the households to be busy places; most migrants in the network slept at least once in all three of their houses during a typical month. Survey data also show a heavy traffic of women across the network’s households.

Figure 6 attempts to depict the migrants’ householding arrangements between their properties. The diagram tries to show its vacillating motions; this is a dynamic system of householding. What I found most interesting here was the fluidity between house and household. One or more core sets of migrants lived in each household on a permanent basis. Other migrants, individually or in pairs or threes, moved between them. Most of the migrants stored their personal possessions in more than one house. In Brad Pitt and Jacky’s house (H4), three packs of migrants stayed in the household for various periods of time. However, two of them also stayed for various periods of time in other households the network held. In early 2008, five of the migrants attempted to set up their own household, also in Mowbray. Few men from outside the network stayed overnight or visited. Impermeable boundaries between the streets and household were kept up.

Despite the immovability of some members from particular properties, each household – or the conglomerate of households – lacked a clear head or heads. Compared with their tight organizational structure at work, in which Brad Pitt and Wesley Snipes assumed clear supervisory roles (Chapter 2), households here were
not discernibly managed by an individual or pair of migrants. They were not "balanced" by matching pairs or packs of migrants. Brad Pitt took a far less prominent role in the household than he did at work. I would not have otherwise known he held one of the more powerful positions among the men in the network by his quiet persona in the apartment.

The migrants' work provided a basis for household conversations and their occasional joined celebratory events. Work associations held some dominance in the household. But, as with other robust, dynamic migrant households I worked with, which survived as economic and domestic entities in the face of harsh external pressures, other relations in these households were more frequently foregrounded. Siblingship mattered more in the everyday of the household than at work, age distinctions held credence over issues like room-selection and property ownership, and competition over girlfriends still posed problems. As shown in the previous chapter, the members of this network were relatively similar in terms of age and origins.
Figure 6 Cape Town branch of Network B (inc. H4)75

Shaded circles represent the permanent and longest-term members of the households. There was continuous movement of other migrants between the households. B3, B5, B13, B14 and B15 attempted to establish a fourth household in early 2008, but it dissolved in May 2008.

75
Houses without memory

In the previous chapter, by studying one network's work in detail, I showed how the migrants' effectiveness as economic actors in Cape Town rests on their use of a repertoire of relational practices, which accords them a degree of notoriety in the city and keeps them safe. Maintaining a home in Cape Town successfully relies on comparably tight and collective efforts: reading the city with similar diligence and foresight; keeping camouflaged; minimizing visual and personal distractions; implementing systems that controlled the numbers and types of visitors to their homes; learning how not to welcome in others. Anthropology may have missed out on young people's capacities as homeowners and homemakers in similar ways to how they have often under-recognized their importance as economic actors. As with their work, the young migrants survive together as renters and residents because of the dynamism and relational strength of the networks they are part of. These arrangements distinguish the youths I worked with from most other migrants and refugees in Cape Town, for whom finding and keeping a place to live in the city is well-documented as a bleak, challenging, and often almost impossible labor.

Houses and households proved nodal sites in my fieldwork. They were places to chart intersections of relationships and resources among the migrants that constitute the networks they inhabit South Africa through. They offered the youths moments of privacy in an urban world within which they face continuous scrutiny.

But while efforts entailed in finding a house in Cape Town affected all aspects of the migrants' home lives, households desperately lacked the spoken dramas of the street and the city, which allowed for chatter and put us at ease. In contrast to other fieldsites, I found far deeper tension and awkwardness inside their houses: argument; too much silence; empty communal spaces and cramped
bedrooms that contravened their outward expressions of brotherliness; closed locked rooms that spoke of theft and distrust.

Anthropologists have long privileged the household as an object of analysis. The household helps compliment or downplay the primacy of kinship as a system and language of analysis in the study of domestic spaces, systems, and cycles (Fortes 1962; Yanagisako 1979). Household studies also emphasize how political, economic, and social forces always permeate domestic experiences, thus challenging assumptions of the house as a private, separate space might say something about the way domesticity is not a singular experience, but plural (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Guyer 1981; Hansen 1992). Indeed, the commanders here “policed” the households in the service of the economy of the network, in ways parallel to Jacques Donzelot discusses the “policing” of families by the state, “not understood in the limiting, repressive sense we give the term today, but according to a much broader meaning that encompassed all the methods for developing the quality of the population and the strength of the nation” (Donzelot 1979:6-7). We see the migrants’ households policed intensely in terms of security protocols, aesthetics, and composition.

Despite the household’s significance in the study of domesticity, by examining how the migrant networks divided and congealed as units, it emerged as an evasive and dangerous object of analysis and discussion. It was not always clear to see what or who constituted them. Lacking generational differences, for example, which might have placed their members in categories of seniority, I was not always sure which persons or relationships to best start describing and comparing these households from. Rather, it appeared that, as well as the surfeits of persons and relationships, households comprised multiple domesticities among the householders,
multiple codes of householding, and the presence of multiple memories of houses. The awkwardness of the men’s houses reminds us, as Valeria Procupez has argued, that the domestic “does not refer to a specific space (the home), or to a set of relations (marriage, kinship, household), or even to a kind of relation (of care, sustenance, nurturing), but rather to... combinations of these ensembles that infuse places and relations with a domestic quality” (Procupez 2008:344).

The migrants challenge assumptions in the literature by suggesting that their household compositions were so stable precisely because they lacked conventional household features, persons, and relational centers, because, in fact, they were so un-household-like. In fact, they were largely composed and build around the tensions that are supposed to be mitigated by domesticity and household relations, which is seems to provide a negative portrait of image of what anthropologists often expect to find in households, and continually document.

At work, migrants could name and clearly grasp their relations with each other. In the household, new relations specific to the household emerged and these appeared to be disruptive, interruptive. This, I claim, made migrants’ households uncomfortable to study. Households are familiar spaces to the young men, of course, commanding particular ways to act and interact appropriately, but the youths did not seem able to inhabit their households in personally or mutually comfortable ways – to “make kinship,” as Carsten suggests. Tensions simmer in households silently, augmenting rigidities and silence. A militarized logic of soldering appropriate for the networks at work appears to give way to the more dominant and destabilizing logic of kinship in the household, even though it is precisely these tensions that are played on by the commanders, for whom, setting up households serves the purpose of maintaining work relations and corporate structures. This
chapter has challenged an image of the household in anthropology as a neutral, graspable object that works in coordination with the state in the reproduction of sociable citizens.

The young male households can be described too easily in terms of what they lack: women; age-differences and elders; conversation; internal centers and boundaries; parent-child ties; conjugal bonds; autonomy. But these households also lacked the activities, objects, and heirlooms considered fodder for homeliness and household memory-making (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Seemingly barren of particular persons and things, these households are not the “houses of memory” Janet Carsten describes (Carsten 2004). They rather remind the men of absences, which are being knowingly played on for a specific purpose by their commanders. These are houses without their own memories. Kinship relations still saturate migrant households in Cape Town, but they are of a kinship that is missing and from elsewhere, and which the networks cannot allow the migrants to live in Cape Town.

Households are thus sites that have become places that remind the migrants of their immobility in one register clearly, but they must also be reminded of the opposite as well, or their lack of fixity. The migrants’ tense co-residency here is indexing something critical and disturbing within the men’s lives and relationships. It may, in fact, be indexing the onslaught and erasure of the family rather than a phase in the family cycle for the sake of kinship.

Households bring back painful memories of the past; they are filled with memories of the families and others they miss. They remind the migrants of their status as exiles and as kinsmen with no family. Householding seems to pervert a familiar cultural idiom of the ‘men’s house’ – a place of apprenticeship between
childhood and adulthood. Unlike the violent ‘homes’ of the initiating age-set, however, these are similarly impermanent households designed for temporary stays that have wrongly since become uncomfortably indefinite. Places of men-in-the-making, these households in Cape Town are out of time and without futures. The household clearly has a future but the relations might not, a kinship with no future and not based on remembering.
Chapter 4

National struggles in naming violence:
Displaced persons, displaced words

Aftermath as crisis

Hundreds of thousands of African migrants and refugees in South Africa fled their homes in May 2008 after a wave of anti-immigrant violence broke out across the country. The suddenness, scale, and particular spectactularity of the violence and unrest sparked widespread panic. Violence in Cape Town resembled forms of violence seen days earlier in Johannesburg and other cities. Its likeness and simultaneity initially generated rife speculation among foreign nationals and citizens that the soon national crisis had been intentionally contrived, organized by forces within the state. Events returned a shaken South Africa to international headlines.

76 The first major outbreak of anti-immigrant violence in South Africa in May 2008 occurred on May 11 in Alexandra, Johannesburg. Over two weeks, as the violence in Johannesburg intensified, violence was also reported in Cape Town, Durban, Pretoria, and other towns and cities. Sociologists at the University of Stellenbosch mapped 135 incidents of violence in South Africa between May 10 and June 30 by time, space, and intensity (Bekker et al. 2008). Violence peaked in May (May 11 to 30 in Johannesburg, May 22 to 26 in Cape Town), during which an estimated 200,000 African foreign nationals were displaced (Igglesden 2008:7-8).

77 Rumors around the May attacks as planned and coordinated were voiced by foreign nationals and by South Africans. As well as because of their concurrency in time and place, refugees and migrants drew connections with past anti-immigrant violence in South Africa and with the antagonism they experience daily at the hands of state officials, both of which, they emphasized, were increasing in frequency (HRW 1998; 2006). Drawing parallels with township violence in the 1980s and 1990s, some South Africans spoke of a clandestine political force at work once more in the country beset to unhinge the state (Fabricus 2008; Mhlana et al. 2008; on the history of ‘Third Force’ theories in South Africa, see Ellis 1998). These rumors proved persuasive and astute, and were granted extensive reportage, further fuelling the initial panic and displacement.
Disturbances in Cape Town began on May 22. In Du Noon and Masiphumelele townships that evening, migrant-owned shops were ransacked and burned by “a mob... on the rampage,” a South African shopkeeper was shot, and a Somali migrant died (De Vries et al. 2008). Unrest ignited elsewhere in the city through the long weekend that followed. Fleeing the violence, migrants and refugees sought safety in police stations, mosques and church halls, community centers, and the homes of others. On May 26, pressured by civil society groups, national leaders, and the public to respond to the escalating crisis, the City of Cape Town opened four large camps for foreign nationals in suburbs and outskirts of the city (Davids et al. 2008). By the end of May in Cape Town, “an estimated 20,000 displaced persons were housed in about 100 camps and sites” (TAC/ALP 2008:6). Colossal aid and volunteer efforts ensued.

Though media headlines, the palpable panic in the city, and the large numbers of displaced persons all suggested contrary prospects at the time, the violence in Cape Town proved to be short-lived and modest. Disturbances were contained to few, very precise locations. Most individuals and families consequently

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78 The chapter is set in Cape Town. However, the bulk of the literature on African migrants and refugees in South Africa and on the 2008 crisis focuses on Johannesburg, where most migrants and refugees live and where most of the violence occurred. Despite similarities, there were significant differences between Cape Town and Johannesburg in terms of the nature, extent, and aftermath of the 2008 violence: Johannesburg experienced far greater violence and more fatalities than Cape Town; Johannesburg authorities pursued different disaster management strategies to Cape Town in the wake of the violence, most importantly opting not to construct large urban camps to house displaced persons; Johannesburg lacked sustained, coordinated campaigning by civil society organizations and volunteers in the provision and monitoring of relief efforts, compared to Cape Town, which differently shaped public reactions to the events, victims, and state’s response. These important differences were sometimes undernoted in national and international press and are routinely glossed over in subsequent analysis.

79 I collected 847 print articles from South African newspapers on the 2008 crisis (a fraction of the total national coverage). The chapter examines media coverage later, particularly in terms of how news reports interplayed with events as they unfolded, but cites only landmark articles in narrating events.
left the camps and shelters quickly and voluntarily, the majority within a fortnight. As encouraged by the state, they returned to their homes in Cape Town or found new accommodation in the city, or left South Africa altogether.\textsuperscript{80} But despite the efforts of the state and NGOs to reintegrate all displaced persons into communities in the city, thus drawing the crisis to a close, over 6300 persons remained in the camps at the end of June. Met with impatience by the state, this displaced population – refusing to leave, afraid for its safety – decreased only to 5066 persons by mid-July (ibid.:7).\textsuperscript{81}

Complex and excruciatingly drawn-out disputes thus followed the preliminary violence and displacement in Cape Town concerning the wellbeing and the confusing political and legal status of the camp populations left behind. At a political level, City of Cape Town authorities and the Provincial Government of the Western Cape sparred and dithered.\textsuperscript{82} Alternately claiming and refuting responsibility for the still displaced migrants and refugees, while implementing

\textsuperscript{80} Vicki Igglesden (2008:7) reported that 40,000 Mozambicans left South Africa as a result of the violence.

