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<RRH>Hustle economy in Mathare

<AT>**‘Youth are redrawing the map’: temporalities and terrains of the hustle economy in Mathare, Nairobi**

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<ABS>**Abstract**

This article examines the temporalities and terrains of the home-grown hustle economy of Mathare, one of the oldest and largest informal settlements in Nairobi. It builds on my previous work mobilizing the notion of ‘hustle’ to ground the narratives of struggle, opportunity and place-making expressed by youth whose livelihood strategies have centred around neighbourhood-based informal waste labour in order to assert claims to their local environment. Drawing on three sets of ethnographic portraits and over a decade of longitudinal ethnographic research, the article shows how hustling connects to and evolves with particular generational and gendered identities, revealing the shifting demands on ‘older’ versus ‘younger’ youth. As everyday lives are mired in constant uncertainty, youth occupy a ‘precarious present’, caught in a state of suspension but also well versed in adapting to adversity and shaping local politics of provisioning in the absence of formal structures of support. The article sheds light on local logics of wealth redistribution among youth who belong to the same neighbourhood but whose claims to particular resources shift over time. The article demonstrates how hustling in Mathare sits at the nexus of agentive economic, environmental, political and social struggles, as youth on the urban periphery manage waste in their neighbourhoods to negotiate their place but also their time in the city.

It was 3.30 a.m. in Huruma, a low-income residential estate located near Mathare, one of the oldest and largest informal settlements of Nairobi.¹ Kennedy, the youth group leader of an area known as *Kibichoi base*, along with two other group members, Mathenge and Elias, were conducting their bi-weekly rounds of garbage collection. Eliza had lent me her overalls and gloves. There were fifteen plots to collect from (most are eight-storey walk-ups, a couple are shanty structures), and we had until 8 a.m. to finish. Kamba music played loudly from the local bars, where sex workers stood outside waiting for customers, and *boda boda* (motorcycle) drivers sat for another smoke. From outside we could see the shadows of drunken souls having a last drink inside the bar. Kennedy and his crew passed by the slow nocturnal pace of things with bemusement and fervour as they pulled their handcarts past the bars where men would drink until dawn. Different nocturnal spaces, sounds and rhythms of labour (Crang 2001) co-mingled and coexisted, each supplying a different service, largely invisible to slumbering residents.

An hour later, around 5 a.m., a ribbon of light appeared under the doors of ground-floor dwellings as some of the *mamas* started their morning chores, cleaning, going through the multiple steps involved in making morning tea (fire, boiling water, boiling milk, tea leaves, stirring constantly). It was still dark but the night was over, giving way to the crescendo of the morning bustle. Tilted young bodies left flip-flop footprints in the dirt paths as their slight frames carried heavy jerry cans of water fetched from the local water points; uneven wooden tables were set up as working surfaces for the first hour of preparation involved in making *mandazis* (fried dough) and *chapatis* (flat bread) – mixing the flour, oil and water, working the dough, and separating out the small balls of dough before frying. Near the Kibichoi primary school, the water point and the corner where collected garbage was stacked until the truck arrived to take it away, Geoffrey's *mandazi* table was well frequented. He had been making and selling *mandazis* for the past twenty-eight years, and his attention to his craft was coupled with efficiency and dexterity. Without precise measurement he managed to make each small ball of dough equal in size to all the others, forming uniform hand-cut triangular shapes that became differentiated only once they flared up in the hot oil before being

¹ This article draws on ethnographic research focused on youth livelihood strategies in Mathare, where I spent fifteen months doing fieldwork between 2009 and 2010, with subsequent trips in 2011, 2012, 2016 and 2017, alongside regular communication via social media platforms (WhatsApp and Facebook especially) with key interlocutors.

carefully displayed in the wooden crate next to the working table. This small business included every stage of production, a one-man assembly line marked by speed and calm.

Myriad forms of behind-the-scenes labour harmonized and provided the backdrop for the rest of the day's economic and social activity, with a collective understanding that something might fall through. In Nairobi, it is common (even expected) that infrastructures and services might break down, so disruption and all manner of crises are the norm (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). Constant adaptation thus becomes vital to people's skill sets and a modality not just for everyday maintenance but for urban life *tout court*. Despite water shortages and the mornings when the garbage truck doesn't arrive on time (or at all), people's orientation towards work and life involves keeping choreographies of the day moving no matter what. The prep time for *mandazis* could not be delayed, or Geoffrey would miss the first flurry of customers on their way to school or work. Garbage collection had to happen on schedule, even if the truck wasn't going to arrive on time.

The vignette above offers a window onto the social forms of labour (Hart 2009) that are intimately entangled with everyday uncertainties, urban street culture and ecologies of belonging in neighbourhoods cut off from mainstream urban services, waged employment and political representation. In these neighbourhoods, a significant source of income generation for youth involves collecting, sorting, reselling and recycling post-consumer residential waste. These home-grown waste economies are increasingly common across rapidly growing cities in the global South where 'urbanization without industrialization' (Davis 2006) has generated a vicious cycle of largely informal and erratic earnings, a minimal tax base, and public under-investment in basic services (Parnell and Pieterse 2012; Myers 2005). Yet, as recent ethnographies of urban waste labour have shown, closer attention needs to be paid to the relationship waste workers living and working in marginalized neighbourhoods have to the urban economy, and to the city *tout court* (Fredericks 2019; Millar 2018).

This article opens up and develops the conceptual frames for seeing and theorizing urban life and labour in popular neighbourhoods² (Simone 2018), at the nexus of urban marginality and possibility (Di Nunzio 2019). It deepens familiar theories that have conceptualized economic relationships structurally excluded from state regulation and support (Breman 2013; Hart 1973; Standing 2011; Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Vosko 2000; Waite 2009) – notably, informality, precarity and makeshift urbanism (Vasudevan 2015). It enhances conceptualizations of work beyond the wage (Ferguson and Li 2018), contributing to theorizations of ‘making do’, ‘getting by’ and *débrouillardise* (Jones 2010; Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012; Mabala 2011; McKensie 2015; Waage 2006), with a particular focus on the ‘rhythms of endurance’ (Simone 2018) and place-making in popular urban neighbourhoods in African cities. As Simone explains, ‘no matter how improvised, lives need to be held, supported. They need a somewhere in which to take place’ (Simone 2018: 4). Drawing on Simone’s attention to both rhythms and places of improvisation and endurance, this article builds on my previous writing on Nairobi’s hustle economy and informal waste labour (Thieme 2010; 2013; 2015; 2016; 2017) by focusing on the temporal and spatial dimensions of hustling, the rhythms and the ‘somewhere’ in which ‘improvised lives’ take place. By exploring the temporalities and terrains of hustling, following over a decade of ongoing ethnographic engagement in specific sub-neighbourhoods of Mathare and youth groups who live and work there, I investigate how hustling as a narrative *and* an urban practice evolves over time within particular neighbourhoods, and how the specific conditions of urban life work with, but also confront, ever-shifting economic, political and social (dis)orders.

