**Temple Run: Dreams of Migration in the Making of the Political Imagination in Freetown**

"Back then, when the boats came, people used to run. Now they'd get on gladly, at least it would mean work". Junior's bleak jokes are not making anyone laugh.[1] He takes another sip of his Sprite and kicks up the dust on the street where we are sitting in Freetown, Sierra Leone. It's January 2017, and a year has passed since the last case of Ebola was recorded in the country, marking the end of a devastating epidemic that took thousands of lives and brought the economy to a grinding halt (Abdullah and Rashid 2017; Glennerster et al. 2016; Richards 2016). "That's why everyone wants to go on a Temple Run", he adds – this time everyone nods knowingly. Temple Run is the "addictive mega-hit" mobile phone game, in which "you have to run for your life to escape the Evil Demon Monkeys nipping at your heels" (Google Play n.d.). This involves jumping walls of fire, swimming through treacherous waters and flying across collapsing bridges. For young people in Freetown, Temple Run had become code for the perilous journey that young Sierra Leoneans are making to Europe via Libya (Enria 2017; IOM 2019). That January afternoon, as I sat with Junior and some of his friends on the steps of an old building in central Freetown, we listed the names of those who had left 'Belgium', the neighbourhood where Junior and his friends make a living through the *jewman biznes*,[2] the selling of technology and used goods for a small commission. Temple Run had become a ubiquitous conversation in Belgium. Daily calls from those who made it, WhatsApp messages and stylish Facebook pictures connected those who went and those who stayed. Images of the 'outside world' signalled to those left behind what a future elsewhere could look like.

On that afternoon, Junior and I had been discussing the challenges he and his colleagues had faced during the emergency brought on by the Ebola outbreak and by the economic contraction, compounded by the austerity measures that followed it. As he made jokes about boats, he laughed bitterly about what he saw as the irony of history, that whilst his ancestors feared being enslaved, now new boats, those ferrying migrants from Libya to European shores, appeared preferable to being stuck in Freetown without meaningful work or prospects. But meanwhile, like many other young men and women in his circles, Junior was doing his best to make his life work in Freetown. He was well respected in the petty traders' association and he had stopped drinking, something that had caused many fights in the past. He was hoping to get an apprenticeship in a vocational centre through a connection he had in government. He had no concrete plans to leave.

---

1            All names in this article are pseudonyms
2      The Krio term *Jewman* is used to define young men who sell goods (e.g. mobile phones) for a small commission (plural: *jewman dem*). As discussed later in the article, this also has social connotations as young men involved in this informal economy are often associated with criminality and with the post-war narratives that link unemployed youth to the potential for instability in Sierra Leone.

This article is about Junior, or people like Junior: those who stayed behind, who did not go on Temple Run because they could not, or would not. In tracing their narratives, dreams and hopes, it focuses on the integral position of migratory imageries in articulations of a distinctive political consciousness amongst Freetown youth. This political imagination is rooted in urban culture and everyday encounters with the state and its representatives, and it embodies a long history in the region of intersections between migration, insecurity and contestations of power. In exploring the role of migration as discourse, separate from practice, the paper engages with the ways in which dreams of migration become incorporated into expressions of *presence* rather than simply longings for *absence*. The relationship between countries of origin and migration tends to be thought of in terms of the material impact of migration (for example through remittances), 'push factors' or experiences of "social death" (Vigh 2009) that young Africans seek to escape. Here I consider how Temple Run (and discussions of migration in public spaces more generally) can also be seen as a way for young people to engage in a dialogue and to express their aspirations to meaningful, substantive citizenship in Sierra Leone. In other words, I ask: what do narratives about migration tell us about both the lived experience of being a citizen for young people in Freetown and their normative visions of what inclusion ought to mean?

In exploring dreams of migration in relation to the political imagination at home I do not posit a tension between migration as practice and migration as a discursive tool – one does not negate the other, as political claims 'here' do not exclude individual efforts or aspirations to escape 'elsewhere'. However, I suggest that we take seriously young people's expectations of citizenship – understood not simply as legal status but as substantive claims of belonging – even when expressed through threats and plans to leave. In this sense, the country of origin is not simply a place to leave, but the subject of normative political deliberations from 'the margins'.

I draw on Gaibazzi's (2010a, 2010b, 2013) work, which explores how, in young people's imaginations, we can see the 'elsewhere' as a critique of 'here' and a way of "forging [social] ties, lifestyles and meaning in the here and now" (Gaibazzi 2010b, my translation). Elaborating on this work, this article takes forward Gaibazzi's (2010a) suggestion that we see mobility and immobility as synthesis and applies it to an exploration of the political dimensions of people's lives. Focusing on migration narratives as analytically different from the act of migrating allows us to consider young people's contributions to nation-building from below. Migration's role in the political imagination is envisioned here as a collective discourse that transcends individual decision-making. Indeed, of the young people whose stories appear below, some have left, some have died in the Mediterranean, some turned back from Niger or Libya, and others succeeded, but the majority cannot leave or would prefer not to. The aim is not to determine whether the dissatisfaction or even hopelessness that young people like Junior express to comment on the status quo are indicators of individual decisions to leave or otherwise. As

such the article does not suggest, as policymakers are keen to do, that if people migrate due to a loss of hope in their countries, development 'at home' is the solution to the 'migration crisis'. Instead, the article explores how these collective discourses, and particularly their use of the idioms of migration and citizenship, form part of a conversation between young people and a state that, despite often being materially absent, is very much present in the moral and political deliberations of young Freetonians. Expressions of disillusionment gleaned from narratives about migration therefore can then also be seen as commentaries on the present, past and future of home and efforts to participate in a dialogue about the nature of political community. In particular, I highlight the significance of valuing the imagination as a form of political agency even when the space for meaningfully acting on or organising around these normative visions may be limited. In this sense, the article contributes to growing literature on citizenship practices and everyday political agency, using migration narratives as a lens into young people's expectations of and relationship to the state.