\textsuperscript{81} The total number of persons in camps and shelters fluctuated in June and July; a higher total population was reported on July 9 than June 26, for example. Individuals moved frequently between different camps and shelters throughout June based on rumors of better conditions and provisions of aid elsewhere. Discrepancies show the paucity of reliable data at the peak of the crisis.

\textsuperscript{82} City, provincial, and national governments deferred responsibility for managing the violence and displaced populations to each other at the onset of the violence, thus the first four days (May 22 to 26) were marked by a notable absence of state activity in Cape Town. The slow and uncoordinated initial response of government resulted partly from then fierce antagonism between city and provincial governments – political tensions unique to Cape Town. In 2008, the City of Cape Town was governed by an alliance of South African opposition political parties, headed by the Democratic Alliance (DA) and led by Helen Zille (Leader of the Opposition in the South African Parliament, also Mayor of Cape Town). In 2008, the Provincial Government of the Western Cape was controlled by the African National Congress (ANC); its Premier, Ebrahim Rasool, was recalled by the ANC during the crisis (July 14). Political parties rushed to blame each other for failing to prevent the violence, then for the crisis' longevity and mismanagement. The national government also held back from declaring a national crisis in May 2008, which would have ushered emergency funds into the city and initiated centralized disaster management processes.
disjointed policies, high-profile politicians traded accusations of negligence, culpability, and racism.\textsuperscript{83} Civil society groups and international medical organizations next threatened legal action against government agencies over inadequate camp conditions.\textsuperscript{84} Reports of growing restlessness within the camps, of residents and management in conflict, augmented tensions further and diminished public patience; observed by Steven Robins (2008), displaced “victims” in Cape Town became viewed more and more as “troublemakers” by politicians and the public. Disputes in the camps arose partly because camp residents’ expectations for assistance, compensation, and international resettlement had been raised during the relief efforts by individuals and organizations working on their behalf. Residents’ demands became increasingly unrealistic. By the end of July, it was clear that a timely conclusion to the displacement crisis could not be reached. Reintegration stalled and volunteer efforts fatigued. Media interest soon waned.

In December 2008, after protracted efforts to relocate the several thousands of still displaced persons, the City of Cape Town began cutting food, electricity, and medical supplies to the surviving camps and shelters (Joubert 2008). In April 2010, 400 people were evicted by force from the final camp in Strandfontein (PASSOP 2010). 37 foreign nationals refused to leave and were arrested (Atkins 2010).

\textsuperscript{83} Accusations of racism were made against the City of Cape Town by ANC politicians and leaders of civil society groups based on decisions to cordon off large, empty, well-equipped municipal buildings to displaced persons out of concerns with tourism. A particularly high-profile eviction in mid-June concerned over 100 displaced persons from outside of Cape Town’s main police station, Caledon Square, which provoked direct confrontations between the displaced persons and the Mayor of Cape Town (TAC 2008b).

\textsuperscript{84} ‘Government agencies’ is an inadequate way of referring here to all of the different branches of city, regional, and national government, including the South African Police Service and the Department of Home Affairs. As explored later, however, the South African state showed itself throughout the crisis to be a simultaneously omnipresent and absent, unified and disconnected entity, especially to the victims of violence and displacement.
Interrupted fieldwork

The first reports of anti-immigrant violence in the Western Cape broadcasted at dusk on Thursday May 22, 2008. I was with friends in Muizenberg. On receiving calls from migrants we knew in Du Noon, we rushed to transform unused offices of the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC), a South African HIV/AIDS activist organization based in Cape Town, into a shelter for six Congolese families who had left their homes. I spent the rest of the evening with friends and researchers monitoring and discussing events. We learned of unrest and flight across the city through media and personal networks. I returned to my apartment after midnight to find nine young men I was conducting fieldwork with waiting outside, terrified (A3, A4, A12, A13, D1, D2, D3, D9, D10). Within a day, 17 youths had moved into my apartment.

Despite the panic in the city, the outbreak of violence in Cape Town on May 22 was not met with surprise. Similar violence had started in Johannesburg ten days earlier and was then still ongoing. On May 11, in the township of Alexandra, Johannesburg, crowds of young South Africans clashed with migrant residents, shacks belonging to migrants were scorched, and two migrants died (Ndlovu 2008). These disturbances intensified quickly, then spread within Johannesburg. Initial media reports dwelt at length on the looting of migrants’ homes and businesses, the

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85 The City of Cape Town and the Western Cape Provincial Government had separately met during the week following the violence in Johannesburg to refine disaster management plans in Cape Town.

86 The anti-immigrant violence in Alexandra is widely recognized as the start of the May 2008 crisis. From the perspective of Cape Town, however, particularly in the university legal aid offices where I volunteered one morning of my time during my fieldwork, a serious incident of violence in Zwelethemba township, Worcester, two months earlier had already generated fears of an impending crisis in the country (Breytenbach et al. 2008). Bekker et al. (2008:33) recorded an early episode of violence in Siyalala, Cape Town, on May 10.
casualty numbers, the drafting in of the South African army to calm communities (the first and only such instance since the 1994 elections), and the organized nature of the violence, first rumored to be politically-orchestrated.

Concerns around the duplication of violence elsewhere in South Africa grew during days that followed as stories and especially images of further violence in Johannesburg relayed through the country. (Print and broadcast media covered almost no other news at this time). All of the young men I worked with, as others, spoke about one widely-circulated photograph creating exceptional terror – of a Mozambican man burning alive, nailed to the ground, in Reiger Park, Johannesburg – printed on the front-page of the Cape Times newspaper on May 19 (Robinson 2008). Migrants, refugees, NGOs, and government agencies began to plan for similar unrest in Cape Town. Rumors and news from Du Noon on May 22 thus instantaneously set off panic.87 Though far fewer cases of violence were reported in Cape Town than Johannesburg, by the end of the weekend (May 25), reacting en masse, over 20,000 African foreign nationals in Cape Town had fled their homes.

Between May 2008 and January 2009, when I concluded fieldwork and left South Africa, almost all of my days were consumed with efforts to assist the migrants and refugees in Cape Town who had been displaced. My fieldwork was interrupted by the crisis of the aftermath of the violence and the legal, political, and

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87 Violence in Cape Town began after a community forum in Du Noon on May 22 was canceled, convened between residents and ANC MP Lumka Yengeni to address housing and service delivery issues. Community forums were held across Cape Town between May 19 and May 22, instigated by the national government to demonstrate its engagement and prevent further violence. “I... was deployed to the area to prevent the violence that we see escalating in Gauteng from spreading. I thought, ‘We need to be proactive instead of waiting for the incidents to start’” (Yengeni, quoted in Witten 2008). The meeting was cancelled because a much larger audience arrived than was expected. Soon after violence started in Du Noon, rioting and looting was also reported in Masiphumelele, Nyanga, Philippi, and Kuils River (De Vries et al. 2008).
humanitarian disputes that dominated life in Cape Town for the last seven months of that year.

I based myself first at the TAC headquarters in the city center, which became a central forum for volunteers within hours. I involved myself with work that included aggregating and distributing donated supplies to the shelters and camps, circulating newsletters to camp residents, and chronicling camp conditions, data from which was used to mount legal action against city and provincial governments on failing to meet international minimum norms and standards laid out by the UNHCR for displaced persons and for violating specific articles of the South African Constitution.

These community-led activities were not without criticism and quarrel. Efforts by the TAC, for example, quickly usurped those of the small, specialized refugee- and migrant-focused NGOs that existed already in Cape Town, which created confusion, disputes over funding, and territory-claiming. Though the TAC was resourced and well-placed in the city to coordinate civil society efforts – its members had ties to individuals of influence in the city and beyond, and to student populations from which it drew large numbers of volunteers – the organization had limited experience of working with populations of foreign nationals at the time, much less in managing a humanitarian crisis. However, the TAC’s high-profile campaign work on HIV/AIDS had trained the organization in a combative style of protesting and media management and in brokering dialogue with the state, which made its actions effective and visible during the first days and weeks – a time when the state’s absence and internal arguments were noticeable. Utilizing techniques of

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88 A comprehensive, open-access archive of all reports, legal documents, press releases, photographs, and data collected by the TAC is available online: [http://www.tac.org.za/community/xenophobia](http://www.tac.org.za/community/xenophobia) [accessed 24 December 2012]
global health and social justice learned through its work on HIV/AIDS, especially by identifying grounds for possible legal challenge against the state through the displaced camps, thus creating new spaces for activism, and by insisting on keeping the crisis a political concern, the TAC transposed its mode of popular activism to a professionalized terrain, what Steven Robins terms “technopolitical humanitarianism” (Robins 2009:644; Human and Robins 2012; also Alluri 2009; for an account and defense of the TAC’s involvement, see Geffen 2009). NGOs and other volunteer organizations responded with similar dexterousness and professionalism. The speed and force with which community groups and civil society organizations such as the TAC entered the crisis before the state, mobilizing rapidly and with considerable coherence, and then came to determine major arcs of disaster

89 “With the subsiding of the xenophobic violence by the end of June 2008 and closure of the camps toward the end of the year, the concerns of non-nationals no longer preoccupied ordinary citizens, and the media dramatically reduced its reporting on foreigners and xenophobic violence... During this period, the South African public seems to have been, once again, lulled into deep sleep and political indifference, and the state’s framing of the refugee problem in international immigration law terms shifted the political discourse aware from compassionate concern about displaced victims of xenophobic violence. It was within this context that the TAC and its partners sought to politicize refugee matters” (Robins 2008:641).

I oddly became an anthropological informant myself in speaking out about the problems with the camp surveying methods. “Whereas some TAC volunteers felt that life histories and oral narratives were crucial for understanding people’s current experiences, others felt that they did not provide useful information given the legal and medical uses that the data had to serve. In addition, some volunteers insisted that eliciting life histories could trigger traumatic memories that volunteers were ill equipped to manage. Ultimately, the data collection process ended up being highly quantitative and directly concerned with establishing the “raw facts.” The data were used extensively in a High Court suit against the local and provincial governments brought by the TAC on behalf of the refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced people... The TAC’s dispassionate and objectivist presentation of “the facts on the ground” to demonstrate how conditions in the camps fell short of internationally accepted norms and standards was accompanied by parliamentary submissions, pickets and sit-ins, marches, relief efforts, public education, and a range of media interventions. These modes of social mobilization provided a passionate and engaged dimension to the struggles for refugee rights and recognition... Far from buying into a technicist humanitarian “anti-politics,” it seemed as if TAC activists, using modes of mobilization similar to their AIDS activist strategies, deployed a complex mix of legal, medical, epidemiological, and rights-based discourses within a shifting political field of limits and possibilities” (Robins 2008:646-647).
management policy and political debate – observed by outsiders such as myself with wonder and unease – later became part of government and independent inquiries into the crisis and its management (for example, FMSP 2009:120-129; Jara and Perberdy 2010).

As well as working with voluntary organizations, particularly by helping coordinate the camp monitoring process with local students, and my ongoing fieldwork, I worked with an older anthropologist as an informal consultant to UN officials who came to South Africa in late June to advise the government. My companion and I had built deep connections among several migrant communities in Cape Town at the time; I was considered useful because of my work with populations of male youths considered hard to reach, but vulnerable to further violence, including retaliatory violence. We combined our researches and volunteer work with new roles as outsider informants. We both had time and willingness to contribute to all of the relief efforts, which we saw as well-meaning and important, but we came to see them as growingly problematic too. We became concerned, for example, with activist groups’ vociferous criticisms of the repatriation options for displaced persons presented by the UN, which raised migrants’ expectations for assistance and compensation and delayed their participation in national

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90 We helped annotate and contextualize data, policies, and government positions for the UN advisors, filled in gaps in timelines, explained our understandings of the motives of various organizations, described and reflected on the conditions of the camps, and offered feedback on draft UN-OCHA recommendations. Emphasized throughout the crisis, the role of the UN was advisory and technical. The entire crisis was framed by the UN as a domestic matter for the South African state. However, the entrance of UN officials to South Africa and the construction of blue UNHCR tents in camps in Johannesburg and Cape Town raised expectations for assistance and created confusion over who was in charge. UN negotiators expressed disbelief to my companion and I that the South African government had been unable to prevent and manage the crisis by itself, and were particularly disturbed by tensions between civil society and government. Concerned with the signals to the continent their presence in South Africa might create, “If South Africa can’t handle a few IDPs,” the lead negotiator told me, “all of Africa’s fucked.”
reintegration processes. As time progressed, we also found it hard to keep critical
distance from the different organizations we were working with, thus to study
interventions we had inadvertently become part of. In November 2008, at UN-
chaired meetings in Cape Town that marked the disaster’s official ending, my
companion and I realized that we were the sole persons in attendance who had been
present throughout the displacement crisis from the start.