² Drawing on AbdouMaliq Simone’s term ‘popular neighbourhoods’ and on the French expression ‘*quartier populaire*’, I aim to move away from the more familiar and pejorative term ‘slum’, as well as from seemingly more neutral but equally inappropriate terms such as ‘low-income’ or ‘working-class’, because these neighbourhoods are not necessarily linked to class-based ties or income-based wage economies. The term ‘popular’ or *populaire* connotes several dimensions: a neighbourhood that elicits negative stereotypes and stigma in mainstream representation; the sense of being part of the city but cut off from its mainstream services; and a strong sense of belonging, associational life and economic activity that may take on social forms and appearances that differ from formal market, waged economies and are often vital to the functioning of the whole city.

This article centres on a group of youth born and raised in Mathare, and examines their modes of self-representation, belonging, calculation, place-making, accumulation and endurance over time. In this life world, my interlocutors refer to the social forms of urban life and labour as a ‘hustle’ (Thieme 2013; 2017). Used in everyday street *Sheng*³ in Nairobi (Githiora 2018), hustling carries a performative function, a shared language reflecting local codes and affirmations of one’s street credibility. As such, from an etic perspective, hustling reveals the strategies and pragmatics of young people cut off from mainstream structures of opportunity and support as they negotiate their relationships to different institutions across diverse terrains situated along the formal–informal, licit–illicit continuum (Hart 2009).⁴ As an urban practice, it involves resourcefulness that is profoundly fragile and full of risks, but also capable of yielding surprising rewards. As an expressive articulation, it is a way for youth to theorize, celebrate, lament and share their own experience of social and economic navigation and endurance under conditions of adversity and uncertainty (Caldeira 2010; Cooper and Pratten 2014; Vigh 2006; Simone 2018). Thus, the hustle economy is both a narrative and an urban practice of shared struggles and solidarities grounded in street-oriented knowledge. As the article illustrates, it encapsulates rhythms of resourcefulness, diverse adaptations and contingency plans in the face of constant interruptions, uncertain returns, potential breakdown and marginalization.

Hustling has several descriptive and analytical registers. To echo Gautam Bhan (2019), paying attention to ‘articulations of knowledge’ embedded in the empirical contexts we try to understand as ethnographers enables what he calls a ‘Southern urban practice’. Bhan discusses the notions and practice of ‘squatting’ and ‘repair’ to show how these familiar but often underrated or stigmatized terms and practices are rooted in the real expressions of makeshift urbanism and should be recognized as instrumental in shaping urban modes of dwelling, resources and skills that merit validation and reconsideration. Similar to ‘squatting’ and ‘repair’, the emic use of the term *hustling* in Kenya serves as a local articulation of and response to economic precarity and urban marginality in the face of protracted uneven development under neoliberalism (Ferguson 2006). Building on my previous

³ *Sheng* is a place-based slang vernacular combining Swahili, English and other Kenyan languages.

⁴ See the other four articles in this special issue: Ference (2021), van Stapele (2021), Unselde (2021) and Monteith (2021).

conceptualization of the ‘hustle economy’ (Thieme 2017), and as the introduction to this special issue elaborates (Thieme *et al.* 2021), hustling can be read as a ‘Black Atlantic’ (Gilroy 1993) performative expression of what Gibson-Graham (2008) has called ‘diverse economies’, reflecting different ways of performing the economy and situated ways of knowing and expressing everyday struggles and solidarities in the face of uncertain urban terrains and unpredictable temporalities of labour.

Over the years, Nairobi youth from under-resourced neighbourhoods have been lured into various government youth employment and ‘empowerment’ schemes, such as *Kazi kwa vijana* (Work for Youth) following the post-election violence in 2008 (Thieme 2010), or the National Youth Service (NYS), originally set up in 1964 and restructured in 2014 by the recent Kenyatta administration. But the nepotism, short-term contracts and delays in pay have consistently drawn youth back to neighbourhood-based livelihoods. For example, the benefits associated with residential garbage collection and recycling included the freedom to work on one’s own terms and the refusal to be, as youth in Mathare claimed, ‘someone else’s donkey’. This expression had a double meaning: it was a critique of the modes of colonial subservience that they perceived in their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, who had laboured either for the ‘white British settlers’ or the *Wahindi* (Indian Kenyan) businessmen, and a perception of the exploitation they would experience (or knew their peers to experience) working in the industrial sector for insecure wages in degrading conditions.

The article draws from longitudinal ethnographic encounters with key interlocutors whose stories and trajectories I have followed since 2009. These ‘portraits’ (Jeffrey and Dyson 2009) reveal the diffuse forms of knowledge, barriers and dreamscapes that animate the everyday lives and imaginaries of young people in a ‘position of marginality’ (Honwana and De Boeck 2005: 5). By examining how a group of youth cope with and subvert this position of marginality, the article reflects on the paradoxical condition of youth who constantly adjust to the dual sense of being stuck and unstable at the same time (Honwana 2012; Sommers 2012). Through three ethnographic portraits, I depict a set of conundrums connected to the temporal and spatial dimensions of urban life and labour in Mathare: the article explores generational and gendered identities and dynamics, revealing the shifting demands on ‘older’ versus ‘younger’ youth, and sheds light on local logics of wealth redistribution among youth who belong to the same neighbourhood but whose claims to particular resources shift over time. It also examines understandings of place-making and

territorial zoning, revealing the ways in which attachment to the neighbourhood ‘base’ (or *baze*⁵ in *Sheng*) are contingent on particular social ties and obligations.

