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PURSUING THE GOOD LIFE:
DISPLACEMENT, INCLUSION, AND WELLBEING
AMONG CONGOLESE IN NAIROBI, KENYA

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PhD in International Development
The University of Edinburgh
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Declaration

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I declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is entirely my own work, and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Megan Douglas
Abstract

This thesis explores the everyday experiences and conceptualizations of ‘the good life’ among Congolese living in Nairobi, Kenya. Drawing on nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Nairobi, Kenya, in 2018/19, I argue that migrants in the city forge inclusion and wellbeing through the leveraging of fluid identities, development of social interdependencies, and cultivation of spaces of belonging.

At the time I conducted research, and still to this day, the restrictions to formal employment and mobility put in place by the Government of Kenya presented significant barriers to both registered refugees and undocumented migrants. Restrictive governmental policies, along with the humanitarian imagery surrounding ‘the refugee’ figure- a suffering, passive, and unidimensional persona- belies the complex and vibrant lives of Congolese in the city. In this thesis I explore what it means to be a ‘refugee’ and ‘Congolese’, and how fluid constructs of identity are built and deconstructed through sartorial expression and consumerism. I highlight how socio-political exclusion is navigated through informality and social networks, and how the metropolis provides key spaces that are shaping and shaped by dynamic interplays between transnational mobility and global consumerism. On an epistemological level, I argue that to better understand the migrant experience, it is vital to learn what they themselves determine to be important and relevant in their lives. Situated within the ‘anthropology of the good’, this thesis presents an ethnographic reframing of narrow institutions and discourses surrounding the ‘refugee persona’, offering broader analytical parameters that consider values, preferences, aspirations, and strategies among Congolese in Nairobi for a life better than the one presented to them by the state and humanitarian regime. In doing so, I contribute to debates in the fields of Forced Migration, Aid and Humanitarianism, and African Studies by generating a greater understanding of the dynamism of forced migration and the aspirations and values of urban migrants on the margins of society.
Lay Summary

The Government of Kenya maintains restrictive immigration policies that makes it very difficult for migrants- including asylum-seekers and refugees- to live and work in the country’s cities. Despite this, a significant number of Congolese choose to live in Nairobi. While living ‘below the radar’ would seemingly benefit these individuals, many Congolese pursue vibrant and dynamic lives in the city, challenging State- and humanitarian-crafted conceptualizations of them as placeless, invisible, or speechless.

While the socio-economic barriers facing refugees are well-researched, I join other scholars who explore the strategies of displaced peoples to overcome such challenges. In addition, by applying a framework of ‘the anthropology of the good’, I look at Congolese migrants not as distant ‘others’ or ‘sufferers’, but as individuals with values, aspirations, and strategies for a better life than the one presented to them. Drawing on nine months of qualitative research conducted in 2018/19, this thesis explores what a good life means to Congolese and how they pursue one within Kenya’s capital city. I argue that they do this by leveraging fluid identities around what it means to be “Congolese” and a “refugee”, by creating complex social interdependencies, and by cultivating spaces of belonging. I highlight how social, political, and economic exclusion is navigated through informality and social networks, and how the city plays a vital role in providing key spaces that shape and are shaped by global mobility and consumerism.

It is worth investigating these themes and processes because despite their prominence in the lives of so many, they are often overlooked within relevant literature, policy, and practice. This, in turn, hinders a fuller and more dynamic understanding of the realities of many and perpetuates migrant-focused policies and programmes that lack nuance or complexity.
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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all those who have been forced to leave their home to make a new life elsewhere.

Acknowledgements

The common comparison between a PhD and running a marathon is an accurate one. At some point finishing a race becomes more mental than physical, and those cheering you on from the sidelines are just as valuable to your endurance, if not more, than your feet hitting the pavement.

I’ve been fortunate to have had many people cheering me on, from the beginning to the end. My most energetic and constant cheerleaders were my parents. So first and foremost, thank you, mom and dad, for your endless encouragement through both the best and worst moments. It will be your faces I look for first at the finish line. Thank you to the Shaw family for your incredible hospitality, love, Lego games, and views of the green fields of Tigoni. Thank you, Aunt Lois, for being such an inspiration and convincing me to join you on the PhD journey. Thank you, Lucy, for being the very best neighbor and friend- I miss our evening drinks around the “scratching tree” with the cats. Thank you to the Government of the Republic of Kenya for approving my application for a research permit. Thank you, Dr. Jamie Cross, for encouraging me to consider doing a PhD and alerting me to scholarship opportunities- none of this would have been possible without you. Thank you to the generous funding of the Leverhulme Trust, enabling me to research and live with fewer financial restraints. My very sincerest thanks to my two amazing supervisors, Dr. Jean-Benoit Falisse and Dr. Lucy Lowe, for your constant patience, guidance, and encouragement along the way.

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community is such an inspiration, and I will never forget your kindness. I look forward to the day we can share tea and *mandazi* again.
Chapter One: Introduction

Maurice walks down the street with long graceful strides, his alligator skin shoes deftly missing the cracks and holes that punctuate Nairobi’s sidewalks. The young Congolese man adjusts the collar of his purple silk blouse and flicks his wrist to check his Gucci watch. His hair is closely cropped, immaculately trimmed in razor-sharp lines. Squinting at the sun that hangs lethargically over the city, he pulls out a pair of Tom Ford aviators and slides them over his nose. Maurice is a member of the Congolese fashion sub-culture La Sape (an abbreviation of La Societe des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Elegantes), and he walks with an understated confidence. He looks neither left nor right at the bystanders who hold their gaze on his figure as he passes, their heads cocked with a mix of admiration and curiosity at this extravagantly dressed young man who cuts a sharp contrast against the sepia hues of the city.

This thesis is about how Congolese, like Maurice, defy expectations of what it means to be a migrant in Africa, forging strong identities and paths of belonging while pursuing ‘the good life’ in difficult social, political, and economic contexts. Paradoxically, while living well below the radar would seemingly benefit migrants in a city where governmental and humanitarian policies are designed to identify and manage those who fall within narrow categories of status, and penalize those who exist beyond, Congolese here challenge conceptualizations of them as placeless, invisible, or speechless (Nyers 2006, 6).