My apartment became a base for the migrants I worked with. For two weeks,
the flat was tense and crammed. The youths took it upon themselves to sift through
and save relevant articles for me from the armfuls of newspapers I seized and
brought home each day, most of which, outdated in hours, I did not read thoroughly
until after I left South Africa. It was upsetting to see young men I now knew closely
and whose gallantry I had come to admire through my fieldwork in a new state of
distress and helplessness. All were uncharacteristically quiet. As for others in the
city, the disturbances themselves and the fear brought out by images and rumors of
violence and encampment ignited memories of past traumas elsewhere.

After a week, Abelo, Gael, and the Luba twins (A3, A4, A12, A13) left the
apartment to return to their rented home in Ottery. Some moved into and then
between the displaced camps (D5, D10; all of Network C; A24 and A25 briefly); in
September, two opted to enroll in UNHCR-sponsored repatriation programs to leave
South Africa (D5, D10). Four weeks later, the three young migrants from Sierra
Leone and Liberia (D1, D2, D3) moved to Johannesburg, after which their cell
phones stopped working and we lost contact. The majority of the migrants, however,
managed to stay in Cape Town within their homes. Network B closed ranks and
kept off the streets, but returned to car guarding within a fortnight, though not in
Green Point. The remainder of the men moved to Johannesburg or elsewhere in
Cape Town (half of Network A), but subsequently found it difficult to rebuild some of their work ties in the city, their sense of confidence shaken.

By December 2008, I had lost track of 14 migrants in my project. Significantly – but incredulously too, I thought at the time, given the intensity of private scenes within my apartment – none of the migrants I worked with had experienced or seen physical violence in May 2008 or during the months that followed. None knew any migrants personally who had either.

For my last eight months of fieldwork, I worked frantically. I found it hard to take the breaks I knew I needed to renew and reflect. I developed sleeplessness despite constant exhaustion, yet a stubbornness to continue with the relief efforts as I watched volunteers around me withdraw. My moods and health fluctuated. I sometimes found myself in tears in response to harmless questions from friends, then irked by scholars in the city who ribbed I could not have asked for “a more exciting event” during my fieldwork. I envied those around me who appeared capable at timetabling their relief work alongside social and restful activities. The older researcher I worked with and I developed a private, dark sense of humor to cope with bleak and desperate scenes we entered into in the camps and the tumultuous organizational politics we were soon embroiled in. Volunteers, experts, and officials had become combative, sharp, and defensive. Meetings between government representatives and migrant advocacy groups regularly spiraled downwards into spats of shouting and name-calling. Displaced populations in the camps were beginning to factionalize as national groups and aggressive accusations of discriminatory, uneven assistance from different groups of camp residents were frequent. One was expected to take clear sides in the charged and ambiguous
debates concerning the legitimacy of the camps and the efficacy and moral sincerity of the government’s response.

I recorded my days and thoughts thoroughly throughout these months, compulsively filling boxes and boxes with notes, documents, and meeting minutes. Because the first weeks of the crisis especially were multipart and so fast-moving, I accepted early on that my grasp of greater dramas in the city and country was limited, my impressions were skewed, and the media reports I gathered were inaccurate – facts and fieldnotes, I noted at the time, to reconcile later. But though I saw everything attentively, I found myself struggling to witness fully what was taking place around me. I hardened to the violence and to camp-life quickly. I was thus not wholly absorbing the events around me in their immediacy and frenzy, and as they unfolded. I was partially aware of these deferments at the time. I only started awakening to the violence and displacement I had witnessed from its inside some months after I ended fieldwork, living then in a different country. It became especially hard to do so once I found courage to return to my finishing phase of fieldnotes and reflect on the contents of large packages of articles and reports on the violence, the camps, and the relief efforts I was involved in, which I had sent ahead to Baltimore by mail.

**Displaced persons, displaced words**

This closing chapter does not put forward a new global narrative on the anti-immigrant violence in South Africa in May 2008 and the displacement crisis that followed, in contrast to most published work on the subject. It does not claim complete understanding of the causes and consequences of the violence either, counter to the main objectives and conclusions of other writings.
My aim instead is to organize a different kind of commentary on the crisis by examining a selection of materials taken from the afterwards of the violence that have since been written over or written out. This will complement and deepen existing accounts, but challenge their uniformities and neatness too. I draw from my various engagements in the relief efforts in Cape Town and my proximity to the affected populations to do so.

The chapter is informed by my work among networks of young male migrants, but it angles on them least directly. Again, none of the youths I worked with saw or experienced anti-immigrant violence in May 2008. Drawing on funds and connections among themselves, and fearing state surveillance (even assistance) above all, most managed to avoid internment in the camps.91

The following sections annotate activities, images, statements, and texts I collected in Cape Town to convey the climate of the city within which the violence and displacement unfolded. Each takes us to crucial events inside the crisis, but typically to moments before explanations of those events were clear: when reliable data was unknown or disputed; when short-term and longer-term outcomes were uncertain; when terms to speak of the violence and its victims had not settled. Much of my evidence falls outside of scholarly publications on the subject, or features ephemerally within them. Given the literature’s insistence on smooth and comprehensive narratives (and, of course, the other stakes and responsibilities borne by authors and institutions who have written or commissioned studies on the 2008 crisis), the materials presented below are absent from or unaccentuated in the

91 Several of the youths I worked with visited the camps in May and June as expeditions on behalf of others. There were rumors early on (and some statements by government officials) that financial compensation would be offered to all of the migrants in the camps, later international resettlement to Canada. The youths’ brief experiences in the camps inform later sections, but are not substantial parts.
available literature, likely viewed as time-specific or parochial, or even as disruptive. Fragments, however, they help expose important logics and tensions in Cape Town and in South Africa in 2008 that shaped the manner in which the crisis proceeded, and, crucially in my view, why it was prolonged so extensively. They also assist in showing how the actions of the state and others were interpreted by migrants, residents, and observers.

Rather than supplementing the existing literature with further first-hand descriptions that aim to reconstruct events more completely, the chapter captures different shades of the crisis in its unfolding. From journalists and anthropologists to the President of the Republic, they show together how many people in South Africa struggled to name the violence. I want to reflect on wider meanings of such a struggle.92

In doing so, I query the principal term used by the media and scholars to describe the violence (and the most frequent term evoked throughout all studies of African migrants and refugees in South Africa): xenophobia. Given the geographical and temporal precision of the violence, I argue xenophobia is too broad and vacant to

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92 I noted earlier there were no neutral places during the crisis itself where one could stand to speak or comment on what was taking place. (Almost all of the subsequent reports and articles about the crisis, however, are surprisingly dispassionate or politically vacuous). I thus need to cut through a lot of background explanation here to stake out some non-neutral points that frame my analysis and convey the conclusions I have adopted. Each deserves substantial discussion elsewhere. First, though migrants and refugees in South Africa united globally and sincerely as victims of violence at the height of the disturbances, it is important to emphasize that the vast majority of foreign nationals in Cape Town who left their homes fled out of the fear of violence, not from experiencing or witnessing physical violence themselves. Second, the bulk of the crisis and, in my view, its wider significance concerned the drawn-out mishandling of the displaced populations – the political struggles in and around the camps. The greatest components of the crisis, at least in Cape Town, thus took place in the aftermath of the violence. Third, in contrast again to the tenor and headlines of media reports and scholarship and the very genuine shock expressed by local and international audiences, violence against migrants and refugees in Johannesburg, Cape Town, and other South African cities in May 2008 was neither new or unexpected.
help us understand what took place in 2008 in the specific and precise terms it warrants (Comaroff and Comaroff 2002; Desai 2008; Geschiere 2009:1-38; Neocosmos 2010; Nyamnjoh 2006) . Rather, I contend that the crisis of the aftermath of the violence, particularly legal, political, and humanitarian debates surrounding the founding and closure of the displaced camps, and the debates among scholars and others who tried to explain it, tells us more about South African state and society in 2008 than the status and suffering of African migrants and refugees then living in the country.

**Ordering disorder, technical languages**

The large literature on the 2008 violence and displacement in South Africa presently includes articles and edited volumes by social scientists (for example, Desai 2008; Hassim et al. 2008; Landau 2012; Robins 2009), investigative institutional reports commissioned by national and international organizations (Amnesty International 2008; Atlantic Philanthropies 2010; Bekker et al. 2008; CoRMSA 2009; FMSP 2009; HSRC 2008a; Igglesden 2008; IOM 2009; SAHRC 2008; SAMP 2008; UN-OCHA 2008), documentary film (Affectionately Known as Alex 2008; Blood & Fire 2012; Where Do I Stand? 2010), and a novel (Tagarira 2009).\(^ 93 \)

Drafted in many cases while events were still unfolding – despite closing with ‘lessons learned’ or recommendations sections, for example, six of the ten major institutional reports were released while the camps saga in Cape Town continued – and written by scholars many of whom had little or no involvement in research endeavors with migrants or refugees previously, the literature is surprisingly

\(^{93}\) Excluded here is the vast secondary scholarly literature from South Africa and elsewhere that draws on the events in May 2008 in other ways, for other purposes (for example, Comaroff and Comaroff 2012).
uniform. Authors of the institutional reports specifically focus overwhelmingly on episodes of interpersonal violence, the motives and actions of perpetrators, and the imperfect responses of the state and civil society. Reports work at contextualizing and explaining events and determining their precipitous and structural causes. Clear, stable chronologies of events are staple; events are identified, then placed in neat, narrative sequences. ‘Victims’ and ‘perpetrators’ are clear-cut, unambiguous categories. Though the greatest practical challenge in Cape Town concerned the diversity of legal statuses and nationalities within camp populations, which thus afforded the state and others no quick or single strategy of resolution, all African foreign nationals are typically collapsed in the literature (as in most press coverage) into the misleading category of ‘refugee’. Displaced persons’ voices are absent in the literature, except as occasional, generic quotes of suffering that bridge or prologue sections. Reports also almost always present the crisis through a narrow national framework, espousing the crisis as a strangely natural outcome of a turbulent South African past and a growingly divided present. ‘Xenophobia’ is the most frequently used term to describe and frame the violence.

Reports provide valuable overviews of the 2008 crisis in terms of chronology and statistics – though no two accounts agree on either of these exactly – and help readers unfamiliar with South Africa appreciate broad contours of what took place. Centering on Johannesburg, the literature also indirectly helps position the atypical case of Cape Town in relation to national events, responses, and policies. Scholarship falls significantly short, however, in emphasizing the crisis’ concurrency

94 The greatest legal conundrum arose out of the crisis concerning the internal displacement of a foreign population within a nation-state, most of whom did not hold formal refugee status within South Africa; this is why UNHCR had no mandate in international law to intervene.
with key political events in the country. Most literature, for example, fails to mention how the 2008 crisis occurred immediately after a ferocious change within the leadership of the ANC and during the subsequent resignation of Thabo Mbeki as President (notable exceptions are IOM 2009:30-31; Neocosmos 2008; 2010). The literature further underemphasizes concurrent events and tensions in the region, such as the power-sharing agreement reached between Robert Mugabe and Morgan Tsvangirai in neighboring Zimbabwe in September 2008, which prompted to a crucial change in South African asylum policy towards Zimbabweans midway through 2008, South Africa’s largest migrant population.

But, most of all, these narratives are striking for their confidence and clarity, their arresting coherence. Terms for actors and actions in reports and reviews rarely lack ambiguousness. In contrast, at the start of the crisis, there was hesitancy and criticism around almost every word, date, and number in circulation. Observers, victims, and experts did not agree at all on how to qualify and quantify the violence. Numbers of displaced persons varied widely. A source of very heated disputes, numbers fluctuated amid suspicions that migrants were registering for assistance and aid in multiple camps simultaneously.

Counter to the staid pace and tone of the institutional reports and narratives of the crisis, my sensory reminders of May 2008 are of men shouting and screaming. And of silences – much was unknown in late May, and there was hesitation from the state especially to name the violence and speculate on its significance. Time was similarly uneven and rapidly changing. Far from neat sequences of discrete events,

95 The coherence of the literature speaks in part to the growth of applied, professionalized social scientific and anthropological research in South Africa, much of which is conducted in partnership with NGOs. Its orderliness may also speak to South Africa’s sad familiarity with violence.
May's days in Cape Town were truly chaotic. Filled with rumor, confusion, and unexpected incident, time was long and fast. Like others who moved within the city, the panic among the young migrants I worked with arose out of fast-changing and jumbled events and from feelings of vulnerability and immobility. The disturbances in Cape Town were terrifying, they remembered, because they had to act without fully knowing what was going on. They fled their homes, they said, because others were.