<A>Nairobi: city of (unrealized) dreams and hustling terrains

Nairobi exemplifies urban extremes at work. The pace of ICT innovations, speculative urban development and international development interventions contrast with persistent uneven development and systemic inequality. Although Nairobi epitomizes the rapidly changing landscape of twenty-first-century African urbanism, its profound contradictions date back to its colonial past, and inequalities across all domains of urban life have persisted despite the transition from British colonial rule (1899–1963) to Kenyan independence (Wrong 2009).

Since 1899, when Nairobi was known as a ‘white garden city’ and off limits to Africans outside Kibera, the city has continuously contended with the legacies of exclusionary master plans, unregulated real-estate markets, and makeshift infrastructures (Hake 1977). During the colonial era, Kenya’s primary wealth was based on its agricultural production. Nairobi itself lacked an industrial economy, so the majority of economic activity in the city depended on migrant service-sector work (White 1990). Some of the only livelihood opportunities in the city were informal and unwaged service jobs, albeit intimately tied to the formal and regulated economy, either filling a gap or complementing existing economic activity. As White (*ibid.*: 1) argues in her study of sex work and casual labour during the colonial era, ‘the illicit often supported the respectable’.

Today, Nairobi is rife with ‘speculative urbanism’ (Goldman 2011), with Tatu City (Watson 2014) and Konza Technology City (Van den Broeck 2017) projecting futuristic visions of African ‘smart’ and high-tech urban development. Yet, over 60 per cent of the city’s residents live in informal settlements, cut off from reliable basic services (Huchzermeyer 2011). The dreamscapes of Nairobi’s future city contend with the everyday realities of Nairobi’s majority residents: the economically active poor and lower-middle classes who

⁵ The *baze* is the *Sheng* expression connoting a zone locally recognized as a kind of collective turf where certain youth make a claim to place. Their attachment to this place may be through various kinds of social ties, especially childhood friendships and the shared experience of time spent together waiting, loitering, scheming and talking about the hustle (see also van Stapele 2021).

experience frequent power and water shortages, while being the customers, retailers and repair technicians of sophisticated ICT products and services. Against the odds, the majority of Nairobians have long developed a constellation of ‘real’ (MacGaffey 1991) economic practices that may appear makeshift and peripheral to state purview (King 1996; Myers 2005), while being entangled with the more mainstream East African capitalist ‘success stories’ of the mobile banking sector and other tech innovations. Youth living in popular neighbourhoods thus experience a paradoxical twenty-first-century reality: at once marginalized by the formal labour and housing market, yet super-connected to digital life.

For the ‘vulnerable urban majority’ of the city (Simone and Pieterse 2017), there is a deep history of youth-led social, economic and activist organization. Writing in the decade after independence, Hake (1977: 9) referred to Mathare Valley as a ‘self-help city’. Here, Hake differentiated between what Barbara Ward called ‘odd job men’ (Ward 1970 in Hake 1977: 9) – often urban migrants scrambling for any work to make ends meet in any corner of the city – and the ‘self-help jobs’ that were made and undertaken in Mathare Valley. At the same time, Mathare Valley came to be regarded as ‘beyond the city’s responsibility’, partly due to its complex history; waves of displaced people settled there in the 1930s before later being evicted, anti-colonial freedom fighters came and went during the 1940s and 1950s, and squatters came back to settle at the time of colonial independence in 1963. So Mathare acquired a reputation for operating ‘outside the law and conventions of the colonial regime’ (*ibid*: 147) and became a place where men and women ‘without jobs or houses set about building a new suburb of the self-help city’ (*ibid*.: 148).

Mathare was segmented into different ‘villages’, and, despite having grown significantly in population over the past fifty years (from about 30,000 to 300,000), residents still refer to their ‘village’, with its own social and economic organization. Against the backdrop of persistent profound inequality, with the ‘future city’ and the ‘real city’ continuing to operate in tandem, Mathare represents the coming together of several factors: a rapidly growing and underserved youth population is faced with a lack of employment opportunities and formal education (especially secondary school and vocational training), and yet youth comprise the majority of residents. Given the settlement’s dense population with a high concentration of households and inadequate municipal provision, Mathare youth have asserted their place in the urban economy and their political hold over a home-grown, ‘self-help’ and youth-led business of residential waste management.

In Mathare, the key objective is to keep moving, even when work is scarce, and *kuzurura* (loitering) becomes a kind of proxy for being ‘in between’ states of activity. Although there may be no clear sense of direction, the imperative is to *not just* stand still. Youth are always ‘somewhere’, as a popular exchange between friends illustrates: the response to the humorous accusation ‘*Umepotea!*’ (‘You’ve been lost!’), implying that you haven’t been seen) is ‘*Niko tu*’ (‘I’m just here’ – i.e. you’ve been around), often followed by ‘*Ninahustle tu*’ (‘I’m just hustling’). Fist bumps are then usually exchanged, as both parties understand that *ninahustle* suggests simultaneously being on the move and stuck in one place. By extension, the often used plural expression ‘*Tunahustle*’ (‘We hustle’) has become a euphemism for the shared struggle to ‘get by’ but also an affirmative phrase recognizing the ‘hard work’ involved in constantly contending with uncertain returns. And yet, ‘to keep moving’ includes continually returning to the *baze*, to be seen and to keep an eye out for what’s going on. The *baze* thus serves as a base camp for dealing with all manner of mundane emergencies, a stage for recounting all manner of exploits, and a place to be bored, to wait, and to scheme together.

Comprising over half of the residential population of Mathare, youth have been left to their own devices to make a living in a highly diverse but unregulated urban economy. With limited prospects of getting a formal job, and an inability to attain the culturally recognized milestones and life stages for a young person moving into adulthood (such as a stable job, property ownership, being able to afford to marry), many youth are caught in a sense of suspension and ‘waithood’ (Honwana 2012). Waithood is individually felt but collectively experienced, so friendship-based youth groups become crucial foundations for social and economic organization in the various Mathare ‘villages’. Young men and women who self-identify as hustlers (*mahustla*) face daily threats to their livelihoods, health and social justice. As they learn to manage overlapping social, environmental and economic risks, they experiment with different (sometimes rogue) aspirations, dealings and plans to reconfigure the world around them (Jeffrey and Dyson 2009; Katz 2004; Thieme 2017; Pieterse and Simone 2013). The following section sheds light on Mathare’s home-grown waste economy to explore how hustling has evolved over time and space among a group of youth coping with a precarious urban environment. Both empirical sections expose the everyday rhythms of investment, labour and sociality that have shaped young urban lives on the periphery of formal education, waged employment and tenure rights. These ethnographic vignettes reflect the undulations not only of endurance in a protracted period of waithood, but also of the continual attempts to improve the collective environment. Here, waste labour is both a

metaphorical and literal expression of ‘reclaiming the discarded’ (Millar 2018), turning what might be deemed void of value and unseen into a gritty politics of possibility and visibility.