The ‘good life’ meant different things to the Congolese I asked, and throughout this thesis I explore empirically what it means to people, as demonstrated through their words and actions. For John, a young man from Bukavu, in Nairobi for four years, it meant “a peaceful life”. For Nancy, an 18-year-old female born and raised in Nairobi, it signified “achieving my dreams”. For Blessing, a 45-year-old woman who lived in Kakuma refugee camp in north-western Kenya for four years before moving to Nairobi, the good life did not exist in the camp because “The food is mostly sorghum and maize.” She said, “People who live the good life there are the ones who have family elsewhere to send them money to buy better things and better services.” The descriptions of the good life offered by John, Nancy, and Blessing, as well as from the other Congolese I asked, cover a wide spectrum of ideals, rooted in the temporal (i.e. present realities and aspirational futures) the physical (i.e. enjoyable tastes and purchases), and the social (i.e. supporting family, building social networks).
My research builds upon a sizeable and growing body of interesting qualitative literature on urban migrants in the ‘Global South’. Challenging old, yet still persistent, tropes of migrants in cities as merely invisible sufferers, it is situated within ‘anthropology of the good’ (Robbins, 2013), which challenges the positioning of refugees and asylum-seekers within colonial and anthropological framing as first ‘Others’ then ‘sufferers’. This thesis decentres such a framework and adds to it with a more optimistic lens, not negating the existence of hardship, yet expanding on it to capture a fuller, more nuanced existence. Anthropological explorations, such as mine, are fitting to capture experiences, notions and aspirations of happiness, hope, and wellbeing (Robbins 2013, 457-58).

Thematically, I move away from a primary focus on socio-economic barriers faced by urban refugees to join other scholars who have explored the strategies of displaced peoples to overcome such challenges (Crea, Calvo and Loughry, 2015; Grabska, 2005; Omata, 2011; Tippens, 2017). In doing so, I move beyond ‘anthropology of suffering’ to an ‘anthropology of the good’ (Robbins, 2013), and examine how migrants’ lives are lived- their behaviours and consumption patterns, places of gathering, relationships with others, forms of labour- as well as visions for a better future, to shape an ethnographic description of how ‘the good life’ is pursued. Whereas ‘the good life’ has often been viewed through an economic lens, informed by quantitative data (Calestani 2009, 142), I employ an ethnographic study of well-being by ‘looking at daily practices and at material experiences’ (Bloch 1992, 65) at the individual and collective level. Though I will describe this project’s analytical conceptualization of ‘the good life’ in far greater detail later in this chapter, for the purposes of clarity I will describe my understanding of it here as the daily negotiations of immaterial and material elements to pursue desires and aspirations for a reality better than the one immediately presented.

My thesis also examines the unique characteristics of cities and processes of informality in enabling ‘agency from underneath’ (Puimala 2013, 949) to overcome structural constraints and pursue the good life. My thesis, while considering various ways in which refugees’ exercise political agency that transcends barriers to citizenship, is primarily interested in how they appropriate space and material and immaterial ways in which they “transform the insecure spaces” into places of protection, meaning, and fulfilment (Lyytinen 2015, 595). In other words, my work is interested in how the Congolese refugees I met were able to circumvent structural challenges to change the city into a strategic space that afforded them the good life, or at least a version of it, in
their livelihoods, community formation, consumption patterns, and cultural performance. I join a
growing number of scholars across disciplines who consider how migrant identity is curated
through commodity culture (Mills 1997) and “aesthetic nationalism” (Edmonds 2010, 41),
enabling belonging and bridges across national and cultural boundaries (Somerville 2008).

By discussing migrant wellbeing in Nairobi, I do not overlook the significant structural barriers to
freedoms and self-actualization that are routinely encountered by many. Just as there is risk in
generalizing the struggle of refugees, there is also risk in glamorizing the extent of refugee self-
determination and resilience. I am very cognizant of the limitations of refugee agency in certain
spheres in Kenya. Politically, for example, urban refugees have relatively little power, and this has
a multitude of ripple effects across other spheres of life in the city, from constraining one’s ability
to register a formal business to being able to rent an apartment. The ambiguous nature of
governmental policies paired with xenophobic public responses, particularly following ‘terrorist’
attacks in the country, often results in increased harassment and abuse of migrants at the hands of
the police. Further discussion of the perils of living as a migrant in Nairobi- for both documented
and non-documente- will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two, however the empirical
evidence presented in this thesis demonstrates that migrant participation in processes including
informality, transnationalism, and network-building builds bridges that can effectively negotiate
such power asymmetries. Shifting the way refugees are viewed, from weakness to strength, from
passive victims to agentic, generates a greater understanding of the dynamism of forced migration
and the aspirations of forcibly displaced peoples on the margins of society.

Throughout my field research, I was never focused on researching pursuits of the good life or well-
being, per se. As I will discuss in further detail in Chapter Three when I discuss the research
methods for this study, it was not until I was well into my data analysis stage that I began to draw
thematic linkages and see concern for and interest in producing and maintaining wellbeing as a
common denominator between my research participants. In answering these questions, I draw
from nine months of ethnographic fieldwork in Nairobi in 2018 and 2019. Most of my field
research was split between Nairobi’s Central Business District (CBD, as is locally known) and one
of the outlying informal settlements, Kabiria.¹ I followed Congolese to their places of worship,
work, and study, accompanied individuals on shopping trips to local markets, apprenticed at a

¹ Not to be confused with the larger, and far more famous, Kibera settlement.
hair salon, attended a fashion photoshoot, and shared countless cups of *chai*, all the while learning about the ways in which these individuals’ aspirations and desires for inclusion, fulfilment, and wellbeing are pursued and realized.

This research is timely and relevant for researchers and policy makers interested in urban migrants. New and continuing trends around the world that drive unprecedented levels of protracted human displacement emphasize the need for continued qualitative scholarship on the lived experiences of migrants in cities. Over half of the world’s population lives in cities (Buchholz 2020). “The human condition”, as human geographer Ash Amin (2006) puts it, “has become the urban condition” (1012). Cities in the global South, particularly, are predicted to hold nearly 90 per cent of the global population by 2050 (UN DESA 2018, 12). According to a 2020 OECD report (OECD/SWAC,2020), though there are huge variances in demographic patterns across Africa, the continent has the fastest rate of urbanization in the world (4). Kenya is one of the quickest urbanizing countries in Africa, with an annual urban growth at approximately 4.3 percent (World Bank 2018, 4).