The article begins with a discussion of key conceptual debates about the role of migration in the production of the 'here and now' for those who stay behind and perspectives from political anthropology on citizenship practices and the role of the political imagination. The second section considers how Temple Run entered young people's spaces in the city at a particular historical juncture and how this migration trend influenced the informal economy in Freetown. The article then illustrates the discursive power of migration in longer-standing discussions around normative visions of citizenship. In particular, it shows how migration provided a language to articulate a distinctive political imagination that was at once rooted in everyday experiences of encounters with the state (and reflections on its absence) and future-oriented in an effort to imagine alternative possibilities. The conclusion situates these reflections in the intersections between mobility and the political imagination throughout the history and "practical memory" (Shaw 2002) of the Upper Guinea Coast.

The article is based on long-term fieldwork in Sierra Leone. The material discussed here was collected primarily over the course of 2017 for a project on the effects of crisis on young people's ideas and experiences of citizenship, but also builds on engagements with urban youth since 2010.[3] Long-term research and continued contact through social media made it possible to observe how the so-called migrant crisis that captured European headlines particularly since 2015, entered Freetown's streets, but also how it was integrated in local experiences of different kinds of local crises – from the challenge of post-war reconstruction to the Ebola epidemic. This contextual approach suggested the importance of

---

3    Throughout the paper I bring older material in conversation with newer phenomena. This was particularly productive in developing my own understanding of Temple Run and points to a broader methodological point that underlies this argument about the usefulness of revisiting older material to shed lights on what appear to be new findings. Some of the insights discussed in this paper have been elaborated in more detail, and with a different scope, elsewhere (Enria 2018).

analysing how migration narratives are situated in broader struggles for inclusion and recognition in Freetown's streets.

**Those Who Stay: (Im)mobility, Citizenship Practices and the Political Imagination**

In the interdisciplinary field of migration studies, 'home' has been conceptualised in a variety of ways, for example in exploring determinants of migration, including its structural drivers (Van Hear et al. 2018), or in efforts to understand its socio-economic impacts (Carling 2014a; Horst et al. 2014; Lindley 2013; Pieke et al. 2007) and effects on social norms (de Haas and van Rooij 2010) or the role of diasporas and returnees (Kibreab 2002; Akyeampong 2000). Increasingly we have also seen an interest in experiential accounts and an appreciation for migration as a socially constructed process (Carling 2014b; Horevitz 2009). This includes looking at how migration aspirations are shaped by social practices, discourses and "culturally specific social struggles" that shape the relative value of staying and leaving (Lubkemann 2004: 1).

Exploring experiences of migration from the perspective of 'those who stay' (see introduction to special issue), anthropologists in particular have pointed to the culturally productive role of migration 'at home',[4] where migration and cosmopolitan imageries enter local cultural repertoires. As Gaibazzi (2010b) notes, the idea of the journey, or the elsewhere shapes not only migratory projects but also the here and now. Belloni (2020: 5) points to "cosmologies of destination" amongst Eritreans at home and abroad, whereby moral prescriptions about different endpoints of migratory journeys not only influence migrants' decisions but also define transnational obligations and imaginations of Eritrea amongst those who have not yet left. Cole (2019) argues that the imaginations of Eritrea articulated through perspectives on migrants amongst those who stay can also reveal ambivalent perspectives on conditions at home, and in this way they can co-constitute and sustain authoritarian rule. Exploring cosmologies of migration in Central Morocco, Elliott (2016a, 2016b) sheds light on how long-term experiences of mobility shape notions of personhood for those who stay behind through the concept of the 'outside'. Daily life is "infused with… a sense of expectation for migratory futures to come" (Elliot 2016a: 103). Conversely, Vigh (2009) shows how in Guinea Bissau daily life and the social imageries cultivated at home inflect young people's conceptions of migration. The threat of social death in Bissau frames a desire for absence, which is equated with the possibilities of social becoming

---

4    Recent scholarship on the sociological concept of home points to its significance as "privileged site for studying processes of place-making, mobility, identity, emotion and belonging, as well as majority–minority relations, at both local and global scales" (Boccagni and Kusenbach 2020: 596).

made inaccessible by the realities at home. Gaibazzi (2013) takes this interrelation further, suggesting that a dichotomy between movement and stasis is limiting. He argues instead that sedentary practices produce mobility and vice versa. He illustrates this synthesis in a discussion of how, amongst Soninke men in the Gambia, an agricultural ethos is seen to build the character necessary to make it in the "travel bush", rather than as a way to root the young at home through commitment to the land, as development policy might anticipate.

Pushing forward this emphasis on synthesis and attention to the co-production between mobility and immobility, between elsewhere and here, the article proposes that narratives about migration amongst those who stay offer insights into collective, normative deliberations about the nature of political community in Sierra Leone. Migration as discourse can thus not simply be interpreted as an expression of a desire for absence. We must also take seriously its function in active efforts to weigh in on discussions about the status quo, including through the imagination of alternative possibilities. It then becomes productive to frame the narratives outlined in this article within a broader conversation in political anthropology that considers citizenship as practice. This speaks in particular to efforts to think of citizenship beyond its legal meaning and explore how people's understanding of themselves as citizens emerges from everyday encounters with the state and ideas about the nation (Lazar 2013). In Ong's (1996: 737) words, this is both through processes of "being made," for example through the disciplinary practices of the state, and of "self-making" as individuals and collectives articulate claims based on expectations of belonging and fashion particular identities. As Lazar (2013: 2) notes, ethnographic explorations of citizenship as political belonging "complicates normative pictures of liberal citizenship," shedding light on daily practices and meaning-making processes. These ethnographic accounts propose an "expansive notion of citizenship, as about political belonging beyond just legal status and rights", and one that identifies these claims of belonging in different spaces and under different guises, including a broad range of expressions of political agency (Lazar and Nuijten 2013: 4). Indeed, for Lazar and Nuijten (2013: 5), such an expansive approach can be a "productive means to focus analytically on political action: how individuals relate to the state in some form." This can include forms of agency that implicate the state directly, explicitly using the language of citizenship to make claims, or the different ways through which citizens either appropriate or resist official categorisations and build alternative identities. We see this for example in Petryna's (2013: 15) seminal study of the emergence of "biological citizenship" in the aftermath of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, where "citizens have come to rely on available technology, knowledge of symptoms, and legal procedures gain political recognition and access some form of political inclusion."