<A>‘Younger youth now want to redraw the map’: intergenerational relations in the garbage economy

The terrains and temporalities of hustling intersect when the little wealth that is accumulated on a daily basis and across longer periods of time needs to be shared constantly across multiple social groups to account for the fragility and uncertainty of gains. The following offers three ‘scenes’ of hustling in practice, focusing on how youth negotiate the daily unpredictable rhythms of work and community relations within their neighbourhoods, the punctual political manoeuvres to access resources from different institutional actors, and the modes of redistribution with younger peers who have become the new generation of ‘jobless’ youth looking to *make* work.

By 8 a.m., all the garbage had been collected and new burlap bags had been put in place for each floor of each building. All that was left to do was wait for the truck, so Kennedy announced that it was time to have *chai* and some *mandazi*. During the breakfast break, Kennedy broke down the business numbers, scribbling on my tattered field notebook.

<EXT>We do collection twice weekly. But Monday is worse than Thursdays, because it’s after the weekend and people have consumed more, you see ... OK, the truck that comes makes two trips each time, from Huruma to Dandora there ... There are four trips per week from Kibicho *baze* ... Each trip can carry 15 tons of garbage, so that’s 60 tons a week ... In each plot you see here [he points up to the four- to eight-storey walk-up buildings all around Huruma], there are fifty-seven apartments on average. That’s 855 households, each paying KSh 150 [US\$1.47]. So that’s ... that’s a total of KSh 128,250 a month [US\$1,255]. OK, the costs include the sacks, paying the guys who collect and wash the sacks, and paying the lorry driver KSh 2,000 per month (approximately US\$20).

For each morning of work, Kennedy enrolled three or four young people from his *baze*, who each got about KSh 500 (nearly US\$5), considered a decent daily wage for a ‘casual worker’ in Nairobi. Kennedy’s youth group managed fifteen plots, which was typical for youth groups

who had been involved in the business since the early days of garbage collection. Over time, any person in the garbage business would progress from starting as a collector to eventually managing a plot, and then potentially having a regular crew of two to four co-workers. They would build the business incrementally, one plot at a time. If you were a good leader, you started to allow some of your crew (who showed interest and potential) to manage their own plot. But the territorial limits are mutually understood: as youth often explained in response to my queries about the spatial zones of garbage collection, ‘You don’t go beyond your *baze*.’

The oral histories I have heard since 2009 suggest that youth-led residential garbage collection started in Mathare in the 1990s. Today, the waste hustle is widespread, hyper-local, fragmented and territorial. Combining time on their hands and an imagination, entrepreneurial youth in Mathare had captured the underutilized resource of household garbage in their highly condensed and congested neighbourhoods. In these neighbourhoods, post-consumer waste was both a systemic problem no one was prepared to deal with and a perfect commodity enabling youth to ‘turn trash into cash’. Each group collected residential garbage from up to 400 households for a monthly fixed fee – a kind of ‘shared self-provisioning’ in a part of the city that lacked basic services (Kinder 2016). In order to insert exchange value into this solid ‘waste’, groups sorted through the collected garbage materials to measure what was worth shredding (such as plastics), reusing (such as metal), fixing (such as electronics), or reselling to the industrial area or to a broker with connections. For many youth born and raised in the ‘slums’, with few opportunities in formal education or employment, the lack of public service provision in their neighbourhoods rendered residential garbage a material, social and territorial currency (Millar 2018).

When the truck driver finally arrived at around 9 a.m., Kennedy quelled the anxiety he had felt since 7 a.m. and started loading the collected garbage onto the truck before the morning foot traffic got in the way. As if there were no rush at all, he asked the driver if he had had breakfast – to which, of course, the driver said no. And for the next twenty minutes, Kennedy and the truck driver sat together under the corrugated metal roof of Mama Caro’s tea stall, next to Geoffrey’s *mandazi* stand. This moment was more than ‘small talk’; it was a careful investment in mutual trust, and a performance to everyone else around that Kennedy had connections. Kennedy later explained that the driver was a ‘friend’ and there were ‘no issues’ with him. But the driver was also contracted by the city council. And if the city council failed to pay him, he wouldn’t come to these difficult-to-reach neighbourhoods, because he

wouldn't have the money to hire the truck in the first place, let alone pay for petrol and his time. Both men depended on the cooperation of the city council, but, in the meantime, they had developed their own working relationship, and these small acts and performances of reciprocity (such as the shared *mandazi* and *chai* in Kennedy's *baze*) were important social investments in securing the bridge between the garbage economy operating in neighbourhoods cut off from municipal services and the fragile cooperation of the city council willing to outsource the collection.

This arrangement was an example of Kennedy's savvy political manoeuvring, as he negotiated numerous forms of provisioning on behalf of his neighbourhood over the years. Kennedy had cultivated strong relationships with all the caretakers of the buildings he serviced and had direct contact with the city council's youth officer, Susan, who in turn felt she had an entry point to a neighbourhood where most people from other parts of the city never venture. As Kennedy put it:

<EXT>many organizations have a mission, but it doesn't match youth's reality and timescale. The unique thing about Susan's approach: *anakuja mtaani* [she comes to the ghetto], and she asks youth to take initiatives.

It was no coincidence that Kennedy's base had a water tank, a 'gift' from the local MP of that constituency. 'I helped her during her campaign a while back,' Kennedy admitted. He explained that 'Bishi' (as she was affectionately known to supportive youth in her constituency) 'did a lot for us youth'.⁶ The water tank was placed in a crucial spot at the junction of residential alleyways and the strip of commercial stalls a block away from the *matatu* (minibus) stage. There was a fee for accessing water from this water point, but it was reasonable compared with most other water points in the area. It was also next to public toilets that were cleaned daily by Kennedy's youth group, metres away from chicken coops where organic waste was taken after the morning garbage had been collected and sorted.

⁶ For some politicians, getting votes is often contingent on demonstrating material commitments to the under-served neighbourhoods in their constituency and can also involve recalling their own struggles with poverty in an effort to connect with the *wanainchi* ('common people').

