

Harnessing the ‘hustle’: struggle, solidarities and narratives of work in Nairobi and beyond

Introduction

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In a workshop entitled ‘Harnessing the Hustle’, held at the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) in April 2017, a group of academic researchers and community activists came together to discuss a concept that resonated across ethnographic findings and everyday life alike: *hustling*. For many of us working in Nairobi for years, we considered the real ‘experts in the room’ to be our Kenyan interlocutors, many of whom have become research collaborators and friends. Most of them lived and worked in different corners of the city, but they had the following in common: they were born and raised in Nairobi, and they self-identified as ‘hustlers’ and with the practice of ‘hustling’ in their everyday life. Alongside our friends and collaborators, we reflected on each paper’s empirical context in which hustling featured as a narrative and set of urban practices and positionings. Throughout the afternoon it became clear that the theoretical registers of hustling merited attention. Hustling was not only a street vernacular; it had also become a way for youth to conceptualize their own struggles, politics and agency. Ironically, the BIEA, which hosted our discussion, is located in the leafy ex-colonial neighbourhood of Kileleshwa. Seemingly removed from Nairobi’s familiar sounds and sensory bombardment, we discussed the need to decolonize ethnographic research and theory, guided by our Kenyan colleagues, artists, collaborators and critics in the workshop.

Given that the five authors in this special issue are white scholars based at ‘Western’ institutions in the UK, USA and Europe, a brief note regarding our positionality merits mention. Each of us draws from longitudinal research in our respective field sites and shares a commitment to integrating a scholarly reflection on the intense and ongoing engagement with our East African (Kenyan and Ugandan) friends, interlocutors and collaborators. Although we take on the task

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of translating our part of this work into academic texts, these collaborations involve myriad activities and labour in which our key interlocutors take the lead because of their expertise and lived experiences. Their expressions of knowledge and analysis are reflected through art community projects, advocacy reports, policy reform and everyday acts of solidarity in their communities. Where we can, we provide our support, mostly from behind the scenes; this has included fundraising, strategic planning, facilitation of networks or community-led projects, all of which informs our academic work and, we hope, enhances our ability to support our friends. Accordingly, the articles in this issue reflect the continued and ongoing engagement with our key interlocutors, many of whom have read, discussed and approved different iterations of these writings.

During the workshop, our diverse set of participants shared collective imaginaries and travelled to various corners of Nairobi and Kisumu. We were transported along the river in Mathare Valley to the life worlds of *chang'aa* brewers, and up towards Juja Road to the stoops of other youth whose livelihoods depended on the use and exchange value of garbage and all its composite parts. We moved along *matatu* routes to understand the cultural and economic significance of informal minibuses in the absence of comprehensive urban planning and accessible transport for all. We listened to the spoken word of Janabii from Kisumu, whose street poetry about 'ghetto life' was site-specific but also resonated with those in the audience from other urban communities cut off from mainstream support and infrastructure. And just when it seemed that most 'hustling' took place on the streets and in the corners of Kenyan cities, we were invited to imagine the humanitarian hustle experienced by a new Nairobi crossing the border from Uganda.

Building on a recent article conceptualizing the *hustle economy* (Thieme 2017), we argue that the hustle provides an analytical anchor to understand the paradoxes of neoliberal cities; we ground this discussion in different ethnographic corners of Kenyan cities. In this special issue, each contribution reflects narratives of hustling that interrogate and theorize urban realities across geographical contexts, but mainly in neighbourhoods and situations where individuals often cannot access formal institutional support. All narrations are located within wider neoliberal structures of labour insecurity marked by deregulation, liberalization and privatization (Ferguson 2006). Thus, they reveal how hustling not only becomes a survival strategy in the face of urban adversity and fraught life chances, but also reflects the agentive construction of identities, social life and senses of belonging through which hustlers 'refuse' (Harney and Moten 2013) 'social death' (Sexton 2011) and position themselves as very much alive despite the odds stacked against them. Situated within precarious and often dangerous circumstances in African cities, the hustle can be understood as a political-economic language of improvisation, struggle and solidarity (Moten 2003; Simone 2004) that contests the continued colonial and singular framing of Africa (Mazrui 2005) and ongoing uneven development and urban marginality. Drawing from the work of the Black Radical Tradition, we suggest that African cities have operated under a system of 'racial capitalism'. This is defined as an economic system of accumulation perpetuating relations of inequality and hierarchy based on skin colour, spanning the globe through the history of colonization and other forms of domination (Robinson 1983; Kelley 2017; Bhattacharyya 2018). Expressions of hustling set in sharp relief – but also contest – forms of everyday marginalization and inequality. These phenomena are of course global, but hustle as a

conceptual lens allows us to tease out the particularities of present-day manifestations in specific urban contexts, from the perspectives of people who are marginalized by them.