Despite growing numbers of refugees living in urban centres across Africa (Jacobsen and Landau 2003, 7) many of them do so outside of the purview of the State or humanitarian regime as ‘self-settled’ refugees and asylum-seekers, and as such are often excluded from both quantitative and qualitative reporting. With rising urban populations, social and economic disparities also grow, and forcibly displaced peoples are often among the most vulnerable to the shocks felt by cities when physical, economic and social infrastructures are unprepared for urban growth. In Kenya, specifically, though the majority of registered refugees reside in refugee camps, a significant portion live in urban centres. There are many practical reasons for why refugees seek out cities rather than camps, including risks of “security threats, lack of adequate education and medical services, limited livelihood opportunities and harsh climatic conditions” (Pavanello, Elhaway, and

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2 Just as I problematize clear delineations of camp versus city, and formal versus informal, within this thesis, I also challenge the notion of a well-defined ‘city’. Cities around the world have ever-changing peripheries that are constantly pushed up and out with urban sprawl, and transnational forces of globalization link cities to wider social, economic and cultural networks. Simultaneously, however, globalization and urbanization shape “cities into all-embracing social spaces as the world and its ways pours into them” (Amin 2006, 1011).

3 As of 2018, there was an estimated 44 percent (224,462) in Dadaab refugee camp and 32 percent (163, 299) in Kakuma refugee camp (UNHCR Kenya, 2021).
Pantuliano, 2010, 12). In addition, many forced migrants arrive to link into pre-existing ethnic communities and social networks (Balbo and Marconi 2005).

My research on Congolese, specifically, is also timely. UNHCR statistics of migration levels over the past three decades, while likely lacking total accuracy due to the lack of censuses in many host countries (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016), illustrates a trend of dramatically increasing numbers of Congolese migrants throughout Africa. As of 2019, the DRC was the fourth largest African producer of asylum seekers (World Vision, 2019), owing largely to decades of national and regional instability. Globally, refugees from the DRC, after the Republic of Syria, had the second highest number of resettlement applications in 2019 (UNHCR, 2019b). Within Kenya, specifically, the numbers of asylum-seeking Congolese arriving has steadily increased over the years, growing from a reported 394 in 1990 (UN DESA, 2015) to a 45,266 in 2020 (UNHCR, 2020b), making them the third largest nationality of forced migrants in the country, after Somalia and South Sudan (Ibid.). Not everyone departing the DRC for Kenya is forcibly displaced, and though exact numbers are not known, there is a substantial number of Congolese in Nairobi who arrived not as an asylum-seeker, but for other reasons, such as pursuing economic or educational opportunities at one of the city’s many universities and colleges. I incorporate a cross-section of these individuals in my study, as will be explained further in my Methods discussion in Chapter Three.

Research Objectives and Questions

This study’s guiding research objectives and questions are related in their attempt to paint a fuller picture of both understandings of what a ‘good’ present (and/or future) looks like, and the strategies then undertaken at individual and collective levels to accomplish such visualizations. My research has the objectives of 1) exploring how refugees cultivate a good life for themselves in a place marked by socio-political alienation; 2) learning more about the modalities of migrants’

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4 It is worth mentioning that the DRC is one of the few countries around the world, alongside Syria, for which there are largescale resettlement programmes.

5 Somalia represents 54.5% (256,683) and South Sudan 24.4% (118,067) (UNHCR, 2019) of the registered refugee population in Kenya (UNHCR, 2019). Other countries represented include Ethiopia (5.9%), Burundi (2.8%), Sudan (2.1%), Uganda (0.5%), Rwanda (0.4%), and Eritrea (0.4%) (Ibid.).
subjectivities, from migrants themselves; and 3) exploring how these subjectivities factor into methods for achieving the good life within the city.

To achieve these objectives, I set out to answer the general question of, “what does a ‘good’ life look like for Congolese in Nairobi?” To answer this, I pursued three different approaches, asking:

1. What are the daily socio-economic challenges faced by Congolese in Nairobi?
2. How do Congolese define ‘the good life’, and how do they pursue it?
3. How do Congolese overcome challenges to achieving ‘the good life’, and how does the city enable these processes?

My objectives and questions underwent a process of evolution over the course of my PhD, moving from embodying theoretical frameworks to reflecting what my participants actually cared about. Whereas initially, for example, my research questions engaged more theoretically with concepts around agency and identity in relation to sovereign categorization (i.e. UNHCR and the Government of Kenya), it quickly became apparent that those I was speaking to had little concern with bureaucratic categorizations or intention of exerting agency in response to such frameworks. Accordingly, I modified my research questions to be less theoretical and more reflective of the persistent themes throughout my interviews and observations.

Several personal and practical reasons led me to choose Nairobi as a field site. In 2015 I completed a master’s degree in International Development at the University of Edinburgh, for which I researched mobile phone monitoring systems for water quality in the informal settlements of Nairobi. Witnessing the multiple and significant challenges brought on by geographical, social, and economic barriers to water access, I was interested in the daily expressions of agency and resilience among the settlements’ inhabitants that I met, particularly within the complex informal economy that had emerged in response to the inefficiency of public services. This experience sparked an interest in further explorations of the themes of community-based informality and resilience within the East African context.

A number of reasons motivated the choice of Congolese refugees in Nairobi as a case study. Representing the third largest ethnic group of refugees in Kenya and the largest in Nairobi (UNHCR, 2020b), they offer a still under-researched collective yet a population sizeable enough

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6 As of December 31, 2020, the UNHCR reported 19,826 and 10,885 refugees and asylum-seekers in Nairobi, respectively (UNHCR, 2020b).
to make access feasible. On a practical level, my cousin, whom I lived with for the first couple months upon arrival in Nairobi, has close ties with the Congolese community in the city, and was a valuable resource for understanding and accessing the field. My cousin also helped me secure a six-month internship with UN-Habitat at the United Nations of Nairobi (UNON) headquarters. This experience allowed me witness, first-hand, the good, the bad, and the ugly of arguably the most influential humanitarian regime in the world and consider the practices and people that design and implement urban programming ‘from the top’ that impact migrants in the city to varying degrees. This experience, and its influence on my research, is re-visited in Chapter Two when I discuss tensions between the UN and the GoK as it relates to the research context.