In some instances, these specific claims and newly fashioned political identities may give rise to collective political action and social movements (Lazar and Nuijten 2013), but organising is not always

possible, particularly for marginalised groups who may face authoritarian states or lack the resources to stage collective resistance. As such, a long-standing strand of literature has looked at the everyday to identify the political in less visible practices. This has included for example the everyday resistance or "weapons of the weak" identified by (Scott 1985) amongst Malaysian peasants who, not having the opportunities for organised political action, resorted to activities such as foot dragging or feigned ignorance to "resist economic and ritual marginalisation… and insist on minimal cultural decencies of citizenship" (Scott 1985: xv-xvvi). Or it can be found in the "social nonmovements" identified by Bayat (2010: 14) in Egypt and the, often unintended, consequences of a "quiet encroachment of the ordinary" as the urban poor gradually expand and impinge on the powerful forcing recognition and even the provision of public goods. Indeed, the city has been particularly central to studies that explore everyday citizenship practices by looking at encounters and performances that take place in urban spaces, which, as Holston (2008: 15) argues, can "turn people, however else related, into fellow citizens." In his study of "autoconstruction" in Sao Paolo's urban peripheries, Holston (*ibid.*: 13) identifies citizenship as a *relation* between state and society that comes to light through experiences with "the elements", such as property, illegality, and courts. These everyday interactions "…constitute the discursive and contextual constructions of relations called citizenship and…indicate not only particular attributes of belonging in society but also the political imagination that both produces and disrupts citizenship" (*ibid.*). Indeed, by looking at these everyday encounters with the state as well as how political community is shaped in the absence of formal services, we can expand our understanding of citizenship as both experience and expectation, paying attention to how political subjectivity is constituted and discursively re-imagined in public spaces.

These efforts to identify the political in the everyday and to reclaim the space for political agency beyond formal organised movements can therefore shed light on what it is to be a citizen, how citizenship is enacted through informal practices but also on hopes, dreams and disruptive articulations of an 'otherwise'. This article focuses on these discursive practices, as I am interested in how young Freetonians use idioms of migration and citizenship to elaborate on their experiences – from efforts to "navigate state bureaucracy or anticipate state violence" (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015: 7) to feelings of abandonment and neglect as young people are left to fend for themselves in the city – but also in how this allows them to articulate specific expectations of the state. This requires a more nuanced approach that can bring together how marginalised groups experience citizenship through everyday encounters with the state and its representatives (or their absence), how they navigate existing political terrains and how these experiences produce specific political ideologies and imageries, even if the space for acting and organising around them can be limited.  In order to do this, we must, as Roy (2018) proposes in his study of the "politics of the poor" in India, move beyond binaries and see everyday politics as a patchwork of practices that can simultaneously produce different kinds of (sometimes

contradictory) relations and subjectivities. For example, as he shows, poor people's supplications of the powerful classes as clients can co-exist with the imagination of different social and political realities. These imaginations of "an egalitarian public space", in turn, can draw on a "complex repertoire of juridical and affective claims" (Roy 2018: 390-391). Whilst an empirical focus on lived experiences or specific "acts of citizenship" (Isin 2008) is key, the risk is that it obscures the political significance of normative ideas and substantive claims to meaningful belonging that are part of everyday discussions in public spaces and as such an important component of the spectrum of citizenship practices.

Seeing migration narratives as a particular articulation of young people's political imagination allows us to think about their role in negotiations and contestations about the meaning and practice of citizenship. In particular, in highlighting how Temple Run and ideals of citizenship are articulated in Freetown streets we can pay attention not only to how migration reshapes urban realities but also how it provides language and imagery through which young people at once critique and re-imagine their relation to the state and assert their identity and expectations as Sierra Leonean citizens.

**Youth in the City: Informality and New Migration Economies**
Young men like Junior were at the centre of policymakers' preoccupations after the end of Sierra Leone's civil war (1991-2002). The conflict was broadly analysed as a 'crisis of youth' (Peters 2011; Abdullah 1998; Richards 1996) and peacebuilding initiatives focused on creating employment for disaffected youths envisioned as 'time-bombs' for a fragile peace (Enria 2018; Fanthorpe and Maconachie 2010). My initial work in Freetown explored the experiences of *jewman dem* like Junior as they navigated the post-war city contrasting peacebuilding narratives that framed young people as both threat and opportunity for national reconstruction with their daily efforts to create meaningful livelihoods. To explore the political narratives that new migration pathways gave voice to, we must situate them in these urban realities. This means tracing how Temple Run entered Freetown's informal economy at a particular historical juncture, what it entailed and how discussions of these perilous journeys lodged themselves in longer-standing deliberations about the meaning of citizenship rooted in specific experiences of exclusion.

For these young men, looking for 'business' perched on railings or standing on street corners, contravening several efforts from city authorities to curb street trading, was both an assertion of presence (Bayat 2010) and a daily confrontation with exclusionary processes. Hustling in the streets of Freetown gave the *jewman dem* a bad reputation. They were seen to personify the dangers of post-war 'idle youth', associated with the potential for crime and violence. The hustle had significant implications for young men's social world – it relegated them to the social category of 'youth', with its implications of dependence, unfulfilled expectations and interrupted transition. At the same time, it created the

foundations for a distinctive sociality steeped in global urban cultures connecting young Freetonians' lives to those of young men in 'the outside world' through music and fashion (Diawara 1998). In the here and now, making precarious livelihoods and creating social spaces in squatted buildings or abandoned market stalls right in the centre of Freetown, on the doorstep of the powerful residing in government buildings, meant staking a physical claim to the city, refusing to be ignored or cast aside. The "waithood" (Honwana 2012) characterising youth also allowed space for hope that things could be different, hinting to the possibilities of social becoming yet to come. This seemed accentuated in the post-war moment, as national narratives of rebirth and opportunity, of economic growth and emergent investment, gave the impression that change was on its way. These narratives had conflicting connotations for young people. Mining companies like African Minerals served for example as symbols of the post-war economic growth that Sierra Leone was experiencing. At the same time, they also represented the continued exclusion from dividends of peace for a large proportion of the youthful population that remained without a stable job. National narratives of renewal were therefore tempered by personal experiences of struggle and vulnerability.