Kenya's history of hustle

This special issue builds on the long tradition and deeply rooted scholarship on urban Africa by anthropologists, geographers, historians and political scientists who have addressed the expansion of the informalized urban labour force operating outside the agricultural economy (Hart 1973; 2009; King 1996; Roitman 1990; Roy and Alsayaad 2004). The 1972 International Labour Organization (ILO) report on the 'informal sector' (ILO 1972) put the magnifying glass (and a label) on Kenya's vibrant but unregulated urban economic sector a decade following colonial independence, borrowing from Keith Hart's seminal work on informal economic practices in Accra (Hart 1973). Kenya is an important place to situate this discussion of the hustle because of its combined history of twentieth-century settler colonialism followed by 'Third Worlding' development (Escobar 1995) and twenty-first-century neoliberal policies. The destructive impact that colonialism had on the 'economic trajectory' of a newly independent African nation – in terms of human, natural and financial resource extraction – was followed by post-independence economic policies that did not support widespread employment-generating programmes or industrialization, while internationally imposed structural adjustment programmes had punitive effects on agricultural livelihoods (Sarr 2019: 25). Thus, while rapid urban migration took place in the decade following the year of independence in 1963, there was little waged employment available for a rising urban labour force, which resulted in a notable early embrace by Kenya's leaders of informal artisans and the economic activities of ordinary citizens. In 1973, Kenya's first president, Jomo Kenyatta, decriminalized *matatus*, the informal transportation vehicles, which not only flourished but arguably brought thousands of Kenyans into the middle class (FERENCE 2016; Mutongi 2006). Since then, Kenya's economic activity that falls outside traditional forms of wage labour has largely been classified as 'informal' or known locally as the *Jua Kali* sector, a symbolic reference first to the propensity of informal sector workers to operate outdoors and in ad hoc conditions (*Jua Kali* literally means 'hot sun'), and second to the official recognition of Daniel arap Moi (the second Kenyan president) in 1984 of *Jua Kali* workers as valid contributors to the Kenyan economy (King 1996).

The adoption and spread of neoliberal policies in their various forms have expanded and accelerated the scope of the informal sector since the 1970s, and, with it, local experiences of economic uncertainty (Meagher *et al.* 2016). Recognizing the connection between increasing experiences of economic uncertainty and the growing erosion of waged employment across the world since the 1970s, Ferguson and Li (2018) have recently called for an 'analytical decentring and empirical reorientation' to encourage scholars and policy actors to think beyond the 'proper job' when evaluating what counts as 'work' in the twenty-first century. This invitation is timely, as a growing majority of young people globally are engaging in working practices that may be considered 'non-standard' (ILO 2018) and references to 'precarity' and 'precarious work' become

normalized as labour markets globally continue to experience casualization and erosion of labour security (Standing 2011; Waite 2009).

Neoliberalism, informality and precarity are three concepts that offer important analytical frames for critically engaging with contemporary social, political, economic and cultural phenomena that concern systems of inequality, hierarchy and marginality. Yet, these concepts can ‘obscure ethnographic particularities’ (Ganti 2014: 89) and do not help us describe or *see* everyday non-normative economic and social practices undertaken outside wage labour relations and mainstream institutions (Millar 2018). In other words, insofar as neoliberalism assumes the pull-back of the state, informality regards activities taking place outside state purview (Myers 2011) and precarity points to increased labour insecurity (Rizzo 2017), these three concepts say something vital about what is *not* happening (Roitman 1990), but they do not always arm us with conceptual tools to see and describe what is actually going on in these supposed negative spaces.