Struggles with words and statistics are expunged from the reports in favor of narrative and terminological coherence. Which terms and figures were used and not used in Cape Town in May and June, and by whom, and what words were asked to encompass, recognize, or elide over help us grasp the competing meanings of events that were then transpiring. “Lethal language games” (Human and Robins 2012:1), terminologies redrew daily as a mutual displacement of persons and language rubbed together. There is value in attending again to what was actually said during the opening weeks of the crisis. Debates around terms and statistics were ferocious. Remembering these struggles will help us better understand the course of the actions that followed.

The initial violence, for instance, was first described widely with words of war. Journalists wrote of war and conflict extensively during the first week of violence in Johannesburg. Prominent politicians spoke of “bringing in the army” as the best state solution. Foreign Affairs Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma talked of South Africa on the brink of an “imminent civil war” (Cape Argus 2008). This language has been entirely edited out of the archive.

War was also the primary language used by the African migrants and refugees who had been displaced. They appeared prominently on signs carried in a
protest through Cape Town on June 2, which called for an end to the political stalemate between the city and provincial governments. Marchers organized themselves with flags in national groups, flanked by trucks of microphoned Somali leaders who steered and roused the crowds. Speeches and signs crafted a tense atmosphere. At the visual eye of the protest were hand-painted banners describing South Africa as a land of genocide and ethnic cleansing. The banners were hard to not notice. Signage included: “South Africa = Rwanda: Slaughtering for scarce resources!”; “We gave you life, you retaliated by death”; “South Africa is the 8th Kosovo: Genocide – be careful”; “Mr. Mbeki – You are very smart, but you make Africa very ugly... Zille is farming human beings in frozen seas” (Figure 7).96

A similar language was also used in the quieter speeches made at a rally of remembrance at St. George’s Cathedral, Cape Town, on May 27. To somber musical accompaniment, recordings of migrants in the camps were played to the congregation. In them, migrants spoke of violence they had felt or witnessed in Cape Town and the unwillingness of the police to help them. One recorded woman spoke of her piteous state now in the displaced camps as reminding her of experiences of conflict and refugeedom elsewhere. At the same church service, the head of mission of Médecins Sans Frontières, Eric Goemare, described the gunshot and stab wounds he had tended in Johannesburg one week earlier as similar to injuries he had seen in Rwanda in 1994.

“War talk” diminished quickly (Roy 2003). While the South African public sympathized with the victims of the violence (temporarily, in ways they could), they

96 The last sign referred to the displaced camp in Soetwater on the Peninsula’s southwestern coast. It was a simply ghastly location, exposed to the elements. Calling for better camp conditions after a Somali migrant drowned, Soetwater residents there had threatened to commit mass suicide by walking into the sea.
reacted to words of genocide and warfare as descriptions of the violence as unwarranted, improper, and distasteful. I was taken back when a senior anthropologist remarked to me that such expressions were “bloody ridiculous.” One effect of their dismissal was to insist migrants’ and refugees’ past lives “in Africa” (sic.), which may help us understand the decisions they took to leave their homes in Cape Town, were divorced from their present lives in South Africa. The rebuttal of these words and statements speaks too of South Africa’s internal struggle with naming itself and its past in terms of war.

A further effect of terms like genocide, war, and ethnic cleansing was to make absurd the displaced population’s calls for outside intervention. Civil society groups, most generously, yet cognizant of its media purchase, felt warfare was too raw and extreme a language for political gain. Thus, two weeks later, at the next major rally in Cape Town and in the first press conference of the Joint Refugee Leadership Committee, expressions of anger had softened to messages about rights, xenophobia, pan-African solidarity, and UN assistance. Replicated in political and media discourse, the crisis was soon reframed as primarily a technical problem of disaster management, resources, and reintegration (Robins 2008). This discourse would eventually dominate media coverage and scholarship.
Figure 7 Refugee protest sign, June 2 (Personal photograph)
'Newspeak'

Media coverage of the 2008 violence and its aftermath in South Africa was voluminous. But as well as report on events, South African media also actively authored a social and political crisis that brought large, previously well-hidden populations to the urban and public foreground.97

Press reports interpreted events. Press coverage cajoled and routed (then re-routed) strong emotions. Print media, for example, first evoked and channeled sympathy towards the victims of violence and displacement (populations not previously depicted so humanly, see Fine and Bird 2006); the same newspapers later led new characterizations of camp residents as wearing and ungrateful. Far from “simplistic and unanalytical, with minimal in-depth discussion of the issues raised” (Fine and Bird 2006:58), I found print media coverage of the 2008 violence and aftermath in Cape Town intricate, pointed, thoughtfully structured, and rich in significance.

How media reporting influenced the course of events is drastically underexplored in inquiries and most scholarship (cf. Harber 2008). Indeed, of all the actors that were scolded in the many institutional reports that followed the violence – the South African Human Rights Commission, for example, made a total of 142 recommendations to actors and agencies ranging from the Department of Education

97 The section considers only English-language print media available in Cape Town during the time of my fieldwork (national and city publications). Jack Fine and William Bird’s study of media coverage of racial violence, migrant and refugee issues, and xenophobia in South Africa between 1994 and 2002 provides historical background and uses a wider base of sources. The study found consistent anti-immigrant bias in media coverage of migrant and refugee issues, an overemphasis of migrant criminality, and inaccurate labeling of most migrants as ‘illegal immigrants’ (Fine and Bird 2006; also Hadland et al. 2008).
Simon Bekker’s desktop study of explanations given initially as to the causes of the violence is based on an analysis of approximately 4000 news articles from 40 South African newspapers between 10 May and 30 June (Bekker et al. 2008).
to the army (SAHRC 2008:12-19) – no agencies, NGOs, or scholars have criticized media agencies subsequently.

On one hand, briefly, the media opened out the crisis very widely. Initial coverage was voluminous, unrestrained. Each and every small detail of news, comment, rumor, and political exchange was printed in the first month. Letters columns, editorials, and opinion leaders enlarged as vast canvasses on which different tensions unfolded and competing perspectives were placed (including eccentric, off-target speculation). Political speeches, the diaries of volunteers, and invited statements from experts and academic bodies were published adjacent to news and views (Adebajo 2008; ASnA 2008; Mbeki 2008; Pearce 2008; Walne 2008).

Print media thus served as an open forum for public expression and scrutiny. Coverage in this regard adhered to best practices associated with post-apartheid media conduct – participatory, independent, and overly-conscious of prejudice (Dawson 2000; Jacobs and Krabill 2005; Zegeye and Harris 2002). Civil society and various spheres of the state consequently courted the media aggressively throughout the crisis to leak information, try and win public support, raise questions, fundraise, and exert pressure on each other. Several NGO meetings I attended were taken over entirely by planning on how to ensure favorable press coverage; some of us present were baffled by its prioritization while camp conditions worsened. These discussions were taking place as stories of the crisis circulated quickly and unevenly in and out of South Africa through global and African media networks. Great disparities between local and international reports furthered confusion.
On the other hand, however, print media carefully structured and limited national discussions. These subtler interventions – in my view, most significant – were intriguing and not as easy to notice. Reporters played particularly active roles, for example, in selecting, then settling official terms for persons and actions in times of unrest and confusion, when words were most disputed and lucidity sought (Robins 2009:640). They usurped an adjudicating role one might have expected the state to have played.

“Refugee,” for instance, was an inaccurate legal category employed consistently in press reports – while most displaced victims were not South African citizens, very few held formal refugee status – but it familiarized quickly as common parlance (on the refugee as a universal figure, “stripped of the specificities of culture, place, and history,” and thus widely appropriated by charitable institutions in the service of creating clean moral narratives, see Malkki 1995b:8-12).

These twin processes are observed by Sarah Nuttall (2006) in her discussion of race, racism, and racial identity in post-apartheid media, popular culture, and scholarship. Nuttall also sees public discussions of identity and difference opening up and closing off comment. On one hand, Nuttall notes how most public and academic writing shows an unrelenting commitment to foregrounding racial identity, by drawing extensive attention to “hidden, invisible forms of racist expression and well-established patterns of racist exclusion that remain unaddressed and uncompensated for, structurally marking opportunities and access, patterns of income and wealth, privilege and relative power” (271). On the other hand, certain writers draw “on discourses of ‘multiculturalism’ that simultaneously acknowledge the history of ‘race thinking’ and attempt to move beyond it. The latter type of study aims to highlight the agency exercised by actors in reshaping their identities” (Hadland et al. 2008:2).

Gleefully, for the young men in my project, deemed “dangerous” and “criminal” in standing city conversations, the media’s quick branding of all displaced victims as “refugees” helped to partly secure their safety. By articulating the refugee as an all-encompassing and deserving figure at the onset of the violence, the media unusually synchronized how the youths spoke of themselves with other groups of foreign nationals. Public sympathy towards foreign nationals dissipated as the displaced started to be seen as troublesome and ungrateful, and eventually a burden on public resources. In May 2009, one year later, the City of Cape Town’s application for an eviction order to force the 461 persons still in camps was reported coldly by the press, with sighs of public relief (SAPA 2009).
The press further arbitrated debate during the crisis between politicians, displaced persons, and migrant advocates over what to call the places where migrants and refugees were sent to stay.\(^{100}\) Naming the camps was an intensely controversial subject for several weeks in May and June. A series of imperfect terms were once in circulation, including, refugee camp, detention facility, temporary shelter, and safety site. Passed over in retrospective reports, word choices were fought over ferociously as principled statements about the legitimacy of the state’s actions, the appropriate curtailment of a person’s movement, and over what might constitute adequate conditions for living. The media again settled this political dispute. News reports stopped using “refugee camp” in late June (the choice of activists and migrants for the access to international aid it evoked and the protections it legitimized) in favor of “safety site” (a term preferred by UN advisers and the state). As Steven Robins observed, “It soon became quite clear that the state’s choice of the term temporary shelter was directly linked to its determination to close down the refugee camps and push ahead with the “reintegration” of the victims of violence into the communities from which they had fled” (Robins 2008:640, emphasis and punctuation in original; notice how Robins also struggles here to use the terminologies he describes were confusing, by putting some terms in italics (temporary shelter), others in quotations marks (“reintegration”), and others in normal type (refugee camps, victims of violence)). Despite coverage detailing violence, abuse, and appalling conditions within the camps, which affected women and children disproportionally and showed the camps to be far from safe places,

\(^{100}\) One camp was a renovated, urban military base; two were flailing, apartheid-era holiday campsites.
“safety site” was used by all actors involved from July (or a cumbersome variant, “Centers of Safe Shelter” (IOM 2009:48; SAHRC 2008:2)).

Published accounts about the crisis apply such terms retroactively, misleadingly implying an agreement in language from the start of the saga (FMSP 2009; IOM 2009; SAHRC 2008).

Reading and misreading images

Migrants and refugees in South Africa united as victims of violence at the height of the disturbances – divisions and tensions among displaced camp populations emerged later. However, only a small number of foreign nationals in Cape Town experienced violence directly or witnessed violence against others. This became a particularly significant issue later on. Rather, most migrants and refugees fled their homes after hearing about violence nearby from others, from gossip, word-of-mouth, or news reports.101 Scenes of chanting, dancing South African youths chasing migrants out of townships amid police gunfire looped for many days on national television. Intensely-watched coverage from Johannesburg built up an apprehensive climate in Cape Town. A second key role of the media in shaping the course of events thus occurred at the start of the crisis: in generating terror among foreign nationals, thereby helping instigate mass displacement.

Printed and televised images of exceptional violence were especially vital – above all, the photographs of Mozambican national Ernesto Nhamuave in Ramaphosa settlement, Johannesburg. Nhamuave was attacked by his South

101 Unparsed or elided over in most media reports and scholarship, this distinction proved important in the subsequent processing of compensation claims and in determining the state’s mandate of responsibility and care. I consider this later as evidence to challenge ubiquitous claims of the state’s incompetence and naivety.
African neighbors on May 18, bound in fuel-soaked blankets, nailed down to wooden planks, and set alight. In Shayne Robinson’s photograph from Ramaphosa, the first received in Cape Town, a strong fire is burning upwards into Nhamuave’s face and bent body as he tries to pull himself free (Robinson 2008, Figure 8). A pyre of blankets and planks fuel the flames beneath him. Behind Nhamuave, in the left of the frame, a policewoman is reaching down to take his right leg, but she keeps safe distance from Nhamuave and is not appropriately dressed to intervene convincingly. Two black policemen stand behind, one appears to be smiling. Past the smoke, the landscape is deserted.

Images of Nhamuave appeared recurrently in newspapers between May 19 and May 23, composing a grotesque retrospective that documented his body in various stages of smoldering and cinderling. I met no South African or migrant who had not seen pictures of “the [nameless] burning man,” as he was known for eight days.102 His image served as a common citation in the narratives we collected later from displaced persons in the camps.