The first official case of Ebola in 2014 changed this landscape. The institution of a state of emergency in July of that year, including curfews quarantines and restrictions on trading hours had significant repercussions for young men who were surviving precariously in the informal economy prior to the crisis. Those not directly affected by the disease experienced the emergency primarily through these restrictions and the economic recession that hit the country, exacerbated by the fall in global prices of iron ore, the country's main export. Previous symbols of growth and hope like African Minerals folded or left. Junior and his friends continued hustling in the streets near Connaught hospital, where at the height of the epidemic, bodies were being dumped in the street because there was no capacity to admit patients (Walsh and Johnson 2018). The epidemic highlighted a range of vulnerabilities, including the volatile nature of social networks as Junior experienced first-hand when he collapsed with a fever in the centre of town and he saw his friends running away, afraid he might infect them with Ebola. He was left to drag himself to the hospital where he was put in isolation before testing positive for malaria (Enria 2015a). For some *jewman dem*, Ebola however also created opportunities to work, though this came with high risks – both physical and social – as those joining epidemic response teams were accused of "eating Ebola money" or prolonging the crisis to extend their employment (Shepler 2017).

Once the epidemic ended in March 2016, there was much to do to rebuild. My discussions with Junior about Temple Run took place in the midst of the hardest phase of the recovery, following the introduction of austerity measures expected to revive a faltering economy. Fuel subsidies had been removed leading to significant price increases and sustained protests. *Jewman biznes* was slow and a sense of stillness in their trading ground was paralleled by palpable dissatisfaction. This was not just a direct

outcome of economic crisis. The challenges of the Ebola emergency and its aftermath had been a backdrop to the fact that my interlocutors, over the years of our interactions, had grown older. As the years went by, it became harder to meet the struggle in the streets with the same optimism; change seemed increasingly less likely. A common refrain in Belgium was "*Ar done gains*": I'm fed up. The most recent crisis only heightened this feeling, tarnishing previous national narratives of recovery and opportunity.

Migration has always been a part of life in Sierra Leone. In the lifetime of Belgium's young men, and following conflict related refugee flows, a distant diaspora community featured in Freetown's daily life through remittances or the yearly arrival of *JCs* ('just come') for the holidays.[5] In January 2017, however, it was a different kind of migration that had captured the imagination: Temple Run. Migration had not necessarily significantly increased overall or become skewed in favour of this riskier route. Rather, while discussions of the 'outside world' had long been part of everyday life, new avenues for migration became particularly prominent around this time. Networks in the city's informal economy had also expanded around this new business opportunity, as some of the 'investors' who let the young hustlers sell their products for a small commission, became fixers, arranging the journey for the young people willing to take a chance. One young man, Adikali, told me that a well-known investor had been one of the first to procure contacts in Libya and had been organising trips. He asked for 2,000 US dollars, of which, according to Adikali, 500 was the fixer's commission, 500 would be given to the traveller for the journey and the rest was sent to Libya to arrange pick-up after crossing the desert in Niger. Other investors had followed suit and built their own contacts, whilst some prospective migrants also figured out that they could try their luck and go alone, cutting out the commission.

So Temple Run entered the hustling ground: several *jewman dem* had left and new forms of communication meant the streets were awash with pictures and videos sent by those who had gone and intermittent calls from Italy, Germany and beyond. Reports were shared of those who had set off on the journey, those who had been in touch after having made it and those who had not been heard from and were assumed dead. Details of the journey were pieced together through accounts from phone calls and WhatsApp conversations, or the whispered stories of those who had returned. Those like Osman who had made it to Libya and turned back but was reluctant to share his experience. His story started with reflections on the struggles of making things work as a young man in Freetown's streets. He had been an *okada* rider until they were banned from the Central Business District in 2016,[6] and he had found himself without a steady source of income. A friend of his, a *jewman* who sold phones for

---

5    *JCs* was the nickname given to Sierra Leoneans living abroad when they came to visit their home country, hinting both
     at their worldliness and their being '*green*' (naïve) to the realities back home.
6    An *okada* is a commercial motorbike taxi.

commission, told him about the 'programme' that everyone was talking about. He sold his bike and all his belongings to fund his travels. He called his brother one morning and said he was leaving the same day; he decided not to tell his mother for fear she would hold him back. He travelled to Guinea (first Pamlap then Conakry) and from there to Mali, then Niger. From Agadez in Niger, some took the route to Algeria, but he went on to Libya, across the desert. Six of his travelling companions died on the way and had to be buried in the desert. Once on the other side and following a challenging journey in a crowded Hilux pickup from Sabha to Tripoli, he attempted his first crossing of the Mediterranean. They were caught and taken to a detention centre. Once he was released, he tried again, but the boat filled with water and they had to turn back. After the second failed attempt he called his mother, who told him to come home: it was not God's will that he would reach Europe, she said, so it was not worth risking death. Through the Sierra Leonean embassy in Tripoli and with the help of the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), he was flown back to Sierra Leone, where he was hoping he might get the compensation he had been promised to set up a new life. "If I had known that was how the road would be, I would not have taken it… it reached a place where I thought: 'I will die here'", Osman said. But being back in Freetown was not easy either, not least as those who had stayed mocked him for not having made it across the sea. He would not tell many people how tough he had found the journey: "they will just take it like *badat* (ill will)", that is, they would think he was trying to hold them back simply because he had been unsuccessful.