In an effort to explore situated articulations of ‘more complicated and hopeful’ (Ferguson and Li 2018) social and economic expressions and experiments, we pay closer attention to people’s own grounded linguistic expressions, referring to the modalities of making a life and making a living at the urban margins (Lancione 2016). This special issue thus takes seriously the invitation to envision and write alternative possibilities for African urban life (Myers 2011; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004) as a commitment to decolonizing analytical registers of social theory. We do so by harnessing the epistemologies of our Kenyan (and, in the case of Monteith, Ugandan) interlocutors, whose everyday vernacular includes a constant reference to hustling, expressed as a mood, an action, a positioning and a condition recognized by everyone but experienced in differentiated ways by all.

Investigating the emic concept of the ‘hustle’ and its multifarious practices across an urban context is one way to explore how informality produces particular experiences of (and relationships to) institutions of government, private interests and international agencies as well as between individuals. When Hart revisited the term ‘informal sector’ he had coined in the 1970s, he critiqued his own concept as too static, insufficiently dynamic and defined through negation (2009: 4–6). Recognizing that the ILO’s use of the term ‘informal sector’ pushed a binary model of formal/informal work, some scholars started developing different frameworks through the 1970s and 1980s to further nuance the understanding of the informal economy, *Jua Kali* or, as Dorothy McCormick called it, ‘very small scale business’ (1987).¹ In his more recent writing, Hart (2009: 6) revised his original concept and implored future scholars to move away from any supposed binary between ‘self-organized human activity and bureaucratic institutions’ and instead ‘expose the positive principles organizing the informal

¹McCormick developed a multidimensional continuum of informality that used seven characteristics to further organize and study the smallest pockets of the urban economy (1987: 75) and examined the degrees of legality along the formal–informal continuum (*ibid.*: 165). In their interdisciplinary collection, McFarlane and Waibel (2012) argue for a more comprehensive understanding of urban informality by interrogating the informal–formal divide and the disjuncture between urban policies and everyday practices in rapidly growing cities in the global South.

economy' while placing these investigations within a 'broad historical framework'. This requires particular attention to what Hart calls the 'social forms' that organize informal activities, rather than narrowly focusing on what 'unemployed' Africans do to earn a living (*ibid.*) in neoliberal regimes.

The hustle concept has emerged from our fieldwork to describe the social forms that organize the various sectors of the so-called informal economy, but we are not suggesting that hustling is only a vernacular used by, or an experience of, poor urban youth alone. Notably, hustling has become part of a cross-class vernacular in Kenya, with public performances among political elites and media declarations increasingly referring to being a 'hustler'. For example, a tweet by @pitchblackkenya from 9 September 2019 declared that the Kenyan education system 'needed to teach kids how to be hustlers and creatives instead of chemistry', positioning hustling as a key skill that would enable youth to survive in the absence of employment. Recent scholarship on 'white-collar hustling' in Kenya points to other forms of hustling among the middle classes happening off the streets and at the interface of the digital and informal economy, such as the growing shadow-writing and contract-cheating industry (see Walker 2019). Insofar as it is an increasingly widely adopted emic term, hustling has become a language of action that various actors across diverse social groups have adopted (or appropriated) to make sense of what they do in the city, giving it a 'cool name' in a way that resonates with popular vernacular. A notable example is the possible presidency of a self-described hustler, William Ruto, who uses this moniker to signal that he is an ally of the workers of the informal economy and empathizes with the paradoxes of everyday hustling.

This is not merely about elevating a particular term we have heard our interlocutors use repeatedly and presuming to give it an academic rendering² or suggesting that the term 'hustling' itself is new. We recognize that hustling evokes an ambiguous positioning and can allude to an array of cognate concepts around precarity, uncertainty, informality and waithood. But we argue that it is paramount to take seriously what Gautam Bhan calls 'vocabularies of Southern urban practice' – that is, to root theoretical inquiry in empirical specificity, and either call for new words to better express knowledges and practices that have been overlooked or misrepresented, or consider new meanings of familiar words 'to enable an expansion of the life-worlds under consideration' (Bhan 2019: 640; Vasudevan 2015). The articles in this special issue are therefore not about setting forth a new set of binaries, but rather about deepening the understanding of urban practices and experiences that organize modes of labour classified as informal.