Descriptions that accompanied the photographs also increased terror among migrants and refugees. Beauregard Tromp (2008b) explained that Nhamuave had been targeted by residents in Reiger Park for being “shangaan [foreigner],” which his assailants determined by his not knowing the word for elbow in isiZulu. Descriptions conveyed delight from the crowds, “One plump woman, dressed in a knitted cap and overalls, could not contain her laughter as she pointed to the barbarous scene and regaled her audience with details of the events” (ibid.). Foreign residents had lost their property, armed youth remained nearby, and the police had

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102 Nhamuave was only named in the media on May 25. He later died from his injuries. His relatives identified his body based on “a birth defect on his middle toe,” which was his sole body part left unharmed (Tromp 2008b).
not assumed control of the area. It was a “war zone,” Tromp claimed. That this violence was very specific and contained quickly failed to prevent panic in Cape Town. Indeed, headlines and images on subsequent newspaper covers that week described only a growing crisis in Johannesburg the state could not contain. After Nhamuave (“Fanning flames of hate,” May 19), photographs followed of migrant township residents guarding their homes unaided (“Third force behind attacks,” May 21) and of police firing into South African crowds (“Army gets green light to help police tackle violence,” May 22).

The coverage of the violence did not distress foreign nationals only. I did not gauge immediately how intensely the initial accounts and photographs affected others in South Africa through May and June, and audiences elsewhere. Often-distorted international reports of the violence fed back and mediated events in Cape Town. Partly because global and national news agencies were sharing artwork and copy, a series of errors shuttled between local and international coverage, especially around images. Emphases and tone of international editorship influenced South Africans’ responses.

Le Monde, Der Spiegel, The Guardian, and the New York Times, for example, all led their May 20 editions with graphic accounts of the disturbances in Reiger Park and the clashes between police and residents. International coverage demonstrated an audacious degree of licentiousness. The New York Times Johannesburg co-bureau chiefs Barry Bearak and Celia Dugger (2008), for instance, detailed events in Johannesburg with the casualness of fiction-writing: “The man certainly looked dead, lying motionless in the dust of the squatter camp. His body seemed almost like a bottle that had been turned on its side, spilling blood. His pants were red with the moisture.” They expressed flippancy towards the casualties.
and casualty numbers, “Here at the Ramaphosa Settlement Camp... six immigrants have been killed in the past two days – or perhaps seven if the man found in the dust Monday morning does not survive.” Bearak and Dugger rushed to identify underlying causes of the violence, “This nation is undergoing a spasm of xenophobia, with poor South Africans taking out their rage on the poor foreigners living in their midst.” They also presented the violence as banal and ordinary, “In the Ramaphosa Settlement Camp, a squatters’ colony on the outskirts of Johannesburg, dead bodies have become a common sight” (ibid.).

The New York Times coverage, however, contained a glaring error. Demonstrating that the authors had obviously not been present in person, the accompanying photograph had been wholly misidentified (Silva 2008, Figure 10). The subject in João Silva’s photograph was described by Bearak and Dugger as a “rioter” who was “demolishing an immigrant’s shack” in Ramaphosa. The subject, in fact, was using his golf club to prevent fire spreading in the township; he was trying to help save the homes of migrants who had fled. (Silva had published numerous photographs from Reiger Park already in South Africa, who alerted the newspaper. New York Times editors published a correction the following day. For a critique of the initial international coverage, focusing particularly on reports of the New York Times, see Chance 2008).

Global reports also unsettled impressions of a ‘new’ South Africa. The composition, content, and artwork of international articles suggests editors had taken great efforts to highlight resemblances between the violence in May 2008 and the violence that defined late apartheid to the world: Casspirs sweeping through townships; armed South African youth performing anti-apartheid protest songs, dancing Toyi-toyi, while chasing migrants; the death of a Mozambican migrant in a
form similar to necklacing (see Adebajo 2008 on the irony of ‘African Renaissance’ thinking). The images of displaced persons in the camps were of generic victims, mostly women and children, who appeared starving, cramped in tents, and abandoned. I lost count of the number of times I heard Capetonians say how “foreign” these pictures looked, how they did not look like they had been taken in their city.

Global analysis affected local audiences. The international coverage was making powerful statements concerning continuities in South African history and was describing the present in ways many South Africans could not recognize. Outsiders’ misidentification of images of violence might be taken also as a statement on how hard it was to draw clear lines between victims and perpetrators. (Similar misidentifications occurred in the South African press. The Cape Times, for example, felt it necessary to issue a statement of clarification after Robinson’s first photograph was published stating that the policewoman in the photograph “was assisting the burning man, not committing the assault.” It is telling that the help of the police needed emphasizing; Figure 8).

It is important to note too that some of the most telling commentary on the violence and displacement to date came from the very first moments. Numerous insights proved to show tremendous foresight, through many initial interpretations were lost once a bigger picture of events was clearer and further data had been made available. Commenting on the photograph of Nhamuave and writing almost immediately after its publication, for example, Suren Pillay wrote, “This image, of an “outsider” being set alight, is now part of our history. Our family album. Its scandal is out in the open for all to see: refugees, the most vulnerable people on this
continent, being attacked and killed by the poor of South Africa’s townships, who too are counted as amongst the most vulnerable on this continent” (Pillay 2008).

A political cartoon drawn by the award-winning South African satirist, Zapiro, and published May 25, made similar comments about socioeconomic causes (Zapiro 2008b, Figure 9). But Zapiro parodies Robinson’s photograph in detail, mimicking the original shot down to the number of nails hammering in the blanket into wooden boards. But Zapiro makes a deliberate change: he replaced a policewoman helping the victim with a group of armed men harming him – standing above, brandishing weapons and Shell fuel drums, and wearing ‘Proudly South African’ t-shirts. The closeness of the police and perpetrators speaks to how widely accepted anti-immigrant sentiments are institutionalized in state agencies. It also promoted discourse on the causes of the violence the media and the state did not want initially to note: flags and ubuntu, perverted outcomes of national pride.103

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103 Unusually for Zapiro, the May 25 cartoon failed to achieve widespread acclaim. It was reacted to negatively by the public compared to Zapiro’s three other cartoons on the subject drawn in 2008. The cartoons covered more familiar themes in Zapiro’s repertoire: the sidelining of veterans leaders and wisdom in contemporary South Africa (Figure 9); Thabo Mbeki as a distant, out-of-touch, emotionless leader (Figure 4.5); South African ‘exceptionalism’ and the demise of pan-Africanism (Figure 4.6).
Figure 8 Fanning flames of hate, May 19 (Robinson 2008)
Figure 9 Xenophobia and the meaning of *ubuntu*, May 25 (Zapiro 2008b)
Figure 10 South Africans take out rage on immigrants, May 20 (Silva 2008)
The President’s “people”

President Thabo Mbeki addressed the nation on May 25. His televised address on the occasion of Africa Day was the President’s first statement on the violence since the start of the disturbances (May 10). Though the police and armed forces intervened immediately in affected urban areas and, by May 25, large displaced camps had already opened in Cape Town, the President had remained noticeably silent on events in the country. For many in South Africa, Mbeki’s words came far too late.

The theme of Mbeki’s address, appropriately for Africa Day, was Pan-African solidarity. His descriptions of the violence included terms and expressions that would dominate the official (national) government response:

On this day... we should be proud of our identity as Africans and do nothing that brings shame and humiliation on ourselves, both as a country and as Africans. Sadly, here in South Africa, we mark Africa day with our heads bowed. The shameful actions of a few have blemished the name of South Africa through criminal acts against our brothers and sisters from other parts of the continent...

Our television sets, newspapers, and other media have brought us shocking images of violence against people from other countries who live in our country, including cold-blooded acts of murder, brutal assault, looting, and destruction of their property. Never since the birth of our democracy have we witnessed such callousness...

The actions of these few individuals do not reflect the values of our people, who for decades have lived together with their fellow African brothers and sisters – whom they accept, without question, as their own (Mbeki 2008).

He supported his address by listing the names of prominent ANC figures who took refuge in other African countries during the struggle against apartheid (a form of political brotherhood). He ended by explaining in quite technical terms how the police, army, and government departments are working with communities in South Africa to combat the violence and restore “law and order.”
Mbeki was lambasted relentlessly in the media and among those I was working with almost immediately after he finished speaking for his reaction and explanations. Compared to actions and statements from other high-profile South Africans, such as Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, who opened her home to displaced persons in Johannesburg and apologized profusely on behalf of the country, Mbeki described the events as isolated “criminal acts” committed by a “few individuals.” Obviously deliberately, he did not use the term ‘xenophobia’ at all.

Simon Bekker’s study of the explanations of the violence offered in South Africa between May and July 2008 showed differences between how government officials and others explained the violence in its immediate aftermath (Bekker et al. 2008). While the “experts” (community leaders, academics, NGO representatives, lawyers) attributed the violence immediately to structural causes, including, socio-economic divisions, high unemployment, housing shortages in informal settlements, and weak border-control, and maintained these arguments for the duration of the crisis, government responses oscillated. During the first weeks, government spokespersons attributed the violence variously to well-organized gang crime, the violence of the mob, and, during the very first days, to an apartheid-era ‘Third Force’. Government views diverged and varied; in time, Mbeki’s explanation was a minority view. What all explanations shared, according to Bekker, was an attribution of the violence to external causes. “Little attention was given [by government and others] to factors directly related to individual outbursts themselves and equally little to the meanings residents gave to local issues” (Bekker et al. 2008:30, emphasis added). Bekker’s observation would pose challenges for academics to later explain.
The criticism of Mbeki continued in the media on a continuous basis until Mbeki resigned as President on September 21. Newspapers filled pages on Mbeki’s “denial” of xenophobia, a word which recalls Mbeki’s infamous stance on HIV/AIDS to many in South Africa. Journalists pointed out Mbeki’s frequent international travel and his infamous absence from South Africa during his tenure as President as evidence for his cold, detached persona and for policies that showed him as ‘out of touch’. Zapiro’s cartoon on May 29 (Figure 12) contrasted the President’s reaction to events with those of others in positions of leadership (Figure 11).

Rather than amending his stance as time passed in light of the criticism he was facing, including from heads of other African nations concerned, which may have improved his popularity and even possibly secured his Presidency, Mbeki continued to insist the violence comprised only isolated criminality. The disturbances did not reflect entrenched tensions or divisions in the country, Mbeki argued. He appeared to dismiss extensive evidence from government departments, NGOs, and academics in South Africa that showed the growth of systemic prejudice towards immigrants in the country and the rise of violence towards African foreign nationals. Indeed, the South African government had launched a major awareness campaign in 1998, entitled ‘Roll Back Xenophobia’, which appears to acknowledge or anticipate of its existence in the country (see Sichone 2008a:255-257 for a discussion of this campaign). Mbeki also claimed not to have received an urgent memo sent to him by the National Intelligence Service in April 2008, which warned the President of simmering xenophobia in the country and imminence of urban unrest (Business Day 2008).

Mbeki made a similar and, in many ways, much more baffling statement at a memorial service on July 3 in Pretoria for those who had died in the violence.
Though his central explanation remains unchanged, for the first time, Mbeki challenged the use of the term ‘xenophobia’ explicitly:

What happened during those days was not inspired by possessed nationalism, or extreme chauvinism, resulting in our communities violently expressing the hitherto unknown sentiments of mass and mindless hatred of foreigners – xenophobia…

*I heard it said insistently that my people have turned or become xenophobic. I wondered what the accusers knew about my people which I did not know…*

And this I must also say: None in our society has any right to encourage or incite xenophobia by trying to explain *naked criminal activity by cloaking it in the garb of xenophobia*

On behalf of our people, I humbly convey… our apologies that we allowed criminals in our midst to inflict terrible pain and damage to many in our society, including, and particularly, our foreign guests. “We will do everything possible and necessary to ensure that we have no need in future to proffer this humble apology which is inspired by genuine remorse (Mail and Guardian 2008, emphasis added).

The President’s words here are fascinating. The same themes from his first speech – criminality, humiliation, and shame – are developed. Mbeki invokes the language of kinship to speak for the nation, positioning himself as an elder figure with a right to talk on behalf of others (“my people”). He places himself in dialogue with unnamed, biblical-sounding others (“the accusers”); however, the accusers appear to be stating what almost all other figures in public office were saying. He posits the notion of an authentic South African, “the heirs to a struggle for African unity and redemption that he traces back to the mid-nineteenth century, [who] could not possibly harbor such xenophobic sentiments” (Hassim et al. 2008:4). While he is absolutely clear on what the violence was not – it was not xenophobia, or “extreme chauvinism,” or even “possessed nationalism” (querying what Zapiro implies in his cartoon), but he is unconvincing in stating that the violence should be condemned
because it was “naked criminal activity” or, even more strangely, “naked criminal activity [cloaked] in the garb of xenophobia.”

Both speeches faced criticism in local and international media, and appeared to deny the existence of voluminous empirical evidence that spoke to the existence of such tensions in the country. The coverage presented the President as someone who had not read any newspaper reports for three months, let alone government documents.