Having introduced how this thesis is positioned to other relevant studies and presented its objectives, questions, and rationale, I will now offer a brief description of the socio-political context of forcibly displaced people in Kenya. Following this, I will discuss meanings and rationale for the terms ‘refugee’, ‘refugeeness’, and ‘Congoleness’, as each is complex and used often throughout the thesis. I will then explain my rationale for using the good life as a framework to study the daily lives of Congolese in Nairobi, setting it in opposition to mechanisms of bureaucracy and control and ‘anthropology of suffering’. Lastly, I will provide an overview of the thesis structure to follow in the subsequent chapters.

**Context**

While a deeper discussion of the historical and contemporary context surrounding this research project will be offered in Chapter Two, I will offer a brief overview here of the legal discourses and frameworks surrounding refugees in Kenya, as these shape, to varying degrees, the socio-economic challenges and opportunities for migrants in-country. Though not all Congolese in Nairobi have been forcibly displaced, the majority of my participants would fall within this category, many of whom were living in the city at some point on the scale of legality. As such, I will spend some time here discussing relevant aspects of the social, economic, and political context of Nairobi for both documented and undocumented migrants. Though the focus of this thesis is not overly concerned with framing migrant experiences according to sovereign categorizations or policies, legal and political parameters are far from irrelevant, and play varying and shifting degrees of impact in the daily lives of the Congolese I spoke with.
Kenya is among the top refugee hosting countries in East Africa, hosting 529,854 registered refugees and asylum-seekers as of August 2021 (UNHCR, 2021). While the majority reside in the country’s two rural refugee settlements, Kakuma and Dadaab, 16 per cent, or 83,166, of those registered live in urban areas.7 As previously mentioned, many Congolese asylum-seekers and refugees- a reported 30,932, as of August 2021- live in Nairobi, making them the third largest nationality of forcibly displaced peoples in the city (UNHCR, 2021). Though the exact numbers of undocumented Congolese migrants are not known, it is likely significant. This chapter will expand more upon the complicated nature of the term ‘refugee’ shortly, but the UNHCR’s usage of the word borrows from the 1951 Refugee Convention to mean “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UN General Assembly, 1951). An asylum-seeker, on the other hand, according to the UNHCR, is an individual whose claim of refugee status has not yet been evaluated or approved by the country in which they have submitted such claim (UNHCR, 2019d).

The Government of Kenya’s (GoK) reception and protection of refugees is defined by the Kenyan Refugees Act 2006, which states that every ‘recognized refugee’ is entitled to the rights outlined by the international and regional conventions ratified by Kenya, including the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspect of Refugee Problems in Africa (RCK 2010, 3). Despite the Refugees Act 2006’s acknowledgement of refugee rights determined by such conventions, in practice it is much more complicated, as international laws and standards are subject to interpretation within national law (Ibid.).

A salient example of this is the GoK’s encampment policy and refusal to formally recognize ‘local integration’, which creates a loophole of sorts, giving the government legal license to deny or reject asylum-claims or refugee status of those living in Nairobi. The encampment policy refers to a *de facto* policy enacted by the GoK since the 1990s, whereby, with few exceptions,8 refugees and asylum-seekers are required to remain in Kakuma or Dadaab. Further details on the history of encampment in Kenya will be provided in Chapter Two, but largely owing to such a policy, even

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7 UNHCR statistics aggregate the cities of Mombasa, Nairobi, and Nakuru within their data for refugees and asylum-seekers residing in “urban” areas as opposed to the refugee camps.

8 Exceptions are formally made for those with preexisting health conditions requiring medical attention, face threats to personal safety in the camps, or require access to higher education (Campbell, Crisp & Kiragu 2011, 6; Muindi and Mberu 2019, 9).
though individuals may meet the legal definition of a refugee according to international and regional conventions, they are considered illegal aliens and are not eligible for the supports and rights afforded to refugees who agree to remain in the encampment areas. In addition, even for those that do receive formal permission to live outside of the camps, the GoK does not recognize nor permit local integration, a policy term describing the process of a host country legally permitting refugees to become members of the community. Local integration is one of three ‘durable solutions’, which also include voluntary repatriation, or “the free and voluntary return to one’s country of origin in safety and dignity” (UNHCR, 2017), and ‘resettlement’, meaning ‘the transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State which has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status’ (Ibid.).

In the absence of formal recognition, protection, or material support, many forcibly displaced migrants in Nairobi live outside of the purview of the State or humanitarian regime as ‘self-settled’ migrants. Self-settlement,9 despite reflecting the realities of so many forced migrants around the world (Bakewell, 2008, 2014), does not quite fit within the durable solutions framework. Yet my objective here is not to assess where my participant realities fit in relation to such bureaucratic frameworks; on the contrary, it is to question the framing of refugee experiences within and according to such frameworks in the first place.

Categorical Ambiguities

Having introduced some of the legal parameters informing the GoK’s reception and treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in Nairobi, I will now spend some more time discussing the complexities of the term ‘refugee’ and ‘refugeeness’. As has already become apparent, the policy and legal realm is fraught with ambiguities at global, regional, and national levels, not to mention contradictions in policy versus practice. Though this is not a refugee study, at least not exclusively, it is not beyond the field of refugee studies; indeed, many of those I spoke to did identify as

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9 The word ‘settle’ implies a temporal end-point to a migration journey; this is often not the case for many refugees in Nairobi. The city can be one point on a wider trajectory to other destinations, which may be temporary or permanent. Many of the Congolese I spoke with told me they were awaiting resettlement in other continents, while others shared that they were eagerly waiting for a time when it was safe enough for them to return home.
refugees, and agencies like the UNHCR would likely describe many as asylum-seekers or refugees as well. Yet throughout this thesis I make a deliberate rejection of framing individuals as refugees because, in many cases, it is not a particularly useful nor accurate conceptualisation. Accordingly, it is worth spending some time discussing the complexities of the term ‘refugee’ as it relates to wider themes of this thesis. Following this, I will discuss another complex term I use frequently in several chapters of the thesis: ‘Congoleteness’.