Thus, investigating the principles that organize diverse 'informal' economies in Kenyan cities, this issue explores how the dangerous mixture of reciprocity and intimidation employed by various neighbourhood groups works to both organize and terrorize elements of Nairobi's transportation sector (FERENCE); how waste workers organize and diversify their revenue streams while managing the passage of their wealth across generations of youth (Thieme); how gendered experiences of uncertainty and hardship among young male alcohol distillers organize

²We thank former BIEA director Joost Fontein for pushing us to consider this valid critique at the workshop.

particular labour practices (van Stapele); how an artist uses spoken word as a storytelling device to express shared moods and struggles epitomized by the hustle among Kenyan youth making do at the margins (Unsel); and how crossing borders to evade past troubles involves practices of translation and bluffing to ‘fit in’ in different contexts, when hustling means being on the run from a particular place and past (Monteith). These are all stories of social forms, practices and experiences emerging from local economies and framed by the guiding principle of hustling and the emic use of the term. The next section engages in a brief reflection on the etymological and historical uses of the term to contextualize its association with experiences of struggle, solidarity, improvisation and subversion.

Hustling as a political language of struggle and solidarity

The term ‘hustling’ has elicited diverse responses and regimes of representation over the decades. Recently, it has featured in a growing number of articles, books and blogs with a range of interpretations. As some writers frame hustling in celebratory terms, celebrating the boot-strapping entrepreneurship of the gig, ‘misfit’ or ‘system D’ economy (Clay and Phillips 2015; Neuwirth 2012), others view hustling as a pejorative working reality for a growing precariat class of workers facing the erosion of labour security and at best able to take on insecure, casualized, short-term work gigs. Yet, most writing on hustling either comes without a well-theorized conceptual discussion of its complex epistemological origins, or presents an overly narrow conceptualization that overlooks its creolized vernacular forms and meanings. Wacquant’s reference to hustling in inner-city Chicago as a kind of ‘social art’ that ‘covers a peculiar semantic and social space’ draws valuable scholarly attention to hustling and its ‘social action and structures’ (Wacquant 1998: 3). Yet, we move beyond a Wacquanian framing of hustling as a primarily deceitful practice entangled in modes of tricksterism and classified as illegal or extra-legal. Thus, we seek to understand the agentive connotations of hustling and associated meanings and practices of resistance against racial capitalism and urban marginality. Sitting at the nexus of struggle and solidarity in the face of social death, hustle affirms, imagines and practises social forms that cannot only be read as precarious, informal or uncertain.

Mark Twain’s early evocation of hustling – featured in his autobiographical account of his early years of ‘variegated vagabondizing’ in *Roughing It* – recounts how he experimented with several ad hoc ways of making a living during the late nineteenth century, an era that was often described as that of the American ‘frontier’ (Twain 1962 [1872]). In the pool halls of small US towns, ‘hustling’ meant a shrewd ‘extra bit on the side’ or moonlighting to supplement otherwise meagre wages and the monotony of industrial, repetitive work (Polsky 1967; Tevis 1959). But as African American scholars and writers show, hustling in twentieth-century America also has roots in racialized struggles against legal, institutional, economic and spatial exclusion. From the Jim Crow era to the street struggles of inner-city over-policed and underemployed black youth, hustling itself became, as Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020) writes, ‘a site of racial inequality’, reflecting the higher barriers to entry in all spheres of life (economic, educational, political). In rap music, hustling became a leitmotif as a description of inner-city struggles in the face of street gun violence, income poverty, drugs and the absence of

welfare support (Jay-Z 2010; Wilson 2009³), but it also described a set of alternative strategies for ‘getting by’ and mobilizing for resources. Duneier’s (2000) ethnography and documentary film of New York’s rough sleepers selling second-hand books features key protagonists describing their everyday experience as hustling: setting up their street stalls, making daily sales, watching out for police, and finding shelter at night. These are stories of simultaneous affirmation and struggle that do not feature in mainstream historical accounts of urban economic life (Rollefson 2017; McKenzie 2015).