In 2017, Kennedy sent me a photograph of Kibicho *baze* and said: ‘T, look, the space that is always so muddy where we leave the hand carts, you see, they have come to pave the road there.’ When I saw him in person a few months later, I asked Kennedy to explain how he managed to get the road paved. I knew there had to be a ‘deal’. He smiled: ‘I was an eye for the MP.’

Here, Kennedy’s social navigation (Vigh 2006) involved carefully managing multiple personal and political connections within and outside the neighbourhood, combined with a public performance of job creation for youth and community-based upgrading. This was happening during the early stages of pre-election violence across Mathare and Huruma communities, so ‘keeping youth busy’ was a form of peacebuilding. This was also a time when younger youth had started contesting the established hierarchies of the garbage collection system across Mathare *bazes*. The teenage school dropouts were seeing older founding members of youth group-led garbage collection ‘doing well’ as shareholders of the business. Younger youth started to make demands, claiming that ‘we need our share’, which called for ‘redrawing the map’ of garbage collection. Against the backdrop of potential intergenerational tension and claims over scarce resources among the larger cohort of ‘youth’, Kennedy became a subcontractor of roadworks, a key liaison between the community and the local MP. At that time, he figured that the best way to mitigate tensions would be to ensure that the pavement made the community happy (local businesses and *mamas* bringing their children to school), but also gave work to potentially idle youth who teeter between ‘making’ and ‘breaking’ (Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Jones 2012). Kennedy made sure that he gave different young people work for three days at a time, and then gave work to another set of youth. This meant training new people each time, which could be regarded as inefficient by any business manager unversed in the micro-politics of the *mtaa* (the street/neighbourhood), but it was a pragmatic and opportunistic strategy of diversifying distribution (Ferguson 2015) among local youth.

This approach resonates with other hustle economies in Nairobi, where there is an implicit understanding among different generations of youth that the older youth need to provide for the younger group in the absence of other forms of support. That logic of intergenerational distribution and obligation is reflected in a careful negotiation between individual

investments and collective returns.⁷ That is partly why Kennedy persists, to this day, in *doing* the garbage work, rather than simply getting paid to *manage* a set of plots and have underlings do the work for him. Maintaining his position as a humble leader in his neighbourhood involves working alongside the young boys, and knowing that making his work ethic visible but unpretentious builds a kind of insurance against potential intergenerational insurgency.

Kennedy's deliberate attention to redistribution among his peers and younger youth 'coming up the ladder' differed in social form from another youth group I have been following since 2009, Mathare Number 10 Youth Group (MANYGRO), fellow veterans of the garbage collection economy in Mathare, based in another sub-neighbourhood along Juja Road. During my last two field visits, there were signs that the MANYGRO youth I had spent time with between 2009 and 2012 were now 'old boyz'. They no longer sat under the hot sun near the public toilet they had cleaned and managed daily since 2007, but instead sat under the shade of a tree that had been planted during one of the World Environment Day (WED) community celebrations that had elicited attention from various NGOs aiming to 'engage with the local community'. Over the years, their hustle had included learning the development lingo to become savvy navigators of the NGO scene⁸ and one of the 'go-to' youth groups for various youth entrepreneurship schemes (Thieme 2015), as one form of external support rendered MANYGRO visible to others. Near that tree, an M-Pesa (mobile money) kiosk set up in 2016 was being manned by two of the older MANYGRO members, serving multiple functions: the kiosk also featured a water tap that had been rerouted to serve all of those needing to refill their jerrycans for household use. (M-Pesa kiosks were widely used but rare to see inside 'slum' neighbourhoods.) The most recent addition to the micro-revenue streams of the group was a fridge filled with glass soda bottles, in a neighbourhood where a cold drink is a luxury people are willing to pay for.

The founding group members were less of a collective now; each had their own side business, spoke of their family, joked that they were now 'well fed' and had 'less time to train', patting their *kitambe* (pot belly). And yet they still assembled under the tree most days

⁷ See Ference (2021) for a similar situation related to the *matatu* sector.

⁸ I thank Lynsey Farrell, whose years of research and practice in Kibera have led to numerous generative conversations about youth self-help groups in Nairobi.

at one point or another. They had the view of the public toilet they used to clean daily and over which they worked so hard to negotiate maintenance rights in 2007 with a local landlord. On the outward-facing side of the door, the painted logo of the social enterprise brand, Community Cleaning Services, they were part of between 2008 and 2013 (Thieme 2015) had faded. There was no need to freshen it up because people just knew it was the MANYGRO toilet. Younger youth (aged eighteen to twenty-five) were the ones tasked with the daily cleaning now, while the old boys occasionally shouted orders from their shared stoop. The old boys managed the water point, the financial services, the urban farming business a few metres away, and the recycling business. The confluence of mobile money services, water and cold drinks shaped a shared public space of individual labour, consumption, leisure and place-making, all in proximity to their foundational businesses of garbage and sanitation services. But just as this portfolio of MANYGRO businesses reflected how far this youth group had come, the banter between the old boys and the younger youth hanging around (but never under) the shaded tree revealed the intergenerational tensions between the older and younger youth at the *baze*. The old boys complained that the younger boys didn't want to work hard. The younger boys 'wanted a piece of the pie'. Notably, as the old boys upgraded and further diversified their portfolio, they persisted in speaking about their diverse forms of labour and life in Mathare as 'hustling'.

Over the years, hustling for the MANYGRO boys involved defying rules and finding alternative routes to access or distribute both basic services (such as electricity and water) and 'nice to haves' (from Timberland shoes to a smartphone) that equipped local struggles with global consumer cosmopolitanisms (Weiss 2009; Ntarangwi 2009). Along Juja Road, up the hill from MANYGRO's *baze*, everyday commerce was punctuated by imaginaries of elsewhere, as stylized portraits of popular culture icons featured on the murals of small shops and *matatus* driving by, with graffiti puns such as 'Straight Outta Dumpsite'. At the MANYGRO stoop, where the old boys and the younger boys sat near each other, performances of apathy for lost futures were coupled with an urgency to hang on to hopeful outcomes. Across these stations of hustle imaginaries and lived temporalities, the appeals to elsewhere were paradoxically juxtaposed with the inability (or resistance) of many to ever fully leave the *baze*. For MANYGRO, this characterized the older boys' liminal position in space and time. They lived and worked in one of the poorest neighbourhoods but occasionally travelled to middle-class enclaves of consumption and leisure, only to return to the *baze* where they had made a life and felt they belonged.