I want to take Mbeki’s stance and words here more seriously, even though any attempt to start to give credibility to Thabo Mbeki’s positions on issues that deeply divide South Africa have typically resulted in anthropologists facing intense internal criticism (see the critiques of Fassin 2007). I wonder whether Mbeki’s obvious struggles with speaking about the violence could be an attempt, if unsatisfyingly, to make a productive intervention in a very heated firestorm – a defense of poor black South Africans. I also want to draw a statement out of context from Fiona Ross’ work on housing and urban life in Cape Town to question a reading of the state as technically incompetent and structurally responsible for the violence and aftermath.

I was cognizant that the professional, activist, and academic circles I moved inside were privileged. In Cape Town, other kinds of media – in English and in other languages – were not covering the sagas in the displaced camps and the confrontations between activists and politicians in any significant volume. This is a shortcoming of my research. However, in a rare essay on the subject, Anton Harber (2008) compared the coverage over two Johannesburg newspapers: The Star (a broadsheet, comparable to Cape Town’s Cape Times or the national Mail and Guardian, the kinds of publications read by those I was working with and which I
archived and examined earlier), and The Daily Sun (a low-cost, market tabloid, read by working class South Africans). Harber shows how the focus of tabloid media was qualitatively different. The Daily Sun dismissed normative claims and depictions of foreign nationals as victims made by elites and liberals. It also appeared to be supported Mbeki’s position that the violence was, indeed, a result of isolated criminality. Quoting from a Daily Sun editorial, “There is much wailing about the debt we owe foreigners, the lessons we learnt from our own struggle, the dignity of all Africans, the evils of xenophobia... What nonsense!” (Harber 2008:163).

Harber showed how, over time, tabloid media gave a voice to very different constituency of South Africans, those who did not share the concerns of NGOs and others about the safety of foreign nationals (seen by many to be neglecting equally atrocious violence against South Africans, but relegated to the mundane and the commonplace). The Daily Sun spoke on behalf of those “who actually fear the foreign gangsters and conmen” (ibid.). Harber claims that, while “we” [scholars] may not wish to acknowledge such publications, we must recognize such publications may reflect a majority view of the nation. As Owen Sichone writes, “Although it has been shown... that South Africans of different backgrounds are equally xenophobic, there is a tendency to blame the racial intolerance and violent nationalism entirely on the poor. After the May 2008 pogroms, newspapers were full of letters from the educated elite condemning the violence and dissociating themselves from the senseless behavior, which was thus blamed on the shantytown dwellers” (Sichone 2008a:258).

Mbeki’s statements were shown later to have serious academic support. South Africa’s leading academic collaborative on migrant and refugee studies, the Forced Migration Studies Project at the University of the Witwatersrand
(subsequently renamed the African Centre for Migration and Society), published the findings of a major interdisciplinary research project in the causes of the violence conducted between 2008 and 2010 (Landau 2011; in summary, FMSP 2010a). The overall conclusions of this report challenge earlier “expert” explanations. Contrary to dominant socioeconomic causes (poverty, housing, etc.), the team found that the violence was geographically specific. “Violence did not occur in sites with the highest percentage of residents in absolute poverty, the highest rates of unemployment, the highest percentages of youth, the highest percentages of resident with low education or the highest percentage of foreign nationals. Violence against foreign nationals typically occurs in locales with high (but not the highest) levels of economic deprivation, high percentages of male residents, high levels of informal housing, and high levels of language diversity” (FMSP 2010a:2, emphasis added).

Curiously, these researchers end up returning to an explanation of the violence put forward by the state. While they argue that violence against foreign nationals and minority individuals rendered ‘outsiders’ as “a symptom of broader challenges of legitimate and accountable local government” (ibid.), they identified the ultimate triggers of the violence as “localized competition for political (formal and informal) and economic power” and organized by, in many instances, “business owners intent on eliminating competition... [local leaders or aspirated leaders] who “mobilize residents to attack and evict foreign nationals as a means of strengthening their personal political or economic power within the local community” (ibid.).

They conclude that socioeconomic factors and notions of entitlement concerning citizenship cannot explain the unique, patchwork geography of violence, though they point out that violence was highest in areas with lowest voter turnout (in 2006), high levels of urban heterogeneity in terms of language and income and
inequality, greatest internal mobility. Uncomfortably, therefore, the authors conclude that only “micro-political” explanations are sufficient (Landau 2011:57). Even more interestingly, they showed that support for the ANC government increased in the political wards where violence occurred in the 2009 general election, decreasing for all other political parties (including the DA which was seen as responsible for setting up expensive camps and speaking too much in favor of foreign nationals; see Landau 2011:76).

Mbeki could be interpreted as making an intervention here on behalf of the majority of the country, sparing them from accusations of xenophobia (or, if one thinks, as Mbeki implores, through the language of kinship, accusations of fratricide). In the heat of the crisis and panic, such a questioning reading did not take place. Surprisingly, only few scholars have since dared investigate the existence of such sentiments in South Africa (HSRC 2008a, for example), and those that have done this has been the subject of intense criticism (see next section). I was aware that a consequence of conducting my research with young Africans migrants could end up demonizing young poor South Africans as responsible for violence against migrants. The alternative strategy has been to shift “responsibility” to wider socioeconomic processes, identity politics, nationalism, and so on (Neocosmos 2010; Pillay 2013; drawing on other studies on the subject of xenophobia, which see xenophobia as a symptom of modern times, such as Geschiere 2009; Nyamnjoh 2006).

Mbeki’s “denial” might also be speaking to a cunning, even sensible governmental strategy. Rather than read the political fracas in Cape Town, for example, as incompetence or unpreparedness in how to manage such a crisis (a criticism leveled at the state in most NGO and scholarly reports), the central ANC
strategy – to not intervene – proved more successful. Cape Town’s unusual political composition led to leaders from the city and provincial governments emerging in stalemate, having each first deferred responsibility for the displaced persons to the other, and then implementing contradictory policies. Several people read the ANC (the federal and provincial governments) as paralyzing the DA-led city authority by actively withholding funds and resources in order for fully functional displaced camps to be founded and operate effectively. However, in Johannesburg, where major camps were not established and where the few camps that were set up were closed very quickly (after three months), resulted in a situation where, though experiencing more casualties, a prolonged crisis did not happen.

In light of different immobility and sensory displacements at work, it seemed exceptionally unfair of the state to have reminded people, as former Western Cape Premier Ebrahim Rasool maintained particularly loudly throughout the week and into those that followed, that the vast majority of displaced persons did not experience physical violence directly and made a choice to move out of their homes. Beyond the likely impossibility of being able to distinguish an act from a legitimate threat of violence in a time of crisis, the language of the state did not make the separation of act and threat meaningful or possible to act on. It was not until early June, for example, that the government started to deliver news to the largest camps, where, in the absence of newspapers, electricity outlets to charge cell phones to
obtain information from others, and outside visitors, stories of the city in flames were palpable and commonplace.\textsuperscript{104}

However, the UN found it hard to criticize the actions of the government in any substantial way. UN-OCHA considered the government’s response to the crisis certainly in need of better coordination and preparation (they noted it was unclear which of the various Government departments involved in the displaced resulting from social conflict was in charge), though they made this criticism also made of civil society groups and international actors. The UN’s criticisms of the state were minor and technical, faulting the management of the camps themselves (particularly around security), the lack of sound documentation, and the “need for a comprehensive and resourced integration strategy… a broader exit strategy…” Instead, the Government perceived the closure of the camps in and of itself as its integration strategy” (UN-OCHA 2008:11). Arguably, while acknowledging the key role played by NGOs at the start of the crisis, particularly in Cape Town, the greater “stakeholders” facing criticism by the UN were its NGOs and civil society groups, most of whom were untrained in international minimum standards for humanitarian assistance (ibid.:13). “Civil society organizations should be better capitated through training in international humanitarian response systems and standards… Few have had significant direct experience in relief and aid operations” (ibid.:19; cf. FMSP 2009:111-123; SAHRC 2008:12-19).

\textsuperscript{104} My attempts to read the emotional states of the young men at the time are colored by many months of our close interaction, though rarely as a group and in such vulnerable conditions. I suspect their distress reflects a mode of response shared by many others. It may also help explain why one of the most productive initial efforts by volunteer groups was to collate and disseminate reliable information of the city-wide situation. I suggest we retain the before in terms of temporal and perspectival limits in remembering the events in May and listening to the words they gave rise to.
The state also moved quickly to change legal regulations; this gained sparse media attention. The Western Cape Provincial Government, for example, submitted a series of ‘extraordinary’ regulations that amended the 2002 Disaster Management Act (Act 57 of 2002) and more narrowly qualified the criteria laid out in a minor subsection (Section 41, Part 2). In the amendment, a very specific definition of “displaced victim” was inserted, “A person who, as a result of the disaster, is homeless or had to leave his or her home or other place of residence and cannot return thereto to safety” (PGWC 2008:2). The amendment placed a greater burden of proof on displaced persons to prove the way in which they found themselves in the camp. A consequence of people moving out of their homes from hearing about violence was that almost no individuals received compensation. And, of some 1430 South Africans arrested in May and June 2008 for assaults against migrants and refugees or theft of property, only 128 were persons convicted one year later (The Times 2009).

In a discussion elsewhere on how housing subsidies have been formulated in South Africa in relation to a person’s dependency relations, Fiona Ross states, “The post-apartheid state was considerably less naïve than the developers” (ibid.):77). Here, Ross is referring to how state agencies, such as housing authorities and social welfare, take into account the variety of family forms and kinship and spousal relations that have come to exist within communities and households in South Africa. She suggests the state has taken into account the history of (marriage,
customary union, cohabiting persons). I would like to suggest Ross’ statement of
the South African state as not naïve has more credence here than acknowledged
elsewhere.

\footnote{Ross continues to show how, despite the allowance for complexity, individuals and
families she worked with still struggled to complete applications for housing and took
objection with the process. “The definitions of dependence do not necessarily imply a
moral dimension to eligibility: the emphasis is on legal and economic relations. They are,
on the surface, sufficiently broad and flexible to accommodate the diverse forms of
relationship that historical processes have engendered. Nevertheless, even granted that
completing official forms is always complex, some residents of The Park faced
considerable decision-making about who ‘counted’ and how. The process of applying for
subsidies highlighted differences between the state’s definitions and those held by
residents. In part this is because the former, while recognizing the complexity of
‘dependency’, assumes that there is a temporal coherence to being a dependent. The
state’s definition of ‘dependent’ also rests on assumptions about the nature and duration
of kin and affinal relationships. These did not have a taken-for-granted character in The
Park” (Ross 2010:77-78).}
Figure 11: Shock by two important icons in South Africa, May 22 (Zapiro 2008a)
Figure 12 The many faces of Thabo Mbeki, May 29 (Zapiro 2008c)
Anthropological disputes

As well as participating in public events, volunteering in the relief efforts, and organizing seminars and teach-ins in universities, numerous anthropologists entered public debates on the violence and its aftermath. A large number of publications on the events were drafted and sent to print quickly, though this appears to be a fad because publication numbers declined quickly after 2010. For a small academic community, anthropologists entered in arguments with each other.

A particularly fierce dispute emerged between John Sharp, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pretoria, and the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), a government-funded social scientific research body (Sharp 2008; HSRC 2008a). The HSRC was charged by the government to produce a rapid response analysis of the violence, looking particularly at South Africans’ perception of the events in the localities where the violence occurred; it remains one of the few pieces of research focused entirely on South African communities. A debate between Sharp and one of the report’s authors, anthropologist Suren Pillay, unfolded across different issues of the British anthropology journal, Anthropology Today.

Sharp’s criticisms were cutting. He lambasted the report’s inadequate methodology (a two-week study, involving six focus small groups, conducted in four townships in Johannesburg and Cape Town). He accused the HSRC researchers of imposing ‘xenophobia’ in the research. “The researchers appear not to have questioned the definition of the violence given in their brief, which told them that it was ‘xenophobic’” (Sharp 2008:1). Sharp faulted questions asked in the focus group discussions as too leading. Researchers’ scripts laid out possible socioeconomic themes to explore, such as housing, jobs, crime, and illness, but the questions that followed these prompts encouraged researchers to listen only to responses that
included statements about migrants and refugees. “What are their experiences of trying to access housing, do they feel they have been prevented from getting houses because of foreigners? How do they think foreigners get access to houses illegally, e.g. bribery, corruption, other?” (HSRC 2008a:55).