As an expressive articulation of everyday struggles and getting by, rooted in long-standing experiences of urban inequality and injustice, hustling and cognate terms became prevalent across African cities from the early 1990s, in part influenced by the globalization of Black Atlantic forms of hip-hop (Gilroy 1993; Ntarangwi 2009; Weiss 2009). Notably, art and activism produced a vital avenue for place-based cross-cultural storytelling and a ‘language of resistance’ contesting historical and persistent forms of domination and injustice (Fredericks 2014). While some of this language of resistance evokes youth claims to citizenship during politically charged moments such as contested elections (*ibid.*), other expressions of resistance tell stories of youth’s fraught positioning of ‘waithood’ or being ‘stuck’ as they face extreme economic hardship combined with persistent social pressures (Honwana 2012; Sommers 2012). For example, in Sierra Leone, youth facing everyday adversity refer to ‘straining’ (Finn and Oldfield 2015), while in Cameroon, coping with unpredictability is described by francophone youth as ‘*la débrouille*’ (Waage 2006). Chernoff (2003) writes about the hustle of a young Ghanaian *ashawo* (bar girl). Each of these stories can be read as disheartening tales of marginalized young people facing poverty, discrimination, and barriers to secure labour markets, housing and welfare. And yet these emic terms, like hustling in Kenya as explored in this special issue, capture the realities of persistent struggle and the ways in which youth assert their agency to cope with and work through a constellation of economic, political and social barriers. Hustling in Kenya evokes an agentive struggle in the face of harsh circumstances, where opportunism, playfulness, fierce persistence and what Vigh (2006) calls ‘social navigation’ generate particular logics and localized practices of adaptation and improvisation (Thieme 2017).

Due to its long history of informal sector activities and its uneven economic and development trajectories, Nairobi tells a particular set of hustle stories. Just as it was in the American inner city, hustling in Nairobi is born out of urban marginalization and underinvestment in infrastructure, resources and jobs, which disproportionately affect urban youth. The situated forms and expressions of hustling are rooted in particular ways of ‘doing business’ to combat decades of segregated and uneven urban planning and multiple forms of exclusion shaped by the particular colonial trajectories and manifestations of racial capitalism in Kenya. Reading

³As Wilson (2009) explains, several American cities in the 1980s onwards experienced a confluence of de-investment, punitive housing policies against black residents, and de-industrialization leading to rising unemployment among the black working class. This coincided with a global drug trade making inner-city neighbourhoods most vulnerable, combined with persistent liberalization of gun laws and the highest rates of incarceration in the world. In this context, affirmations of hustling recognized the constant risk among young black men of being killed by gang violence, or over-policed by law enforcement.

these ways of 'doing business' as merely informal, irregular, and potentially illegal reproduces colonial and racialized tropes (Mazrui 2005) and neoliberal ideas (Carmody and Owusu 2016) about street-oriented knowledge and practices in African cities. How then can we read the energy and attributes of the diverse local economic knowledges, social lives and coping strategies that constitute and emerge from hustling? We urge fellow scholars to reconsider how the terms 'hustle' and 'hustler' are being recast and used as a vernacular of improvisation, struggle and solidarity. Here we turn to the Black Radical Tradition and particularly the work of Cedric Robinson (1983) and the recent work of Bhattacharyya (2018). Drawing from Robinson's work, Bhattacharyya asks how, within early and later formations of capitalism founded on 'differentiation' along racial hierarchies, we might develop a more 'expansive understanding' of the 'positioning and agency that can arise from such differentiation' (Bhattacharyya 2018: 12).

While racial capitalism has not explicitly been used with regard to Kenya in previous scholarship, we argue that doing so sheds important light on both the palimpsests of colonial legacies that persist in Nairobi's physical and social landscape and the forms of dispossession, struggle and agentive resistance that persist in the economic landscape of the city. Here, the work of two Kenyan scholars helps us ground the notion of racial capitalism in the Kenyan context. In her study of traders and street markets, Kinyanjui (2019) describes what she calls the *utu-buntu* business models, a system built on social networks of solidarity and reciprocity, which have persisted as alternatives to racial capitalist models. Even as racial capitalism washed over Kenya, removing Kikuyus from land they had farmed for generations to provide massive farms and ranches for white, British settlers and laying the ground for the subsequent neoliberal order that has exacerbated global inequality throughout the world, Kinyanjui reminds us that in African metropolises such as Nairobi, many African economic practices still emphasize 'the values of solidarity, caring and nurturing' (*ibid.*: xiii). Githiora (2018: 56), describing Nairobi in around 1950 at the height of British colonial rule, helps explain how urban economic and social geographies reflected systemic and structural differentiation along racial lines: 'It was a life apart for the European and Asian, with relatively menial facilities for a population that was meant to remain on the margins of the city while providing the necessary domestic and industrial labour needed to run the city.' Indeed, it was at these racialized margins that low-income residents built their makeshift dwellings and small businesses during the colonial era, often migrants from other parts of rural or small-town Kenya. This history has informed present-day spatialized class divisions in this city, which still reflect these deep racial and colonial roots. During the colonial era, early rural-urban 'African' migrants were forced to contend with the way in which racial capitalism shaped their own business logics of solidarity and reciprocity, while they remained on the fringes of the mainstream economy and were thus categorized as criminals. A generation or so later, young people growing up in these margins, particularly the eastern part of Nairobi, have shaped urban vernacular expressions that reflect their own contemporary modes of dispossession, solidarity, struggle and resistance against persistent economic and social differentiation.