**The Political Imagination and the Power of Elsewhere: Debating Citizenship in Public Spaces**
Temple Run however did not only enter young people's streets through the stories of those who went, the plans of those hoping to leave or through how Freetown's informal economy accommodated these processes. Its significance was much broader, as references or allusions to Temple Run or migration more generally featured in daily conversations in the form of jokes or discussions about the predicament of being a young hustler in Freetown. In what Bayat (2010: 13) calls "the political street", where "collective sentiments, shared feelings and public opinions of ordinary people are expressed broadly in public spaces," discussions of migration laid the foundations for reflections on young people's position in Sierra Leone's contemporary political dispensation. These discussions outlined critiques of the powerful and articulations of demands on the state. These demands were firmly rooted in the particular experiences of young people inhabiting Freetown's streets: from urban youth culture, unemployment and social exclusion, disillusionment and everyday encounters with the police or anger about the absence of social services. Tracing these discussions, therefore, we can distinguish both an account of what it is to be a Sierra Leonean citizen for young Freetonians and the content of their aspirations for a more meaningfully inclusive political community.

Sitting by a petrol station in the East End of Freetown, Messi, a former *okada* rider who, like Osman had been grounded by the ban on bikes, was holding court. Laughing, he referred to Temple Run, saying that his next target should be Agadez, the city in central Niger that journalists have dubbed the "smuggling capital of Africa" (Destrijcker 2016). He quickly followed this with "*APC done lock game oh*", by which he meant that the then ruling party, the All People's Congress, had made things difficult for young people like him. This was a reference to the post-Ebola recession and austerity, but its figurative meaning gestured towards a specific critique of power that I will return to throughout this section. To *lock game* suggests something akin to 'kicking away the ladder', implying that politicians had access to the benefits of the game (i.e. resources accumulated through politics) but had blocked opportunities for others. During the Ebola outbreak, Messi had volunteered, taking swabs from the sick and the dead. Now he found himself back on the street, trying to find opportunities to ride a *keke*, the new three-wheeled motorcycles that had replaced *okadas* in some parts of town. Whilst the emergency had allowed Messi to see an opening, as he briefly entered the world of work, now the game had closed again. His friend, listening to our discussions, agreed that they might as well travel to "any outside country, even the Gambia," as long as it was not Sierra Leone. Messi's jokes about Agadez had framed his discussions of his frustrations, glimpses of hope and the perception that those in power were responsible for young people's struggles.

The power of 'elsewhere' was frequently invoked in critiques of the status quo and in articulations of what life in Sierra Leone *should* be like that emerged from such critiques. One young man, David, was clear about placing these expectations on the government: "I expect that government should give me something so that I can live with my family, that is a right, I know it happens in other countries… For our country nothing like that is happening" (Interview, 5 September 2017, Freetown). David lived in an informal settlement that had developed over time along Freetown's coastline, which was populated primarily by people who had left the rural provinces, especially during and after the war, resisting regular government attempts to evict them or relocate them elsewhere. The absence of social assistance was also paralleled by everyday encounters with state agents, principally police officers, which were often described as intrusive, arbitrary, or occasionally violent. Police raids were common occurrences in David's neighbourhood, as he described the police from 'up' descending into the informal settlements to arrest young people for frequenting (possession of drugs or being found socialising in places where drugs were consumed). In these stories, experiences at the police station were described as confusing and alienating. Once one was arrested, they were regularly advised to plead guilty, regardless of what they had done, and pay a fine or face jail for an indeterminate amount of time. Although for David, the state was experienced primarily through these raids, threats of eviction or imagined in frustrations with its absence, his statement of expectation reflects enduring claims to "social obligations linking state and citizen" (Ferguson 2013: 236). Indeed, not only did these experiences give an insight into the nature of

the relationship between citizens like David and the Sierra Leonean state, they were also articulated explicitly in terms of a dereliction of the duties and rights they were owed as citizens. If a duty of care was central to a perception of what it should be to be a citizen, these experiences were expressed as daily devaluations of their status as Sierra Leoneans. David explained this for example using a comparison that highlighted what he saw as a gulf between legal citizenship and his experience. Reflecting on his perception of the law as arbitrary, David argued that in Sierra Leone, privileged foreigners could bend the law and take advantage of citizens:

> Foreigners who come from outside, maybe they have more rights than me in this country…like, look at you [a white European woman]. If you and me argue, maybe for your sake, I will go to jail. When I don't have the money to fight you back, I will go to jail. You see? That means they have taken away my rights…But if I go to your country, if I hit you, they will deport me. (Interview, 5 September 2017, Freetown)

Comparisons of injustice at home and the way things were imagined to work in Europe often underpinned explanations of why people might want to go abroad. People leave because of "the hardship," David argued. He had other plans for the moment: he wanted to build a home for his family in Freetown. But were he to see a "small space" (opportunity) to travel, to "find another living" to provide for his family, he said he would take it. The juxtaposition of his struggles to fulfil his hopes for his family in Freetown and speculations about sending remittances from abroad, served to underscore his critique of the hardship at home. David's friend Abass similarly used migration as a way to describe the depth of challenges in Freetown. After he told me about his friend who was in Algeria waiting to cross to Italy, I asked him if he wanted to follow suit and whether he was not put off by the dangers of the journey. He smirked and said:

> I don't want to live here! […] Sister, here we live by magic…if you do not suffer, you will not get anything, so that is why we [pray] for God to help, even if it [means] getting out of this country. It is the big ones who are ruling the country, they are only doing it for their family, they do not help us. (Interview, 6 September 2017, Freetown)

By contrast, when asked what it should mean to be a Sierra Leonean, young men like Saidu argued:

> It is plenty! [As] a citizen, I should not strain for a sleeping place, I should not strain [to get] a job, these two things, I should never strain for them. In other countries, you as a citizen should not strain for these things; a place to sleep, a place to work, but for us here today we strain for a

place to sleep and a place to work. Some of us if you see where we sleep you will feel sorry for us. (Interview, 29 August 2017, Freetown)

This condition was of course not the same for everyone, and just like privileged foreigners were seen to have more substantive rights than young men like David and Saidu, they also pointed to differential treatment of Sierra Leoneans, with only the wealthy and powerful seen to experience the full rights of citizenship. For Saidu, those who "live at IMATT [a wealthier part of Freetown]… They are the citizens, we are the foreigners." Frustrations at the absence of state support that left young men to fend for themselves through 'magic living', fear and resentment provoked by the perfunctory experiences of the state through arbitrary violence therefore created a feeling amongst young men that they were second class citizens.