**Refugee and ‘Refugeeness’**

This study’s use of the term ‘refugee’ comes at a time when the word is gaining complexity and losing popularity in academia; as well as having a simplifying effect, the term ‘refugee’ carries with it some damaging baggage from within development discourse that my study seeks to challenge, chiefly among it its implication of a passive victim in need of aid (Harrell-Bond, 1999; Malkki, 1996).

Yet as messy and contested as the word is, it is far from irrelevant. Refugee scholar Roger Zetter’s words from 1991 still hold true to this day, when he states,

> Within the repertoire of humanitarian concern, refugee now constitutes one of the most powerful labels. From the first procedure of status determination- who is a refugee? - to the structural determinants of life chances which this identity then engenders, labels infuse the world of refugees (1991, 39).

Within the context of self-settlement, the power of the label ‘refugee’ that Zetter describes is an ever-changing thing, its strength fluctuating depending on the context in which it’s used, and by whom. As it concerns the GoK, its power can be made anaemic in its unacknowledged legitimacy. In the eyes of the UNHCR, the word may be an accurate description, but without the State’s endorsement of the term, its utility is limited. Within the minds of some other actors it carries influence, though not always to the advantage of those who hold the label; for police officers and city council workers, for example, the word can sanction discrimination and abuse. Among refugees themselves (or those who self-identify as such), its power is often more imagined than actual, and it ranges; for some it is irrelevant, a bureaucratic category of little use in the day-to-
day, while for others, like those who reverently showed me their carefully folded UNHCR-issued documents kept safely in their wallets and pockets, the label has great power, their ticket to a better life elsewhere.

Leveraging the ‘convenient fiction’ (Gupta & Ferguson 1992, 8) of labels, I take a page from Al-Sharmani’s (2004) study of Somali ‘refugees’ to use the term to refer to most Congolese participants, unless otherwise specified, who identified themselves as those who left the DRC due to instability, despite not necessarily being legally recognized by the UNHCR as status refugees. Some are technically refugees (as defined by the 1951 Convention), while others are asylum-seekers, undocumented, in the country on an expired or current visitor’s permit or rejected for refugee status. Like Al-Sharmani, my use of the term ‘refugee’ is born from the idea of ‘refugeeness’ to describe complex processes of displacement and daily realities in one or more host societies (2004, 1). Refugeeness, as migration scholar Liisa Malkki puts it, is a “process of becoming …. a gradual transformation, not an automatic result of the crossing of a national border” (Malkki 1995: 114). This process, according to her, is one of creating of subjectivities across social, political, economic, and cultural spheres (Ibid.). When I use the term ‘refugee’, therefore, it is used not solely in reference to sovereign categorizations (Lacroix 2004, 149), but rather as a depiction of the complex subjectivities of Congolese individuals who have been forced to leave their home and make a new life for themselves in Nairobi.

‘Congoleseness’

In my analysis of how urban refugees conceptualize and pursue the good life in Nairobi, I consider the role of ethnocultural identity, or ‘Congoleseness’. The notion of conducting an ethnography of anthropologically-defined distinct cultural entities, such as ‘the Congolese’, has long been contested among scholars, as notions of ‘societies’, ‘cultures’ and ‘homelands’ become increasingly blurred in contemporary landscapes of unprecedented transnational movements of people (Appadurai 1988; Clifford, 1988; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Malkki 1997). I join the ranks of researchers who use the term “culture”, but with an awareness of the analytical liability it carries (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 3). As historian-anthropologist James Clifford (1988) puts it, ‘culture’ is “a deeply compromised idea I cannot yet do without” (10).
Yet despite the sizeable amount of scholarship complicating the notion of cultural identity, in the field ethnocultural generalizations were commonplace, among both Kenyans and Congolese. I heard many references to someone being “so Congolese” or “dressing Congolese”. When I would wear bright, colorful outfits my participants would complement me on “looking Congolese”. Depending on the context and who was speaking, to be/look/speak/act Congolese could be used as a compliment or an insult. It is also used as a marketing tactic; the hair salon I ‘apprenticed’ at in downtown Nairobi did not hide the Congolese nationality of its owners and staff, but instead advertised it quite freely through the Lingala and heavily-accented Swahili they would speak and their bold clothing choices. I was told by several individuals that there is a common stereotype among Kenyans that Congolese hair stylists are the best at their job; as the manager of the salon told me, “My customers come here because they know we’re Congolese and expect us to do a better job with their hair”.

The DRC is a vast geographical expanse, stretching over two million kilometers², inhabited by over an estimated 81 million people, representing over 200 ethnic groups (Naughton et al., 2017, 9) and speaking over 240 languages. How then, can one speak of a singular ‘culture’, or of ‘Congolese-ness’? Indeed, a Congolese citizen living in the eastern city of Goma in North Kivu province is likely to have more in common culturally with a citizen of neighboring Gisenyi in Rwanda, than a Congolese in Kinshasa, nearly 2,500 kilometers away. Associations become even murkier with displacement and the loss of a geographically circumscribed homeland; what of a Congolese person living in Kenya, or one who has been born there, and has never stepped foot on Congolese soil?

There is no blueprint available for navigating the tricky spaces around conceptualizations of ‘culture’ and ‘difference’. Bhaba (1989), however, provides some comfort amidst the discomfort, not offering any universal solution, but rather, offering that,

The only place in the world to speak from was a point whereby contradiction, antagonism, the hybridities of cultural influence, the boundaries of nations, were not sublated into some utopian sense of liberation or return. The place to speak from was through those

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10 The exact population of DRC is unknown; the country has not held a national census since 1984, and any national surveys that have followed are largely based on assumed projections, lacking quality and accuracy (Naughton et al., 2017). The latest source of national demographic data is a report produced by the Demographic and Health Surveys Program (DHS) in 2014 (Ibid.)
incommensurable contradictions within which people survive, are politically active, and change” (67).