Thus, we argue that hustling does not operate as a contemporary rogue economic space outside the norms of propriety of formal capitalistic economies, but rather it is an expression of the 'positioning and agency' that has grown *out*

of and in resistance to persistent racial capitalism – a system that has systematically generated wealth and profit through modes of racialized labour exploitation and resource extraction, while also deriving value from African business logics of solidarity and reciprocity in relationships of exchange. We therefore treat hustling as a profoundly analytical concept precisely because of its emic meanings, uses and practices, which are read here as courageously life-affirming in the face of racial capitalism in its specific manifestations in Kenyan cities. Hustling in these cities can thus be read as part of the Black Atlantic, an ‘intercultural and transnational formation’ (Gilroy 1993) with local particularities and expressive articulations (Thieme 2017).

Here is where it is crucial to pay attention to the narratives of *struggle* that underpin urban relationships to labour. Lonsdale (1992: 204) has emphasized the importance of identifying a usable ‘political language’ that ‘unites people over what to argue about’. As Atieno-Odhiambo argues (1995: 2), Kenya’s post-colonial history has had to be ‘invented, assembled together, arranged around the metaphor of struggle’. Indeed, struggle has been a dominant theme throughout various stages of Kenyan twentieth- and twenty-first-century history, acquiring a politicized status of collective pride (starting during Kenyatta’s rule and persisting subsequently). Therefore, narratives of struggle have become integral to conceptions of belonging, resistance and hope in Kenya, as well as the inspiration for myriad forms of grass-roots mobilization, from self-help groups to more bellicose expressions of outrage against perceived injustice. Today, these expressions of struggle, steeped in historical legacies of anti-colonial resistance, have dual significance. They represent a condition of hardship in the face of structural barriers to economic opportunity due to rampant uneven urban development. But struggle also suggests an active mode of resistance and openings.

The urban vernacular of hustling in Kenya today reflects a contemporary ‘political language’ of youth, affirming different registers of struggle. These struggles play out through daily efforts to make a living and in affirmations of belonging in cities where their youthful majority is relegated to peripheralized neighbourhoods (Thieme 2013). From blackouts to water shortages to endless traffic jams, Kenyans are well accustomed to the interruptions and jolts of everyday urban rhythms, and coping with these may generate collective mobilization or at the very least a discourse of ‘we’, as though everyone were in it together. The solidarities that bind people’s everyday struggles to make a living are also highly individuated, even if interdependent. Shared struggles to get (to) work (if there is work) and to comply with cultural norms of adulthood (getting a ‘proper job’, owning property and getting married) – all increasingly impossible goals (Honwana 2012) – play out differently in individual lives. As we explore collectively, shared and individual hustles are entangled and thus co-constitutive while diverse coping strategies give way to countless and highly varied outcomes.

Hustle ethnographies

Hustle ethnographies offer a timely opportunity to theorize from African cities (Myers 2011; Robinson and Parnell 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), harnessing the conceptual categories of ordinary youth who constitute the majority presence on the street. We are committed to working with the details that make up the

conditions of urban life in postcolonial African cities (Simone and Pieterse 2017). This involves a process of 're-description' that invites ethnographers to see urban worlds beyond familiar disciplinary and conceptual tropes that 'weigh urban studies down' (*ibid.*: 197). In popular neighbourhoods,⁴ the habitus of hustling has naturalized particular attitudes and logics among youth (Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012) who have shaped diverse aspirations and outcomes. These challenge both normative conceptions of the 'proper job' (Ferguson and Li 2018) and the pejorative representations of hustling. In contrast to other scholarship that has tended to portray hustling as largely entangled with deceitful and manipulative practices to overcome adversity (Wacquant 1998), we seek to deepen the scholarly understanding of hustling as more than mere opportunism rooted in social and economic survival.