If time was one of the primary currencies of the hustle, hustle carried a loaded generational and temporal dimension: it was about a ‘precarious present’ (Millar 2014), but also about hanging onto the exploits and claims to certain resources and places of the precarious past. So, for MANYGRO, the *baze* manifested the palimpsests of youth imaginaries and publicly visible community-based entrepreneurial ventures that combined turf claims and service provision: certain bodies got to sit under the shade, while ‘servicing the neighbourhood’ was performed through an assemblage of physical infrastructures (M-Pesa, water, soda, toilets) and social gathering points. For Kennedy, as he once explained: ‘The *baze* is not about a structure, it’s a feeling that I belong here ... it’s a place you must pass by every day coz u get to know the breaking news, and about new hustle. It’s also a place to buy time when you have little to do.’ So, for Kennedy, the *baze* was more than a place where youth assembled to spend time and assert their turf, a place to be found and be seen in. It was all at once a network, a mood and the representation of a time in one’s life – a reminder of where one came from, and where some risked no longer feeling welcome if social ties and economic contributions were not continuously cultivated and shared. It was thus an infrastructure in which collective investment could be channelled and harvested, because it was collectively protected. As the *baze* evolved over time and morphed with the years, retaining its functionality and meaning, it developed new forms of support for the local hustle economies that depended on having a physical, social or affective tie to the *baze*.

Over these past ten years, the terrain of hustle has been reflected in how these street corner *bazes* that were built around the strategic proximity to local landmarks of waste work – the transit point for waste collection or a pay-per-use toilet – were eventually developed into other services or material improvements, such as a waterpoint or a paved road. These investments in the local environment shifted with time, subject to intergenerational negotiations among younger and older hustlers. For both Kennedy and the youth of MANYGRO, their conundrum as ‘older youth’ who were no longer young was staying relevant and retaining a hold on a set of resources that had symbolic and material significance in their life world. The MANYGRO ‘old boyz’ managed the carefully built but ultimately fragile hierarchies within the *baze* that all started with their garbage collection and plastic recycling business. They were now the *sonko* (boss) figures of these seemingly horizontal youth-led businesses premised on youth solidarities and shared returns. Because younger youth now had less to lose, and perhaps more gall, demonstrations of care towards younger counterparts served as a form of self-preservation and street credibility maintenance. But

while MANYGRO delegated toilet cleaning and garbage collection to younger youth, Kennedy continued to do those early morning garbage runs, and perhaps strategically wanted to be seen, in his dirty overalls, by younger youth and the truck driver. In different ways, both these examples show the continuous labour involved in securing and retaining accumulation within, for and thanks to the *mtaa* economy. To be ‘streetwise’ in both these contexts included knowing how to take care of your own, but how to be seen doing so differed from one *baze* to another. While the MANYGRO old boys could be ‘seen’ in the shade, Kennedy was mostly ‘seen’ on the move.

<A>‘When the day hustle goes down, the night hustle goes up’

This section focuses on a young woman named Eliza, who was one of the few female waste workers I met in Mathare. Young women’s stories and their own paradoxical subjectivities as ‘hustlers’ are often missing from youth and slum studies, other than to emphasize their gendered dispossession in a number of spheres. In part, their status of ‘youthhood’ is stunted once they become mothers, which is not the case for young men who face cultural markers of adulthood that are increasingly unattainable (Honwana 2012). For young women, in contrast, their ‘adulthood’ is often accelerated. Eliza’s story builds on the previous accounts of hustling discussed in relation to Kennedy and MANYGRO that emphasize the importance of intergenerational distribution. As discussed above, hustling can both normalize dispossession and offer affirmative pathways at the same time, involving continuous calculations in order to manage diverse obligations to both kin and community relations. Eliza’s story offers an additional vantage point: her struggles involved, first, negotiating access to a largely male-centric informal waste economy and, second, negotiating the drawback of eventually ‘doing too well’ because she was able to secure periodic waged work. Her story highlights the way in which the performative gestures of hustling provide unlikely forms of solidarity and security. This reflects three dimensions of the hustle in this part of Nairobi: gendered subjectivities, the success penalty, and hustling as a performance of shared struggle.

Eliza was born and raised in Huruma. Her story shares some of the familiar characteristics of Mathare life for young women: as a young adult, Eliza fell pregnant at seventeen and became a single mother. But unlike many young girls in her situation, she refused the path of early marriage, or dropping out of school and staying at home. ‘In the ghetto,’ as she always

referred to her neighbourhood,⁹ Eliza was able to challenge the cultural norms that were less negotiable ‘up-country’, where her situation would have been considered shameful (Thieme 2016).

Despite becoming a single teenage mother, Eliza finished school, and soon afterwards she started to navigate the youth-led waste business, a popular entry point into the labour market for youth in these neighbourhoods. She was one of the very few women who became a garbage collector, and she soon rose through the ranks, starting to manage plots and hiring other youth under her. She did this alongside various forms of community activism. She became a well-respected ‘*hustla*’, one of the guys, but she was also committed to helping teenage girls overcome the challenges and stigma associated with early pregnancy. She could be found hanging out on the stoop with the guys, but also spending a few hours of her Saturday afternoon getting her hair braided with the girls.

By 2010, Eliza was managing to earn a decent living, combining both waged employment with a sanitation social enterprise and various side hustles. But during this period of sustained stable revenue, Eliza encountered a kind of success penalty. In neighbourhoods where precarity is the norm, there is a cost to doing ‘too well’. ‘Everyone comes over for lunch!’ she joked one day to explain that the imperative of redistribution that allows for strong social bonds and ‘sharing’ in low-income communities becomes a burden if you are always the one who is earning enough to ‘provide’.¹⁰ Within her own family, Eliza was caught in a perpetual cycle of redistribution, as all her earnings sustained not only her son’s education but also her parents and her two underemployed brothers. In 2011, Eliza’s small family farm up-country burned down one night. It was immediately expected that Eliza pay for all rebuilding costs, as

⁹ ‘Ghetto’ is an emic term used by my interlocutors, evoking a shared condition of exclusion and marginality, but also reappropriation of a loaded term with specific historical ties to dispossession, racialized segregation and spatial exclusion (see Duneier 2017). In its everyday use, it both highlights the relational position of marginality vis-à-vis the rest of the city and also can connote a sense of place and belonging, at times even pride.