These "real citizens" and "the big ones who are ruling the country" were therefore implicated in young men's analysis of the causes of the current predicament and a conviction that things did not have to be this way. A hot topic in the news at the time of our discussions offered an interesting elaboration of this analysis: the fate of a large diamond that had been found by a pastor in the Eastern part of the country. The diamond had been taken abroad to be sold, but David and his friends speculated that it would disappear, drawing on past rumours of diamonds turning to stone once in the hands of politicians following the war. The symbolism of vanishing opportunities, swallowed up in mysterious ways by those in power echoed Messi's assertion of a closed game. The young men argued that with the natural resources available in Sierra Leone "the country should not be suffering." In other words, opportunities to provide for and lift up young people existed, but those in power foreclosed them. In this context then, David and his friends' reflections on Temple Run are valuable not only as a more or less concrete desire to leave, but also in how they situated themselves in broader commentaries on everyday realities and the role of those in power in creating those conditions. Critiques of injustice, abuses of power and inadequate safety nets, therefore, lay the foundations for normative conversations about social justice, the obligations of 'the big ones' and positive definitions of what citizenship *should* entail.

These critiques are not new. Migration simply served as an entry-point and new forms of travel like Temple Run as new idioms to elaborate pre-existing conversations. These narratives inserted themselves in young Freetonians' daily discussions of life as a hustler, giving voice to moral critiques of state neglect and violence but also to a vision of alternatives, for example where the country's riches were used to provide stable livelihoods and shelter. Rather than simply intentions to travel or expressions of resignation, the discursive power of migration lies in how it defines commentaries of lived experience as well as specific expectations, hopes and demands for recognition at home. The

result is a particular political imagination that at once critiques the status quo and prefigures how things might be otherwise.

It is useful therefore to situate narratives about Temple Run in longer-standing discussions, and particularly to highlight how metaphors of immobility and suffering, in different guises, have been central to the development of this particular political consciousness amongst Freetown youth. In previous work, for example, I documented how unemployment was defined in the streets as 'sitting down'. This denoted long periods of waiting, when one's effort to make a living, such as selling for commission, must be seen to be temporary, a bridge to better opportunities. This metaphor for "waithood" (Honwana 2012) highlighted both the temporal and spatial connotations of young people's livelihoods: at once a reassurance that one's predicament is temporary, but also a fear of being unable to move. To get up and move out of unemployment required establishing relationships of reciprocity and dependence with a 'big person', a *sababu*. A key avenue was to be prepared to 'suffer' for this person, taking risks, working for free in order to be recognised. The risks and suffering associated with efforts to stop sitting down were simultaneously accepted and critiqued. One had to be smart and adapt to existing realities, even if the 'game' is rigged. This meant competing fiercely for these connections, suffering in the short term to pave the way for a better future. But the "locking" of the game, the "selfishness" of the big ones was discussed as a sign of their failure to fulfil their social obligations to young people. Critiques of the "real citizens", those who were foreclosing young people's opportunities, were not critiques of hierarchy or dependence *per se*, but rather of a perceived breakdown of responsibilities of redistribution and care that come with power ( see Ferguson 2013; Ferme 2001; Piliavsky 2014). They were challenges to big people's individual or 'selfish' accumulation— as Junior for example suggested that if they wanted, they could build factories and employ the youth. The day to day hustle to move, the tactics it involved, included efforts to become included in the existing narrow networks of *sababus* at whatever cost, but these were also accompanied by more structural critique of 'suffering' and demands for change. Young people's political imagination, alongside their pragmatic navigations, can be understood as an active effort to claim recognition and a stake in society.

This tension between pragmatic navigations and the political imagination, alongside fears of state repression and the difficulties of resourcing a political movement poses challenges for young people to organise around their demands and, in some instances, their actions may even undermine these more expansive visions.[7] However, this does not mean that this political imagination is not meaningful as a

---

7   In other work, for example, I have outlined young peoples' perspectives on the difficulties of collective movement and how a search for inclusion in the networks of individual 'big people' for some young men led instead to involvement in instances of political violence (Enria 2015b).

form of political agency in and of itself. This retrospective is also significant because we find the same narrative structures in the stories about Temple Run as we do in previous critiques of unemployment as sitting down. In comparing the journey from West Africa to Europe to a game where one must jump through burning bridges and swim across water we see resonances of the necessary acceptance of risks, or the productivity of suffering in order to steer one's life towards the future. That one might have to accept such risks is however reflective of an unacceptable reality of struggle, so that migration offers a rhetorical device for highlighting the realities of being young, unemployed and socially excluded in Freetown. At the same time, metaphors that bring together (im)mobility and suffering point to the possibility of hope. Whilst young hustlers cannot be categorised as a "hope movement" in the way that Dinerstein and Deneulin (2012: 585) define them, because they do not (yet) mobilise around their critiques of the present or fully enact the alternative forms of living they demand, their narratives similarly articulate hope as an "anticipatory consciousness of the 'not-yet-become'." Migration as discourse then is not daydreaming but a way of "creatively [imagining] another reality" (Dinerstein and Deneulin 2012: 595). Imageries of elsewhere and treacherous journeys emphasise current hardships and add to longstanding claims to meaningful, positive citizenship rooted in social obligations and redistributive demands. For some like Osman, Temple Run *is* the risky strategy to attempt making a life elsewhere. For the collective of youth like Junior, David, Saidu or Messi, it frames discussions about demands for a future at home. They are not (just) longings for absence; they are an expression of presence.