The articles in this special issue offer windows into specific experiences and practices of marginality and exclusion in the city, from which are born an ever-shifting constellation of strategies, predicaments, narratives and performances that both manifest in specific localities and travel beyond the spaces of marginality to become read (and told) as a wider story of city life. What we wish to emphasize is that, while the travelling narrative is in itself significant (notably because it has travelled well beyond Kenya at this point), its discursive reference and epistemic roots are grounded within individuals and social groups that live and work in underserved neighbourhoods, where communities are left to their own devices, where economic hardship and social marginalization are inextricably linked to the history and present-day forms of coloniality that underlie the neoliberal urban planning of Kenyan cities. As such, this context both produces experiences of dispossession and at the same time engenders the rawest forms of urban sociality and economy at work.

Across the articles, the ethnographic stories of individual hustlers reflect engagements with wider economic relations that manifest in the city. They also demonstrate how the economic rationalities of particular practices of hustling challenge narrow explanatory frameworks in which neoliberal logics are premised on continuous growth, profit and individualism, at the expense of continuous dispossession and exploitation of marginalized groups (Beuving 2013; Thieme 2015). Instead, the articles showcase a diversity of scenarios where economic calculations involve practices of reciprocity, distribution and diversification of economic investments for communal gains as well as complex individual subjectivities dealing with a host of pressures and expectations. Therefore, hustling says something meaningful about those who hustle, but also about the cities where hustling takes place, where the phenomenon is growing every day as urban residents

⁴Drawing from AbdouMaliq Simone's term 'popular neighbourhoods' (Simone 2018) and on the French expression '*quartier populaire*', we aim to move away from the more familiar and pejorative term 'slum', as well as seemingly more neutral but equally inappropriate terms such as 'low-income' or 'working-class' because these neighbourhoods are not necessarily tied 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 but are often vital to the functioning of the whole city.

negotiate the ‘boundaries and interfaces between work, leisure, home, neighbourhood and elsewhere’ (Simone and Pieterse 2017: xi). The five articles provide an empirical ensemble highlighting certain commonalities but also situated moral and ethical codes that together constitute a constellation of plural economic knowledges and rationalities. Each article can be read as an individual piece in its own right, but, as a collection, they form a mosaic-like portrait of the hustle, offering a more expansive interpretation of hustling by shedding light on the changing nature of work in African cities and highlighting the distinctive forms of social and economic life among hustlers in different corners of two Kenyan cities in particular.

As Felwine Sarr (2019: 104) writes in relation to African cities in his recent book *Afrotopia*, ‘there are a variety of ways for reading the cityscape’. Read together, these articles reveal and ‘read’ a series of possibilities, tensions and predicaments taking place in two Kenyan cities through the conceptual, empirical and analytical lens of hustling, drawing on our interlocutors’ ‘oral reason’ and their own analytical registers (Diagne 2005). In doing so, we hope to stretch established categories of social theory that have thus far largely ‘read’ African cities and their urban environments as informal, precarious or makeshift. Hustle combines particular subjectivities where hope, despair and fear are internalized and embodied not as contradictions but as co-constitutive (Monteith, van Stapele), where modes of public relations via social media and spoken word among the creative (under)classes become crucial narrative devices through which the stories of the hustle among urban youth are told (Unsel), where relational encounters entangled in negotiated trust, transactions and street credibility are integral to everyday dealings and performative practices (FERENCE, Thieme).

Hustling – as an urban experience and practice, as a way of moving around the city, as a mode of making work and *being* at work, and as a form of building social ties – might be perceived as trickery, deceit and exploitation in one light, but also as collaborative, solidarity building and creative in another – at the same time. Therefore, hustling does not aim to solve the contradictions of African urbanism. Instead, hustling brings out the palimpsests of shared and individual practices and outcomes that emerge from but also address seemingly irreconcilable relations between hope and despair, trickery and morality, self-provisioning and solidarity. Our effort to understand the constellation of struggles and strategies elucidates how hustling not only encompasses many of the paradoxes of life in African cities today but also opens up alternative ways of understanding urban economic practice and of reading African cityscapes.

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