¹⁰ In this special issue, Naomi van Stapele (2021) discusses the converse: the gendered expectations to ‘provide’ among young men and the severe pressures that these pose for individuals unable to do so.

the main breadwinner at that time. Her life savings, about US\$2,000, went straight to reconstruction.

As a single mother, and as a woman from the Luo community where land inheritance is patrilineal, her son would never have the chance to inherit land, a crucial cultural signifier of male pride and identity in Kenya. Eliza's driving goal for years had been to save up to buy Kevo some land, so that he could have a place to call his own. At the time of the fire, Eliza was US\$200 short of being able to buy a small plot of land for her son. As Eliza eventually slowly rebuilt her savings over the subsequent months, she also decided in 2012 to move out of her family home and upgrade her living conditions outside Mathare Valley. As she put it, 'It's not everyone who will be happy about your progress. So you have to leave the ghetto.' Yet, when I asked her if her new neighbourhood felt like home, she said, 'No, this place is my bedroom, but the ghetto will always be my sitting room.' The perceptions and experiences of 'doing well' were in themselves full of vicissitudes. When I returned to Nairobi in June 2016, Eliza had moved back to her old neighbourhood. She continued to pay for her son's boarding school education, wishing him away from life in the urban slums, but in the meantime Eliza was raising her young daughter (born in 2013) in the thick of it, in part because she could count on her vast networks for ad hoc childcare support. 'My daughter can learn how to be a little survivor,' she once said proudly. Eliza's own social navigation and hustle involved a careful balancing act: she recognized and took advantage of the affirmative possibilities and skills associated with knowing how to hustle 'in the *mtaa*', riding on the street credibility of her earlier days as a waste worker, but she also knew when it was time to find housing elsewhere during periods where her income stream was coming from outside Mathare, with the proviso that she could always return if need be.

In 2018, Eliza's income-generating activities included a 'day job' with yet another sanitation social enterprise where she worked as a field officer with a strong reputation for understanding community issues relating to urban environmental management. She was paid a wage and had a uniform – markers of 'professional work' in Nairobi. But her working identity was not tied to her day job. She still self-identified as a *hustla* among others in Nairobi and her everyday labour combined forms of remuneration and accumulation, unpaid social activism, an actively curated Facebook presence, and concerted efforts to 'be seen' in her own neighbourhood when it mattered and disappear when it suited. Eliza supplemented her wage with a series of side hustles, including a small property investment up-country

where she built and rented out three small single-room units on the family property of her new partner. Her in-laws allowed her to use the family plot in exchange for building and running a small property rental business. Eliza's brother initially gave her a loan of KSh 200,000 (US\$1,950), and, as Eliza explained, 'we hustled for the rest' as an upfront cost of KSh 320,000 (US\$3,110) was needed to build the units and the toilets. She explains that she now has KSh 60,000 (US\$580) left to pay back to her brother. 'Once I can earn a profit, I'll expand and build more units.'

In contrast to her male counterparts, Eliza knew that performing the hustle took on particular forms of security provision for a woman. First, during moments of intertribal tension around pre- or post-election periods, she knew how to 'switch on' multiple dialects of *Sheng* depending on whom she was with at the time, a kind of multilingual skill that has become part of her risk mitigation strategies. As she explained, this was almost a matter of survival that any *wazaliwa* (those born here) cultivated, in order to camouflage their tribal identity when needed. The *wakucome* (those who have migrated to Nairobi from rural areas) were less adept at switching from Kikuyu to Luo, for example, which can be a disadvantage. Second, as she explained in 2017: 'You see, when I see those boys who snatch at night, I walk alongside them and I say, "Hey maboyz, mnafanya hustle? Mimi pia ninafanya hustle [Hey, my boys, you guys are hustling tonight? [implying bag snatching] Me too, I'm hustling [inferring sex work]]."'

Although Eliza was not a sex worker, in that instance performing as such was a form of ensuring mutual empathy with the young men who might otherwise have seen Eliza, a woman walking alone after dark, as an easy target. In this theatrical scenario, the bag-snatching boys and the sex workers were peers, both night *mahustla* whose 'day hustle had gone down'. Devoid of moral judgement for either line of work, Eliza's greeting demonstrated an expression of camaraderie that cunningly relied on (and transcended) performative gendered lines to manage potential risk. In the *mtaa*, a female sex worker doing her rounds elicited respect among others in the night economy;¹¹ the mutual respect among night *mahustla* was partly due to the lack of competition (although they sometimes targeted

¹¹ Sex workers get a free ride when they board a *matatu*. They are rarely harassed or targets of bag snatching by the young men whose night hustle involves stealing. This speaks to the moral codes of the night hustle, a theme beyond the scope of this article.

the same ‘clients’) and the knowledge that you had a few hours of darkness before you could ‘feed your stomach’ by morning, let alone pay your rent by the end of the month. There was a shared understanding that the ‘night hustle’ sometimes involved activities categorized as illegal, or at least socially stigmatized as illicit, but the choice to engage in these forms of income generation also reflected shared urban struggles in under-resourced neighbourhoods where, as Malcom X once noted, ‘everyone hustles to survive’ (cited in Wacquant 1999: 143). This scenario also disrupted the presumption that certain hustle economies were deemed noble if demeaning (e.g. waste collection), while others were deemed illicit (e.g. drugs, robbery, prostitution). In Mathare, the performance of hustling was a kind of continuum, where hustlers inserted themselves into an endless permutation of social situations in ways that were both ‘banal and necessary’ (*ibid.*: 143). Eliza’s manoeuvring here showed that, in order to stay safe after dark – something that is often impossible for women in popular neighbourhoods (Datta 2012) – performing her hustle involved bluffing (Newell 2012) in order to establish a shared connection and expression of care with other night *mahusta*.