To critically navigate how, and why, the ‘otherness’ or ‘distinctiveness’ of the ‘community’ of forcibly displaced ‘Congolese’ in Nairobi is “produced” (Wilmsen 1989), I borrow from the recommendation of Gupta and Ferguson (1992), who suggest moving, “beyond naturalized conceptions of spatialized ‘cultures’ and to explore instead the production of difference within common, shared, and connected spaces…” (16).

The chapters that follow are my attempt to tease out such ‘productions of difference’ within Nairobi among Congolese. I consider how geographies of the city enable this difference-making, and how complex subjectivities, including “refugeeness” and “Congolese-ness”, are either/simultaneously emphasized, diminished, and leveraged to ones’ gain within the pursuit of the good life.

‘The Good Life’: A Conceptual Reframing of ‘Refugees’

Much of the academic literature on forced migration gives primacy to top-down ‘mobility regimes’, these systems, discourses, and actors that shape human mobility processes and outcomes, characterized by efforts to control and manage (Agier, 2011). Congruently, within anthropological disciplines research subjects have historically been ‘Othered’, then viewed through the lens of the ‘suffering’ subject (Robbins, 2013). Refugees, specifically, have also been conceptualized as suffering, coping, or passive (Kotilainen & Pellander 2021; Zagor 2015). At the merging of these trends- the bureaucratic control of migrants and the anthropological framing of them as sufferers-my thesis challenges such frameworks in its exploration of the good life among Congolese in Nairobi. Such a lens is largely inspired by the analytical framework of American anthropologist Joel Robbins’ (2013) ‘anthropology of the good’. In this chapter, I will make a case for why the good life is a useful and relevant entry point from a policy and theory perspective to study the daily realities of Congolese migrants in Nairobi. I set it in opposition to mechanisms of bureaucracy and control (namely so-called ‘durable solutions’ and encampment policies) and ‘anthropology of suffering’ as an analytical preamble to the empirical chapters to follow.
I will first offer a brief overview of the historical and contemporary forces that led to a methodological and epistemological shift within anthropology, from the ‘othering slot’, to the ‘suffering slot’, to ‘the good’ (Robbins 2013), and how it relates to this study. I will then consider the good life in relation to mobility regimes, specifically ‘durable solutions’ and encampment policies. Lastly, I will frame my qualitative study of the good life in relation to such regimes from the perspective of favouring migrant agency amidst and despite marginalizing structures.

**Beyond Suffering**

American anthropologist Joel Robbins (2013) draws attention to how, beginning around the 1990s, anthropological research participants went from largely being conceptualized as ‘the primitive other’ to the ‘suffering’ subject, one ‘living in pain, in poverty, or under conditions of violence or oppression’ (448). Following this shift, the trend of ‘anthropology of the good’ has begun to grow in popularity, which is concerned with subjectivities beyond suffering, and themes like imagination, well-being, value, and care for self and others (Ibid.). It is within this framework that I situate my own study of the good life among Congolese in Nairobi. The objective here, as I have previously described, is not to settle on some shared localized or universal notion of ‘the good’; rather, it is to consider the various ways in which individuals live their lives to pursue their own understandings of it (Ibid., 457).

A shift similar to the one that Robbins (2013) identifies has occurred within migration studies. Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life’ (1995) among refugees, for example, which perpetuates the ‘Othering’ of refugee camp inhabitants, has been well-criticized, and the framing of refugees as sufferers became commonplace within academic literature. Yet, in line with Robbin’s identification of the growth of the anthropology of the good, we are also seeing growing momentum towards more qualitative, less gloomy conceptualizations of the everyday lives of migrants. Anthropology of the good challenges the tropes of refugees as either passive (Hyndman and Giles 2011) or militant activists (Lebson 2013; Lischer 2007). Horst (2019) applies anthropology of the good to challenge such tropes by considering refugee agency by framing compassion and empathy for others as ‘heroic everyday acts of common people’ as resistance to exclusionary policies (2019, 44). My study also relies on the anthropology of the good to challenge stereotypes of migrants, yet unlike Horst, I am less interested in the moral or the ‘heroic’ and more
in the mundane and the everyday. I will return to this topic of agency and the good life later in this chapter.

Despite such methodological and epistemological shifts, there remains a tendency within refugee and migrant literature to give primacy to the State and humanitarian regime (which I group together as ‘mobility regimes’ in this chapter), which both ‘Other-izes’ refugees and renders them passive sufferers in need of top-down ‘solutions’. So, then, how does anthropology of the good fit within the discourses and practices of mobility regimes? How do policies of containment and frameworks of durable solutions account for individual and collective conceptualizations of the good? Pursuits of wellbeing? Hope? Care? Robbins (2013) highlights the ‘imaginative’ and ‘hopeful’ nature of the good life (further explored by scholars including Crapanzano 2004; Lohmann 2010; Mattingly 2010; and Miyazaki 2004), as something that ‘goes beyond the given, the already there… the world in which social life unfolds… to study the good as anthropologists, we need to be attentive to the way people orientate to and act in a world that outstrips the one most concretely present to them” (Robbins 2013, 457, italics added for emphasis).

One of the realities most concretely presented to Congolese in Nairobi is shaped by the vast array of mobility regimes. In the next section I will discuss these in greater depth, and how they exist relative to the lens of the good life that I apply in my study.

**Mobility Regimes**

Mobility regimes are described here to mean the global and national policies, government and humanitarian values, policies and practices which shape human mobility patterns and capabilities. Michael Agier (2011) critiques the efforts of mobility regimes which are designed to categorize, control, and manage people places (4). The primacy of the modern African state and nationality as the basis of citizenship and belonging is a legacy of colonialism, leaving little consideration for the fluidity of borders or identity (Hovil & Lomo 2015, 40). The role of the state in exacting power to regulate and manage mobility was strengthened following colonialism, and humanitarianism represented a neo-colonial replacement of sorts to craft new modalities of control (Agier 2011, 31). One such modality is that of ‘durable solutions’. I mentioned these briefly earlier in this
chapter to provide some policy context, yet I will elaborate more critically on them here in relation to the framework of the good life, as it applies to my study.