**Conclusion: Echoes of the Past, Dreams of the Future**

Turning back to the boats in Junior's sombre reflections urges us to pay attention to the historical echoes of the role of migration in the political imagination in Sierra Leone. Junior's reference to the slave trade is a reminder that history, whether embodied or explicitly remembered, is central to the formation of political consciousness. Revisiting Rosalind Shaw's (2002) work on the reproduction of memories of the slave trade to make sense of and critique the present in Northern Sierra Leone is pertinent here. Migration and memories of forced movement have long been at the heart of popular challenges to power 'from below' in the Upper Guinea Coast. Shaw's discussion of how 'practical memories' of the trans-Atlantic slave trade are incorporated in daily practices such as divination points to the simultaneous continuity and rupture in a relationship between the present and the past. "Both past and present interfuse, shape and mutually fashion each other such that memories form a prism through which the present is configured even as present experience reconfigures those memories" (Shaw 2002: 265). These reconfigurations in turn reveal a certain moral ambiguity in commentaries about modernity. Modernity is at once critiqued through reference to anxieties that echo the past, for example as disappearances during the slave trade are re-imagined in narratives about witchcraft, whilst being appropriated through inclusion in local culture. Popular imageries of powerful 'big men'

acquiring and accumulating influence and wealth through occult and cannibalistic means exemplify how memories can be mobilised to challenge power and express normative judgements about social order. Just like movement and migratory patterns have fundamentally shaped state-making trajectories in the Upper Guinea coast, from Mande migrations to refugee flows in the Mano River wars, they have also inflected a collective imagination (Knörr and Trajano Filho 2010).

The elaboration of recent phenomena like the hardships wrought on young Sierra Leoneans by the Ebola outbreak and economic recession, or new migratory pathways, through references to the past point to long-standing narrative repertoires to make sense of the present and manage uncertain futures. In this article, I have argued that we take these narratives seriously *as narrative*, to think of what they tell us about young Sierra Leoneans' relationship to their country, the current nature of state-society relations as experienced through everyday encounters with the state and its agents or critiques of its absence, and how these shape their normative visions of meaningful citizenship at home. Dissociating our analysis of reasons to leave and dynamics of movement on the one hand, from the discursive uses of Temple Run and references to migration and 'the outside world' more broadly enables us to unearth domestic conversations about the rightful content of those visions. In so doing we can ask, what are these narratives about beyond migration itself? This is only possible if we situate it in Freetonians' struggles for recognition, efforts to claim (rather than abandon) a stake in society and practice citizenship through the hopeful imagination of alternatives premised on normative ideas of social obligations and fair distribution and a productive or inclusive 'dependence' (Ferguson 2013).

Whilst it remains paramount to understand migration and journeys like those taken by Osman and his friends, we should not neglect the role that narratives about migration play in political struggles at home. For young people in Freetown, Temple Run is about much more than the potential exodus that haunts the European imagination. Recognising that migration gives language to frustrations and hopes is to give agency to young Freetonians and their collective imagination, making visible their role as players in their country's future. Rather than undermining the very real reasons that push young West Africans to leave, this perspective adds to a growing literature that sees value in exploring what migration means to those who stay behind, looking beyond causes, consequences or solutions. This affirms the political significance of migration, outside of the purview of European policies and preoccupations.

## References

Abdullah, Ibrahim. 1998. 'Bush Path to Destruction: The Origin and Character of the Revolutionary United Front/Sierra Leone.' *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 36 (2): 203–35.

Abdullah, Ibrahim and Ismail O. D. 2017. *Understanding West Africa's Ebola Epidemic: Towards a Political*

*Economy*. Chicago: University of Chigaco Press.

Akyeampong, Emmanuel. 2000. 'Africans in the Diaspora: The Diaspora and Africa.' *African Affairs*, 99 (395): 183–215.

Bayat, Asef. 2010. *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Amsterdan: Amsterdam University Press.

Belloni, Milena. 2020. 'Cosmologies and Migration: On Worldviews and Their Influence on Mobility and Immobility.' *Identities*, 1–19.

Carling, Jørgen. 2014a. 'Scripting Remittances: Making Sense of Money Transfers in Transnational Relationships.' *International Migration Review*, 48: S218–62.

Carling, Jørgen. 2014b. 'The Role of Aspirations in Migration.' *Paper Presented at Determinants of International Migration, International Migration Institute, University of Oxford* (September): 23–5.

Christiansen, Catrine, Mats Utas Henrik E. Vigh. 2006. *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: Social Becoming in an African Context*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.

Cole, Georgia. 2019. 'Systemic Ambivalence in Authoritarian Contexts: The Case of Opinion Formation in Eritrea' (May).

Destrijcker, Lucas. 2016. 'Welcome to Agadez, Smuggling Capital of Africa', *Politico Europe*. Available at https://www.politico.eu/article/the-smuggling-capital-of-africa-agadez-niger/. Accessed 5 May 2020.

Diawara, Manthia. 1998. *In Search of Africa*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press

Dinerstein, Ana Cecilia and Severine Deneulin. 2012. 'Hope Movements: Naming Mobilization in a Post-development World.' *Development and Change*, 43 (2): 585–602.

Elliot, Alice. 2016a. 'Paused Subjects: Waiting for Migration in North Africa.' *Time & Society*, 25 (1): 102–16.

Elliot, Alice. 2016b. 'The Makeup of Destiny: Predestination and the Labor of Hope in a Moroccan Emigrant Town.' *American Ethnologist*, 43 (3): 488–99.

Enria, Luisa .2015a. '"You Think This Is an Ebola Office?" Rebuilding Trust in the Aftermath of Sierra Leone's Outbreak', *Mats Utas Blog*. Available at https://matsutas.wordpress.com/2015/10/13/you-think-this-is-an-ebola-office-rebuilding-trust-in-the-aftermath-of-sierra-leones-outbreak-by-luisa-enria/. Accessed 5 April 2017.