Sharp next accused the authors of the report for analyzing their data insufficiently. The report, for example, included statements from the focus groups that connected the violence to issues that had little to do migrants, refugees, and xenophobia, or which made more nuanced analysis of social, economic, and political factors than the authors analyze. “Government is fighting against us, employers are fighting against us, and foreigners are fighting against us. That is why we fight against them (foreigners), because they are nearer. They don’t support us in our struggle... One thing I noticed is that this fighting started when the food prices went up. Then South Africans began acting in the wrong way. They started thinking since the foreigners are here, let’s just blame them before the food and other resources run out” (HSRC 2008a: 45). Sharp also accused the authors of failing to acknowledge the less-reported violence against South Africans in May, who “may have been mistaken for foreigners on account of their appearance (ostensibly ‘darker’ than the ‘typical’ South African) or their inability to speak any of the main South African languages fluently” (Sharp 2008:2). Later research would show that 20 of the 63 casualties in the May 2008 violence were South African citizens (Landau 2011).

Sharp’s most serious criticisms concerned the report’s recommendations. “Government should legalize immigrants and refugees who are already in South Africa, and then close the country’s borders effectively (using the National Defense Force if necessary) to ensure that additional foreigners – particularly poor ones – cannot ‘come and go as they please’” (Sharp 2008:1). The HSRC also proposed
undertaking an audit of government-funded housing with the objective of ejecting foreigner residents, and barring foreign nationals from unskilled job sectors, such as construction and domestic work.

Sharp’s criticisms of the report, particularly its methodology, are valid, though, as Pillay pointed out in his response, the time and resources available to the researchers were beyond their control (Pillay 2008). Pillay also pointed out numerous instances of Sharp’s misreading or under-reading of the report. Actually, despite its limitations in terms of methodology and data, the report does bring out a number of unique points that are ignored in later, more comprehensive studies. Focus group data suggested not only that the populations with the most antagonistic attitudes towards African foreign nationals were older black males (33 years or above), not youths (as the media assumed), and that younger women (18-23 years) were held different attitudes to others. Young South Africa women “appear to regard the antagonism expressed towards foreign nationals as ‘backward’ and anachronistic in a modernizing world. They see the men who resent foreigners as caught in a trap of ‘laziness,’ entitlement, failure to take responsibility for themselves and a tendency to allocate the blame for their misfortunes outside of themselves... These young women admire foreign men for creating opportunities for themselves and being prepared to do whatever work is available in order to make a living. South Africans, on the other hand, are seen as materialist and acquisitive” (HSRC 2008a:33). Discussions of gender rarely feature in later work.

Sharp’s ‘explanation’ of the violence turned from individual behavior and attitudes to wider socioeconomic issues and divisions within South African society. While he states that violence against ‘outsiders’ and the theft of their possessions is “deeply shocking,” he states we need “to look at the broad sweep of South African
xenophobia, consider the full extent of its causes, and reflect on the disturbing ways influential South Africans respond to it” (Sharp 2008:3). Referring to the work of Michael Neocosmos (2010), Sharp claimed “the recent violence was a manifestation not so much of the xenophobic attitudes of the poor at the bottom of society as of a xenophobic discourse that starts at the top, at the highest levels of the ANC-led state, and is prevalent among the elites – the rising black elite as well as the established white elite – whose interests are the state’s main concern” (Sharp 2008:2).

But the HSRC report, in fact, showed these statements frequently. While some members of the focus groups showed how some South Africans believed that foreign nationals were gaining an unfair, too easy access to government services and state resources, the report also showed some South Africans believing the government had adopted policies and attitudes that were responsible. “Other respondents illustrated concerns with how government communicated with residents about the attacks by essentially arguing that government had talked past communities.... [Quoting a focus group participant:] ‘The government officials must come down to the people [to] ask what is wrong... instead of [coming] up with words: they are going nowhere, they are here to stay’” (HSRC 2008:28). Sharp is more keen to demonstrate anthropological studies that show poor South Africans showing, at times, respect, support, good neighborliness, and care to foreign nationals within their communities. Owen Sichone (2008b) provides vignettes of what he terms ‘xenophilia’ among black South Africans in an attempt to show cosmopolitanism unfolding in unexpected places. He offers an example of an Angolan refugee, Raphaël, whose South African wife had taken his name and identity. “Although Muambuyi complained about being made economically dependent like a child she
had in part bought into the idea that South Africans are too Westernized and that Raphaël was teaching her the African culture she had lost. She was proud of the fact that she had learnt how to prepare Angolan meals and boasted that she was now a much better cook than her husband but in a way she had become through him a stranger in her own country” (Sichone 2008b:313).

I mentioned before that I believe the aftermath of the crisis tells us more about the state of South African society than the lives of refugees and migrants in the country, and I believe this extends also to South African anthropologists. What does this tell us about the state of anthropology in South Africa? I was surprised by how deeply divided the small anthropology community became on the violence and how fierce debates among anthropologists became. Each of the three universities in South Africa organized numerous seminars to discuss the events. Reflecting the very stark political, racial, and class divisions between the institutions, such forums varied in form and reaction considerably, one focusing most on suffering least critically, another breaking out into heated debate as why “the anthropologists” were so concerned with what proved to be very isolated violence against a few, rather than the daily affront on the South African poor by the majority.

I saw a divide between an older and younger generation of South African anthropologists emerging. Sharp represents an older generation of anthropologists that remain deeply sensitive to the history of anthropology in South Africa and rebut arguments made more comfortably by younger scholars, willing, for example, to accept that poor urban South Africans could actually hold negative sentiments towards others and be capable, as individuals, of exploiting others or engaging in violence. This came out in a panel discussion among four younger anthropologists in the Annual Meeting of Anthropology South Africa in 2008, in which I participated.
Three of the four participants were South Africa; three of the four had been trained outside of South Africa. The core text we aimed to challenge, as sensitively as we could given the authors were present, was a statement released by the leadership of Anthropology Southern Africa on the violence in May 2008.

The official statement of the professional anthropology association continued themes John Sharp raised in his critique of the HSRC report. Released to the South African media in late May, the statement, copied almost in full here, is filled with very problematic language:

We are horrified by the violent attacks on fellow South African residents... We are ashamed at the extreme violence against children, women and men, many of whom have settled in South Africa’s cities to escape violence, persecution and the degradations of poverty elsewhere. We are shocked by the barbaric actions of those who have taken to brutal mob violence against their neighbors.

As anthropologists, we are deeply concerned, both professionally and as citizens, that these actions reflect a continuing emphasis in South African political discourse on cultural, racial and national differences. It is a discourse that, drawing on a long discarded anthropology, essentializes such differences even as it claims to celebrate them. It is a discourse that was central to colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid. It is a discourse that perversely persists to the present, now manifesting in the way the media labels as ‘xenophobia’ horrendously violent acts where some South Africans raise fists, swing axes and pangas, and use matches to light fires as means to attack their fellows who happen to speak different languages and allegedly look somewhat different from themselves.

We abhor the consequences of continuing and worsening poverty, unemployment, failed service delivery, and the global economy’s effects and how they conspire to create extreme hardship for South Africa’s vast majority, and to make attractive that essentializing discourse of difference. But we have to stress that never and nowhere can those conditions excuse violent unbridled attacks on fellow human beings.

We suggest that, contrary to the current South African and international political consensus, the presence of people who are deemed to be ethnically, racially or nationally different is not at the core of the problem; that the presence of so-called national, ethnic or racial minorities are no more the cause of uproar in Alexandra, Cleveland, or Hillbrow than they are of the ruthless hunting down in Naples, Italy, of people who call themselves Roma. The core of the problem lies, rather, in the fact of a system that breeds
inequality, that marginalizes people to an ever greater extent, and that then – through supposedly “celebrating diversity” – attributes their marginality to their alleged cultural, social and national characteristics. As Southern African anthropologists, we are convinced that closing borders and repatriating foreigners is not the solution. Rather the solution lies in a politics which explicitly fosters the non-racialism espoused by the South African Constitution, that rejects and resists the power of identity politics, and that strives for a cosmopolitanism that valorizes the contributions of all who have ever settled in our part of the world whilst ensuring the freedom of association and of cultural and linguistic expression of all human beings (ASnA 2008).

We found the statement troubling in numerous respects. The language used appears to essentialize what it sets out to critique. While making gestures to possibly comparative incidents of violence that has been labeled xenophobic (such as cases against the Roma in Italy), it presents a case in which only “South African anthropologists” can comment on “fellow South African residents.” The excessive use of “we” ended up making younger anthropologists feel excluded. In substance, the statement appears to be claiming that ‘xenophobia’ is, as Sharp, Neocosmos, and Nyamnjoh (2006) argue, a discourse furthered by elites. It is a particularly surprising statement given the authors’ superb work in the 1980s, which analyzed South African language, including anthropological languages, as a form of power in the service of the apartheid state (Boonzaier and Sharp 1988), “an indispensable guide to the confusing, obfuscatory political discourse of apartheid” (Shepherd and Robins 2008:2). Very recognizable terms, many taken from anthropology, became used by the state to constitute a “discourse of domination... a discourse about the nature of South African society, which reveals the logic and serves the interests of those who wield power (ibid.:6).

For me, therefore, the conflict between the anthropologists appears to demonstrate an emergent shift within South African anthropology which reflects its
still internal insecurities. These shifts and insecurities are discussed in Andrew Spiegel’s important article on South African anthropology’s shift from a dominant focus on “exposé ethnography [that was] designed to demonstrate many of the worst on-the-ground consequences of the apartheid system” (Spiegel 2005:133; also Gordon and Spiegel 1993) to an anthropology founded on an “ethics of care” (Spiegel 2005:136). Driven by a critique of anthropology in general as in the service of state, South African anthropologists in the 1980s “can be characterized by its desire to be politically relevant and interventionist,” the notion of an activist anthropology (Shepherd and Robins 2008:5). For Spiegel, a new caring anthropology entails seeing anthropological work as being responsive to social and community needs, and, among other things, enabling the voices of the subjects of anthropological research can “reach decision makers” (ibid.:139). This “care” extends also to what anthropologists do with anthropological knowledge and how populations are engaged during research. “We ['South African anthropologists'] have to ensure that we do not participate in activities that undermine either that capacity and competence or the structures that are constructed to take responsibility for planning and designing appropriate strategies to enable those who will be care-givers to do so effectively. We cannot therefore allow ourselves to be drawn into divisive activities that set us against one another unless those conflicts can be caringly mediated in order to be productive” (ibid.:140; see also Becker 2007).

This certainly constitutes normative dimensions of anthropological research as I saw it practiced and discussed in Cape Town during the period of my research. It is worth thinking about how sensitive anthropology is in South Africa, particularly in Cape Town. Throughout my entire fieldwork in Cape Town, it became clear to me that certain lines were in place within the academic community.
Past writings from ‘outsider’ anthropologists still hurt local anthropologists (Scheper-Hughes 1995, Crapanzano 1985). Scheper-Hughes’ critique of anthropologists working at the University of Cape Town may have reflected what she saw during her short tenure as a visiting professor there, but she failed to acknowledge the deeply political work of anthropologists in the nation at the same time, some of which incurred great risk to their safety and social standing. I have mentioned previously how my fieldwork with young male migrants was viewed in problematic terms by other anthropologists, because, in my view, they felt it could not fit within existing parameters of legitimate research, outside an economy of legitimate compassion.

Younger anthropologists appeared much more comfortable than their elders in pursuing alternative research projects in the country, ones simultaneously less political and more political, perhaps projects that cross into taboo territory and older generation still feels reluctant to enter (Gillespie and Dubbeld 2007). In the case of Sharp’s critique of the HSRC report, this seemed to be an inability to hold South Africans, particularly poor black South Africans, accountable for cold-blooded violence and economic opportunism they might have conducted.

Conclusions

106 “And tea was still served, with predictable regularity, at ten, twelve-thirty, and three in the appropriately dowdy tearoom, the same space where Monica Wilson once held court. Departmental “found ing father” A.R. Radcliffe-Brown’s rough-hewn initialed mailbox still perches jauntily on a side table, a sacred icon to the less-than-sacred history of anthropology at the University of Cape Town... As the tea itself, served up with a sharp, intimidating, exclusive, and only rarely self-mocking humor, is a reminder that the old order is hanging on to the bitter end, tearoom topics are carefully circumscribed: cricket, film, and popular culture are acceptable, as are anecdotes about foibles of odd and eccentric South African or European anthropologists, living or dead. Anxieties and fears about the political transition are (understandably) commonly expressed. However, any seemingly naïve and optimistic reference to the “new” South Africa can result in a dramatic exodus from the tearoom” (Scheper Hughes 1995:415).
An enormous number of scholarly, institutional, and media reports were produced in South Africa in the immediacy of the anti-immigrant violence in South Africa and the displacement crisis that followed. Reducing the scale of the violence, the advance of the state opened a second phase of the crisis, which would last many months – a saga marked by unbearable camp conditions, the daunting task of reintegrating the displaced into communities, an uncertain involvement of the United Nations, and the state’s failed attempts in prosecuting the assailants. As fast as these writings appeared, this literature has since decline drastically in volume. South African academics have turned to other crises.