As previously mentioned, the GoK does not recognize local integration as a ‘durable solution’ (Goitom 2016). Durable solutions- the trio of local integration, resettlement, and repatriation- are not only ineffective in ‘solving’ the problem of protracted forced displacement (Long & Milner 2014, 3), but the very notions on which durable solutions are based on a ‘refugee problem’ in need of fixing (Ibid.). They also prioritize permanent return to particular geographies as the ultimate fix, disregarding complexities within migration trajectories; the ability to move across borders can serve a vital role in the accessing of rights, goods and services, and opportunities in the pursuit of a good life (Long & Milner 2014, 475; Long 2011).

Many governments, including the GoK, associate local integration with threats to national security and unsustainable demands on the economy (Dryden-Peterson and Hovil 2003). The GoK requires refugees and asylum-seekers, with few exceptions, to live in a refugee camp apart from citizens, partially out of fear of risks to national security (Goitom 2016). Despite this, a significant number of the refugees and asylum-seekers in Nairobi, both registered an unregistered, would fit within the category of ‘self-settled’, as they live outside of the purview of the state and humanitarian regime, in legal liminality. Within Nairobi, many Congolese live in the city’s many informal settlements, where housing is more affordable and accessible for undocumented individuals.

There are many forms of encampment, beyond the traditionally understood refugee camp (Agier 2011, 6). Within the context of my study, one of my primary research sites was the informal settlement of Kabiria. There are a number of similarities between informal settlements and refugee encampments. Some settlements host large numbers of refugees and internally displaced peoples, for example, and while the walls and boundaries are more socio-economic than physical (though much has been written on the porousness of refugee camps)\textsuperscript{11}, there are both immaterial and material demarcations between the settlements and other parts of the city. Kabiria, for example, is geographically and infrastructurally differentiated from the wealthier, formalized segments of Nairobi, as I discuss in my overview of my research sites in Chapter Three. Yet I am thinking of encampment in much broader, and less geographical, terms: namely, the ‘mobility regimes’, the

\textsuperscript{11} Turner (2016), Weima (2021), and Yerousis et. al (2015) provide more in-depth studies of this.
policies and practices designed and implemented by the State, refugee, and humanitarian regimes to count, manage, and disrupt the movement of people.

A condition of humanitarianism’s strength is the turning of refugees into victims and beneficiaries (Agier 2011, 197). Though Agier does not call upon the language of ‘anthropology of suffering’ specifically, his description of the outcome of humanitarianism in its treatment of refugees bears striking resemblance to what Robbins (2013) describes. Agier makes reference to ‘images of despair’, for example- “what can be said of these beneficiaries, except to sympathize with them or condemn them” (2011, 197)? Such strong emotions evoked among the consumers of humanitarian-produced imagery is the ‘lifeblood’ of humanitarianism, says Agier (2011, 197), and conversely, maintaining such emotions requires beneficiaries to remain silent, pleading victims in need of empathy; a face and a name would defeat the purpose (Ibid.). The only names that are afforded within durable solutions are those allotted by the mobility regime; ‘refugee’, ‘RSD’, ‘asylum-seeker’. As Agier points out, the act of naming is always political (2011, 33), and the labels that exist within the realm of the refugee regime are all deeply political in their histories and contemporary objectives of defining and managing migrant populations. Yet, particularly in the context of Nairobi, I would add, the act of not naming is equally as political. Many of those I spoke with as part of my study live or are passing through Nairobi without such a bureaucratically recognized name- and as such, they are rendered legally invisible, informal, and illegal.

My study on how migrants-refugees particularly conceptualize and pursue the good life contrasts the traditional approach of humanitarian and development discourses that are fixated on ‘providing’ refugees (those that are officially labeled as such, at least) with durable solutions while overlooking their agency (Bradley, Milner, and Peruniak 2019). As the following chapters in my thesis demonstrate, many of those whom I spoke to (who would fall under the forcibly displaced category) described how leaving DRC and travelling to Nairobi played a significant part in their ability to partake in meaningful work, access educational opportunities, and be part of a new community. The section that follows will explore expressions of agency among migrants that, while typically overlooked within the framework of durable solutions, is addressed through a qualitative investigation of everyday pursuits of the good life.
The Good Life and Agency

Defining ‘the good life’ is a challenge long taken up by psychologists, philosophers, economists, and anthropologists (Barnes 1984; Guignon, 2002; Robbins, 2013). The notion of well-being, specifically, has increasingly become of interest across a myriad of fields and disciplines. Human agency is a core element of my definition of ‘the good life’. The concept, as applied throughout this thesis, encapsulates human well-being in a holistic sense, and, taking a page from Aristotle’s definition, it goes beyond to also mean the expression of self and meaningful engagement in all aspects of life (Hestir, 2008). This notion of self-expression speaks to the importance of authenticity, or the ability to freely make choices and take responsibility for them (Sutton 2020, 1).

While I offer an agency-oriented approach that presents Congolese migrants not as passive victims to sovereign politics but as contributors to their own local realities and futures, I do so by also considering the socio-political structures that shape manifestations of agency. Giddens (1984) suggests the ‘duality of structure’, with individuals making decisions in pursuit of a good life but doing so within structural parameters that inform decision-making (Eriksen 2001, as seen in Calestani 2009, 143). This thesis will look at the acts of labour, self-expression, and community-making manifested in hair styling, fashion, consumption, informality, and religiosity as examples of processes shaping subjectivities that meet the needs and interests of refugees both in the present and in the imagined future (Robbins 2013).