Eliza explained: ‘For us youth, opportunity is where you stay [live], and you can hustle in a place where you stamp your authority’ – a kind of street credibility that was earned over time. Yet there was a success penalty, as any notable gains in the *mtaa* have to be redistributed somehow to those whose hustle ‘is down’. So Eliza’s steady and continued accumulation over the years (hampered by several setbacks from which she has always managed to recover) meant that she had paid for her children’s school fees, started other businesses on the side, and upgraded her living situation multiple times. And yet, she remarked, ‘It is best that people don’t know where I stay exactly.’ For a time, Eliza stayed on the top floor of an eight-storey tenement walk-up in Huruma. Kennedy, one of Eliza’s closest male friends in the neighbourhood, lives on the top floor of a nearby building. They both joked that it was the ‘penthouse’, with the advantage that ‘no one knows exactly where you stay, and no one’s wet laundry is dripping down on yours’. The downside was that it was the first floor to run out of water. But that was a small price to pay for the perks of anonymity and a little privacy, the two rarest commodities in the *mtaa*.

For Eliza, hustling was about knowing how to read social situations and how to adapt one’s battle plan, knowing when to march against the injustice of extrajudicial police brutality, but also ‘knowing that police are not all bad’, because ‘knowing officers in charge in your

district' could give someone the necessary levers to bail out a friend who had been arrested and was being detained. Hustling was knowing that nothing was fixed; any enemy could become an ally, just as any semblance of security could be overturned overnight.

In June 2019, Eliza lost her 'secure job', unable to 'meet the sales targets' of the social enterprise that had started to tighten its criteria for people to stay on the payroll. For some time, she had expressed that she felt like a foot soldier within the organization despite the accolades and occasional incremental pay raises from her '*wazungu*' (white European) bosses. Eliza knew that these social enterprise schemes come and go in Nairobi, a city that has rapidly become the hub of sanitation entrepreneurship and business-led development. When I asked her what she was going to do now that she had lost her main source of income, Eliza shrugged her shoulders, smiled and said, 'I'll always find something.' As if able to foresee what was to come, three months before losing her job, Eliza had decided to move back into the building where she grew up, where rent was lower, and where she knew the landlord well. This deliberate and pre-emptive downgrading of her living situation was smart personal budget management and a strategic 'hustla' move. By explicitly returning to the neighbourhood where she had cultivated long-standing social and working ties, she reaffirmed her street credibility alongside those whose 'day hustle was down', figuring out how to make work and find opportunity elsewhere, and when and how to share eventual gains.

<A>Conclusion

From the mosaic of early morning activities of street economies to the practices and pragmatics of place-based day and night hustles, the vignettes presented in this article shed light on the multiple rhythms and spaces of the hustle economy. The stories of inter-youth relations evoke the temporal dimension of hustling and the shifting sense of obligation to redistribute, in tension with the persistence in keeping hold of certain resources, street corners and credibility. As the three vignettes have illustrated, the dynamics of redistribution and belonging shift over time as those who were once the neighbourhood 'youth' become older and a new generation of youth assert their claims. These temporal shifts are inextricably tied to place-based contestations and sociality, thus exposing the spatial and social terrains of hustling.

Considered relationally, the terrains and temporalities of hustling play a significant role in shaping contemporary urban life in Nairobi's popular neighbourhoods today. Laced with insecurity and protracted uncertainty, these terrains reveal affirmative moments and pathways grounded in local codes and shared street knowledge that merit better empirical understanding, more nuanced 're-description' (Simone and Pieterse 2017) and conceptualization.

The everyday strategies of hustling discussed here reveal a particular relationship to time, place and urban practice: the time spent hanging about and place-making around the territorial markings of the *baze* is also a chance to perform momentary *kuzurura* (idleness or 'joblessness') while recounting one's engagement in 'self-help' jobs that may variously be improvised, ad hoc or routine. But to evoke one's hustle can also provide the necessary ambiguity (about what the hustle actually involves) to get out of trouble and to build a sense of solidarity and shared struggle. All the while, sometimes hustling involves particular deals behind the scenes to get things done. Here, both the narration and the social practice of hustling inflect one another, understood socially as shared hurdles in the face of the uncertainty and fragility of even seemingly regular work.

Through an ethnographic account of the experiences, subjectivities and pragmatics of Kennedy, MANYGRO and Eliza, this article argues that hustling can be read as an urban condition (the hustle), a practice (to hustle) and an identity marker (to be a hustler) that evoke multiple forms of prosaic, industrious and political labour: combining everyday survivalism and waiting, strategic diversification of income streams to mitigate risk, punctual contestation of – but also alliances with – authority in order to access key services and resources, and the ability to navigate and even shape local politics of distribution. As such, *hustling* is at once entangled with persistent legacies of uneven development and socio-economic injustice and yet continuously gives way to possibly generative social forms of experimentation, provisioning and reciprocity (Simone and Pieterse 2017). For Kennedy, MANYGRO and Eliza, engaging in the waste economy has either been a temporary springboard to other work or a long-term investment in shaping their territorial hold on a particular area *through* garbage collection and recycling. In their own way, they show that the skill involved in *seeing* value and possibility in what is discarded or broken is not merely a last resort strategy or the 'end of the line' but rather an 'experience of continual return' (Millar 2014: 33), a form of endurance in a corner of the city that may at times seem inhabitable (Simone 2018).

In closing, the question is whether this form of return and endurance suggests that the hustle produces a protracted state of liminality, where youth in Mathare mainly extend themselves across short-term projections of time, space and demands in the absence of longer-term future imaginaries. While some articulate ‘life plans’, others orient themselves towards particular ‘life pieces’¹² or fragments of projects. If ‘hustling’ in Mathare Valley refers to a condition, a way of life, a persistent struggle, and a logic and interpretation of hard work, it can simultaneously evoke stunted futures and an endless repository of resourceful experiments and renewed attempts. Here I am reminded of one of the expressions that often follows the refrain *ninahustle tu* (I’m just hustling) with a mix of humour and melancholy: *ninajaribu* (I’m trying). It is as though ‘trying’ acknowledges the inevitability of set-backs but the persistent potential for gains, however ephemeral and modest. Thus, as a constantly changing pattern of struggle, advancement, loss, banter, social connection and individual experimentation, hustling emphasizes the significance but ultimate fragility of place-based youth-led kaleidoscopic urban practices and performances. Although many of my key interlocutors have joked, and lamented, that they are soon no longer going to be classified as youth,¹³ they continue to ascribe to the narratives and logics of hustling, as an expression of continued struggle, endurance and possibility across time and place, and of their relationship to life and labour in the city.

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¹² I thank AbdouMaliq Simone for commenting on earlier work and making this distinction between life plans and life pieces.

¹³ In Kenya, youth are classified as eighteen to thirty-five years old.

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