This chapter has attempted to turn back to the inside of the crisis and pause over key statements, images, events, and struggles that paint a less tidy narrative of a violent crisis. Doing so gives voice to many actors who were rendered mute or generic. It has attempted to use subsequently-dismissed comments and speeches to raise wider issues in contemporary South Africa.

Xenophobia has become a popular concept to think about violence in South Africa between citizens and foreign African nationals. The term speaks to South Africa’s emergence as a host state for refugees and its unclear attachment to a continent it has long considered itself separate from. ‘Xenophobia’ worked in May to harden national difference and sentiments of belonging, while eclipsing shared economic hardships and solidarities. It conveniently allowed an array of scholars and speakers to sidestep issues that pose more serious thought and response by deferring to external causes, such as the incapacity of the state and socioeconomic inequalities. Only later appreciated were the racialized composition of the violence, its very specific geography, and the relatively effective decisions taken by certain state agencies to restore calm. I have argued that President Thabo Mbeki’s
struggles to name the violence in South Africa may be more kindly interpreted as his attempt to save “his people” (black South Africans) from shameful accusations. I have also explored debates between scholarly figures to suggest a gulf emerging between different generations of anthropologists within the country.

This chapter, yet another contribution to the library on the ‘xenophobic violence’ from May 2008, has tried to raise questions to do with words and acts of violence from the first days of a crisis in which violent words, threats of violence, and reports about violence led to injury, widespread displacement, and confusion. The complexities of the moment – shaped by constrained possibilities for speaking and writing, marked by the jarring of events, languages, and histories, and producing effects of limits and excess that temporarily disturbed speech conventions – has been fast forgotten, easy to forget, and my suggestion is to return to the moment for close analysis by making words our central focus, especially the public words that circulated rapidly and briefly. Violence and confusion continued for a short period of time, before a language set in (or was restored) to talk about the situation and those it involved. I have tried to show how much of what followed in the immediate aftermath of the attacks against African immigrants and refugees was also violent in nature.

Until May 2008, issues of xenophobia in South Africa outside of academic and professional publications were largely confined to marginal, back-page, local stories in national media: isolated murders, assaults, and looting; small-scale protests; allegations of corruption, bribery, and mismanagement at the Department of Home Affairs. It was hard not to attribute some kind of newness to the 2008 crisis: certainly the scale and speed of the problem and its form supported the thesis that what was happening was unprecedented.
Refugee advocates, lawyers, and activists were grateful for the intense attention refugee affairs were making, even if they were organizationally incapable of handling it. It brought an issue that had not sufficiently garnered public support and interest. Yet, the same groups were also critical of the way the crisis unfolded – ultimately led by civil society groups without previous expertise in the field of refugee affairs. At heated moments, refugee experts and advocates were pitted against each other.

There is a puzzle surrounding the massive library on xenophobia and the 2008 crisis in South Africa, and its uniformity. Institutional reports and scholarship continue to place greatest fault with the state – for either being inadequately prepared and poorly staffed (matters of technique) or for its responsibility for not addressing socioeconomic factors (neoliberal economics, the solidification of categories, nationalism, the narrow restrictions of citizenship). NGO and government and independent reports all advocate community engagement as a solution to the buildup of future tensions that might create additional conflicts, yet few researchers dwell in the spaces where such violence occurred. Likewise, few reports speak to the agency of the foreign nationals involved. This may be a result of how the camps were not passive spaces of victimcy, but internally tense and violent.

There are, finally, risks in cutting words and acts out of the worlds that gave rise to them – a danger of de-contextualizing from focusing on moments in isolation, in which the extraordinary and disturbing is unduly heightened over the ordinary, in which one misses the competing and multiple processes that led to an event emerging and the effects that came afterwards, and thus the experiences brought to bear in both. There is a need for careful situational analysis of a confusing moment.
I experienced a personal sense of abandonment in staying involved in a ‘refugee crisis’ while others had abandoned it, probably quite sensibly, as a lost cause, as irresolvable, and where no ‘victory’ could be claimed. My sights are limited by doing ethnography itself – from the closeness and painfulness of attending too closely to everyday lives under duress. In continuing to listen, perhaps the anger of others became directed at me because I am someone who listens.
The idiom of brotherhood

The young migrants in Cape Town spoke of each other, and later of me, as “brothers.” This was an affectionate and serious naming: a broad and specific kind of relationship adaptable for work, guarding, homemaking, and war; of close friendship between men; an ethical disposition towards another. They talked about and pointed towards the absence of brotherhood in South Africa. Wesley Snipes told me South Africa is a lost and bad place, because South Africans do not know what it means to “love thy brother” – an insight perhaps into how the demands of living in the city impair relations between men and how the violence of apartheid reeked destruction on the institution of family (Reynolds 2000). Gesturing to an unnatural crime, President Thabo Mbeki talked about the violent attacks on African foreign nationals bringing shame to the new nation because African male migrants are “our brothers” (Mbeki 2008).

The archive might be trawled for a revised discussion on brothers and brotherhood in anthropology: the levirate marriage; the mythology of fratricide (“Am I my brother’s keeper?” asks a defiant Cain, Genesis 4); the making and breaking of brotherhood through ritual, war, initiation, and in the everyday. Such a call may come from outside of anthropology (see Chabal 2009, a political scientist, advocating for a stronger attention to male kinship in the political economy of Africa, particularly in terms of ideas of ‘association’ and ‘obligation’).
Monica Wilson once showed an entire African society organized by brotherhood. She described the Nyakyusa, in Tanzania in the late 1930s, reproducing itself through the new origination of villages formed by sets of boys of roughly the same age (Wilson 1987). Brotherhood, at that time, provided the basis of sociality for the Nyakyusa; these ties created homes and households, determined the patterns of marriage, and organized day-to-day life. “The village begins with perhaps a dozen boys, and their younger brothers join them, one by one; but after some years, when the senior members of the boys’ village are between sixteen and eighteen years old, the younger ones begin to be refused admittance to the village: “They are children!”” (ibid.:19). These practices take place under the sign of a Nyakyusa cultural value, ukwangala, “the enjoyment of good company... by extension, the mutual aid and sympathy which spring from personal friendship” (ibid.:66). In Nyakyusa society, good company cannot be found between men and women, or between men of different generations.107

This dissertation has provided a study of migrant networks built out of brothers and on an ethics and economy of brotherhood.

Youth as “stuck”

Brotherhood endures, but youth should not.

“We are now in the age of youth,” Marc Sommers explains (Sommers 2012:5). Diminished access to land, faster migration to the city, and dwindling opportunities for viable unemployment in Africa has produced “an increasing difficulty of young people to become adults” (ibid.:6). Categories of the “youthman” have been invented

107 Good company cannot take place among Christians either. “The Christians’ code of hospitality differs somewhat from that of the pagans; the latter stress feeding neighbors, while the Christians stress feeding strangers” (Wilson 1987:71).
in Nigeria, Sommers writes, and “waithood” is now used in policy-making and
development studies to describe young people’s lives in Egypt, Africa, and the
Middle East. “Being a youth lasts much longer than a ceremony: it means
experiencing the liminal stage of becoming for years. It may even become a state of
permanent ambiguity, as cultural prerequisites for adulthood in many countries are
hard if not impossible to attain” (ibid.:3). African youth are “stuck” out of time (Cole
and Durham 2008).

The anthropology of children and youth has, most centrally, challenged
impressions of young people as a passive, inexperienced, and incapable subset of
actors, showing instead their resiliency and agency in times of conflict, violence, and
migration (Argenti 2007; Boydon and Mann 2005; Hoffman 2011). But it has also
drawn attention to challenges younger generations face in moving through the life-
course in familiar and culturally acceptable ways. I have argued that the migrants I
worked among survive and succeed in a hostile urban world because of the
possibilities their modes of relationship offer them, which prove to be compatible
with the city. Freedom from the restrictions and immobilities of family-life, for
example, provide the youths with the dexterity and companionship they need to
make a city such as Cape Town a viable place for living. Yet, I remained aware that
while these “brothers” hoped to retain some aspects of their current status and
modes of living, which Cape Town offered them, this was also a temporary sojourn
that had become unintentionally and un-wantingly too permanent.

Some time before the violence in Cape Town unfolded, I learned a lot of the
youths were secretly sending some of the money they were earning in South Africa
back home to their families. “All of us are doing this, James,” Saeed told me in
private. “But we can’t discuss it with our brothers here. Some of them don’t have
relatives to pay back, and others are too ashamed to say that their money is returned.” It was an open secret; a secret between brothers. Oriented to an elsewhere, the migrants’ remittances were going backwards in time to a place of loss, where they were imagined to be doing reparative, hopeful work: buying a future. None of the few migrants I knew who were candid with me on the subject were convinced that such relations could be restored quickly.

Several migrants in the networks I worked among quietly left their “brothers” in Cape Town to journey home to try to become men. Their struggle for adulthood was a betrayal of an unspeakable kind. Such a telling, however, needs to be kept for another time.
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Education

2013  Ph.D. Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University
2007  M.A. Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University
2006  M.A. Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge
2002  B.A. Hons. Social Anthropology, University of Cambridge

Professional Experience

2010- Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, College of Arts and Sciences, Zayed University, Dubai
2009  Instructor, Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University
2008-2009 Research Affiliate and Visiting Lecturer, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, Stellenbosch University
2007-2008 Research Affiliate, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Cape Town
2004-2009 Instructor, Expository Writing Program, Johns Hopkins University
2004-2005 Teaching Assistant, Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University

Awards, Fellowships, and Research Grants

2012  Exemplary Faculty Award, Zayed University
2009  Research Fellowship, Framework Program in Global Health, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
2008  Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant, Cultural Anthropology, National Science Foundation
2008  Research Scholarship, Harold Hyam Wingate Foundation
2007  International Dissertation Research Fellowship, Social Science Research Council
2006  Residential Writing Fellowship, Centro Incontri Umani, Switzerland (with Aaron Goodfellow and Patricia Henderson)
2006; 2004 Research Fellowship, Center for Africana Studies, Johns Hopkins University
2004  Research Fellowship, Institute for Global Studies in Culture, Power, and History, Johns Hopkins University
2004  Research Fellowship, Program for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Johns Hopkins University
2003-2007 Graduate Fellowship, Department of Anthropology, Zanvyl Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, Johns Hopkins University
2002; 2001 Prize for Highest Academic Performance, University of Cambridge
2001  Isaac Newton Trust Fellowship, University of Cambridge
2001  Commonwealth Scholarship, University of Cambridge
Research and Teaching Interests

War, Displacement, Migration; Kinship and Friendship; Children and Youth; Urban Life and the City; Violence; Economic Anthropology; Gender; South Africa and/in Africa

Publications


2004 Child on the Wing: Children Negotiating the Everyday in the Geography of Violence. Anthropology News 45(1)

Presentations and Conference Activities (Selection)

2010 Roundtable organizer: Sexuality, Human Rights, and the Law: A Special Conference on Recent Events in Uganda. Program for the Study of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore (with Aaron Goodfellow and Clara Han)

2010 Relations as infrastructure, persons as substitutes: Migrant networking in Cape Town. Paper presented at Explorations of ‘Afrinesia’ – Experimental Approaches to Political and Legal Anthropology in Africa, Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala


2009 Participant: Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Culture, Johannesburg

2009 Street knowledge and unspeakable places: Walking with young migrants in Cape Town. Presentation, Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore


2008 Hard categories, indescribable things, and some forceful words on death: Young migrants in Cape Town. Paper presented at the New Social Forms Seminar, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch


2006 Rethinking the ‘child soldier’. Paper presented at a conference on Armed Youth, Centro Incontri Umani, Ascona

2006 Discussant: Domesticities. Graduate Student Conference, Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore


2004 Commissioned paper: ‘Small questions’ for scholarly movement: A pre-review of young people’s involvement in war and political violence. Workshop on Children and Youth in Organized Violence, Social Science Research Council and Institute for Security Studies, Pretoria

2004 Discussant: future/tense: Time and Politics. Graduate Student Conference, Department of Anthropology, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore (with Jun Mizukawa)

Administrative Experience, University and Professional Service (Selection)

2012- Faculty Advisor, Young African Scholars Program, Harry F. Guggenheim Foundation, New York

2011-2012 Chair, Academic Affairs Committee, College of Arts and Sciences, Zayed University

2011-2013 Steering Committee, Undergraduate Research Scholars Program, Zayed University

2010-2012 Selection Committee, Abu Dhabi International Film Festival

2009 Editorial Assistant, Social Dynamics

2007-2008 Reviewer, Anthropology South Africa

2005-2006 Diversity Leadership Council, Johns Hopkins University

2005-2006 Chair of Academic Affairs, Executive Board, Graduate Representative Organization, Johns Hopkins University

2003-2005 Administrator, Child on the Wing: Children Negotiating the Everyday in the Geography of Violence, Johns Hopkins University, a project under the Rockefeller Foundation in the Humanities and Study of Culture