Enria, Luisa. 2015b. 'Love and Betrayal: The Political Economy of Youth Violence in Post-War Sierra Leone.' *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 53 (4): 637–60.

Enria, Luisa. 2017. 'Temple Run or Stay?' *Africa Is a Country*. Available at https://africasacountry.com/2017/04/temple-run-or-stay. Accessed 5th May 2020.

Enria, Luisa. 2018, *The Politics of Work in a Post-Conflict State: Youth, Labour & Violence in Sierra Leone*. Oxford: James Currey.

Fanthorpe, Richard and Roy Maconachie. 2010. 'Beyond the "Crisis of Youth"? Mining, Farming, and

Civil Society in Post-War Sierra Leone.' *African Affairs*, 109 (435): 251–72.

Ferguson, James. 2013. 'Declarations of Dependence: Labour, Personhood, and Welfare in Southern Africa.' *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 19 (2): 223–42.

Ferme, Mariane C. 2001 *The Underneath of Things: Violence, History, and the Everyday in Sierra Leone*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Gaibazzi, Paolo. 2010a. 'Qui, Nell'Altrove: Giovani, Migrazione e Immaginazione Geo-Sociale Nel Gambia Rurale', *Mondi Migranti*.

Gaibazzi, Paolo. 2010b. 'Migration, Soninke Young Men and the Dynamics of Staying behind, the Gambia'.

Gaibazzi, Paolo. 2013. 'Cultivating Hustlers: The Agrarian Ethos of Soninke Migration', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 39 (2): 259–75.

Glennerster, Rachel, Tavneet Suri and Shweta Bhogale. 2016. 'The Implications of the Ebola Outbreak on Markets, Traders, and Food Security in Sierra Leone.' *The International Growth Centre*.

Google Play (n.d.) 'Temple Run'. Available at: https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.imangi.templerun&hl=en_GB&gl=US. Accessed 5 May 2020.

Holston, James. 2008. *Insurgent Citizenship: Disjunctions of Democracy and Modernity in Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Honwana, Alcinda M. 2012. *The Time of Youth: Work, Social Change, and Politics in Africa*. Sterling: Kumarian Press.

Horevitz, Elizabeth. 2009. 'Understanding the Anthropology of Immigration and Migration.' *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 19 (6): 745–58.

Horst, Cindy, Marta B, Erdal, Jørgen Carling, and Karin Afeef. 2014. 'Private Money, Public Scrutiny? Contrasting Perspectives on Remittances.' *Global Networks*, 14 (4): 514–32.

IOM. 2019. 'Race for Life: Healing Trafficking Survivors in Sierra Leone through Awareness Raising'. Available at https://medium.com/@UNmigration/race-for-life-healing-trafficking-survivors-in-sierra-leone-through-awareness-raising-13a3818338d7. Accessed 3 May 2020.

Isin, Engin F. 2008. 'Theorizing Acts of Citizenship.' In E.F. Isin and G.M. Nielsen (eds,), *Acts of Citizenship*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. 14-43.

Kibreab, Gaim. 2002. 'When Refugees Come Home: The Relationship between Stayees and Returnees in Post-Conflict Eritrea.' *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 20 (1): 53–80.

Knörr, Jacqueline and Wilson Trajano Fliho. 2010. 'Introduction.' In J. Knoerr and W. Trajano Filho (eds.), *The Powerful Presence of the Past Integration and Conflict along the Upper Guinea Coast*. Pp. 1–24.

Laszczkowski, Mateusz and Madeleine Reeves. 2015. 'Introduction: Affective States – Entanglements,

Suspensions, Suspicions.' *Social Analysis*, 59 (4): 1–14.

Lazar, Sian. 2013. *The Anthropology of Citizenship: A Reader*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.

Lazar, Sian and Monique Nuijten. 2013. 'Citizenship, the Self, and Political Agency.' *Critique of Anthropology*, 33: 3–7.

Lindley, Anna. 2013. 'Diaspora and Transnational Perspectives on Remittances.' *A Companion to Diaspora and Transnationalism*: 316–29.

Lubkemann, Stephen C. 2004. 'Situating Migration in Wartime and Post-War Mozambique: A Critique of "Forced Migration" Research.' *IUSSP Working Paper*.

Ong, Aihwa. 1996. 'Cultural Citizenship as Subject-Making: Immigrants Negotiate Racial and Cultural Boundaries in the United States.' *Current Anthropology* 37 (5): 737–62.

Peters, Koen 2011. *War and the Crisis of Youth in Sierra Leone*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Petryna, Adriana. 2013. *Life Exposed: Biological Citizens after Chernobyl* (2nd ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Pieke, Frank K.., Nicholas Van Hear and Anna Lindley. 2007. 'Beyond Control? The Mechanics and Dynamics of 'Informal' Remittances between Europe and Africa.' *Global Networks*, 7 (3): 348–66.

Piliavsky, Anastasia. 2014. *Patronage as Politics in South Asia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Richards, Paul. 1996. *Fighting for the Rain Forest: War, Youth and Resources in Sierra Leone*. Oxford: James Currey.

Richards, Paul. 2016. *Ebola: How a People's Science Helped End An Epidemic*. London: Zed Books.

Roy, Indrajit. 2018. *The Politics of the Poor in Contemporary India* (Vol. 4). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shaw, Rosalind. 2002. *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shepler, Susan. 2017. '"We Know Who Is Eating the Ebola Money": Political Effects of Perceived Corruption in the Ebola Response.' *Anthropological Quarterly*, 90 (2): 457–80.

Van Hear, Nicholas, Oliver Bakewell and Katy Long. 2018. 'Push-Pull plus: Reconsidering the Drivers of Migration.' *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 44 (6): 927–44.

Vigh, Henrik E. 2009. 'Wayward Migration: On Imagined Futures and Technological Voids.' *Ethnos* 74 (1): 91–109.

Walsh, Sinead and Johnson, Oliver. 2018. *Getting to Zero. A Doctor and a Diplomat on the Ebola Frontline*. London: Zed Books.