As has been discussed in this chapter, the framework of ‘durable solution’ leaves little room for refugee agency in its various and complex forms. Yet, as pointed out by Horst (2019), understanding individuals’ small, everyday behaviours are vital for a deeper understanding and appreciation of social transformation (45); it turns our attention away from the macropolitical level of conceptualization that is so common within migration studies which offers little room for identifying the role of individual and collective meaning-making and agency within contexts of socio-economic uncertainty. A research focus on the good life of refugees, on the other hand, recognizes and honours the agency of individuals and collectives in positively transforming socio-economic realities (Ibid., 40).
Indeed, this agency can exist simultaneously within, alongside, and apart from political categorizations, as I demonstrate with empirical evidence presented in the chapters that follow. I look at how the political limbo imposed by state and UNHCR-defined legal categorizations do not prevent refugees from becoming creative agents who make a new and good life for themselves in the city. I show how they appropriate space, utilize their skills, knowledge, and connections, and leverage shared notions of ethno-cultural and religious identity to cultivate their own solutions to structural challenges. This is done in many ways, though my study focuses specifically on the practices and subjectivities surrounding fashion, meaningful livelihoods, religious identity, and strategic community connections with other migrants. This focus is done in the belief that the values and aspirations of those I spoke with are vitally important to them, and, in many cases, far more relevant than bureaucratic paradigms.

Such a focus on agency corresponds with a growing emphasis on self-reliance and autonomy within global debates and frameworks. One of the main objectives of both the Comprehensive Responses of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and The Refugee Compact (2018), for example, is to “enhance refugee self-reliance”. Closely affiliated with notions of agency and ‘self-reliance’ is the growing discourse around ‘resilience’ within refugee, humanitarian, and development spheres, becoming a prominent lens for analysing the individual and collective ability to withstand and respond to crises (Capstick, 2018). Yet critiques of such an framework include the risk of praising ones’ ability to ‘bounce back’ while overlooking the structural oppressions from which one is bouncing back from in the first place. Palestinian scholar Malaka Shwaikh speaks about the downfalls of the discourse of ‘resilience’, which she posits ‘imposes mythical terms on the colonized and deals with them as if they have supernatural ‘coping mechanisms’ (2021). It absolves structural oppressors of their responsibility and lessens the need for humanitarian intervention (Ibid.). Sinatti and Horst (2015) share a similar view, in their description of the humanitarian framing of refugees as ‘agents of development’, and the role of refugee ‘self-reliance’ in easing the ‘burden’ on the State or humanitarian regime. Shwaikh argues for a switch from the discourse of ‘resilience’ to ‘resistance’, as this shifts the attention to structural oppressions and collective responsibility in challenging situations that require ‘resilience’ in the first place (2021).
Just as Robbins (2013) emphasizes that anthropology of the good is not about divorcing anthropology of suffering, but expanding from it, such a framework must not ignore the realities of pain, grief, and structural inequalities. The chapters that follow do frame strategies for wellbeing more in terms of rejection of oppressive structures than resilience; in Chapter Seven, for example, I talk of fashion expression and consumerism as examples of subversion of pressures to render oneself invisible amidst wider socio-political marginalization. I do not wish to place the trope of ‘happiness-despite-hardships’ upon my participants, nor permit resilience discourse to romanticize pain; this would only signify a full-circle return to both the ‘suffering slot’ and ‘savage slot’ of anthropology.

Within this introductory chapter, I have presented my rationale for my thesis’s usage of ‘the good life’ as an analytical framework, housed within the wider framework of the anthropology of the good. Such a framework marks a shift beyond the ‘suffering slot’ anthropology to present ‘a new focus on how people living in different societies strive to create the good in their lives’ (Robbins 2013, 457). Anthropology of the good and methodologies like my own that seek the life stories of migrants positions forcibly displaced people as their own mobility regimes, and their efforts at constructing a good life not just in spite of displacement, but because of it, and beyond ‘durable solutions’.

As this chapter has explored, an analysis of the good life presents a different form of individual and collective identity-making, mobilization, and social transformation. Durable solutions offer little room for categorical ambiguity; yet this is in great contrast to the reality to the complexities of social, political, and economic subjectivities of so many migrants who live and work in the liminal spaces of the “national order of things” (Malkki 1995). My focus on ‘the good’ enables me to consider the ‘moral inspirations’, values, and care among individuals and collectives in contexts of displacement (Horst 2019, 43), both within and beyond the analytical parameters offered by mobility regimes.

Within this chapter I also examined how discourses of ‘the good’ and ‘resilience’ challenge limited conceptualizations of migrants and yet are still at risk of ‘othering’ research subjects, having the potential to overlook structural oppressions and inequalities in favour of the happy-go-lucky, tough-as-nails migrant. Rather than fixate on language around self-reliance and resilience, the chapters that follow position the everyday lives of Congolese in Nairobi as a rejection of
humanitarian narratives of suffering and socio-political systems of oppression, and refusal to accept a life less than the one they desire for themselves and others.

**Chapter Overview**

Following this introductory chapter, **Chapter Two** will provide further contextual information for the basis of this study, describing key historical, geographical, social, and political conditions that shape the migrant experience in Nairobi. I look at shifting patterns of refugee policy across Africa and within Kenya from the time of independence to the present. I examine the various factors influencing migration to Kenya and Nairobi and consider the unique characteristics of the city’s informal settlements that make them home for so many Congolese. I describe Kenyan policies as they relate to the ability to live and work in the capital, and the GoK’s changing relationship with the UNHCR and implications for refugees in the city.

**Chapter Three** offers an in-depth description of the qualitative research methods this study employed, its ethical considerations, and approaches to data analysis. I will also offer a reflexive account of the impact of my positionality on my data collection and analysis, as well as the impact of the research on me, personally.

**Chapter Four** continues discussion of ethnocultural identity by presenting a case study of a Congolese-owned and operated *kinyozi* (hair salon) in Nairobi’s CBD. It looks at the importance of being able to make money for achieving the good life and provides an example of how urban livelihoods are enabled through transnational connections and convergence of interests between Congolese and Kenyans. It examines how the *kinyozi* remains a unique space within the city where migrants and members of the ‘host community’ engage in mutually beneficial physical and emotional interactions. It looks at how the relationships that are built here go beyond economic sustainability, securing both refugee livelihoods and positive intergroup connections to produce different forms of capital- financial and social- in negotiating economic agency within the dominant systems of power. It examines the role of employment in the self-settlement process, considering strategies that obscure the formal-informal distinctions to circumvent legal barriers to employment. Specifically, I look at the act and mindset of “hustling”, these omnipresent informal
transactions that live in the blurry formal/informal nexus as a means of economic self-sufficiency and meaningful existence.

**Chapter Five** describes how Congolese and refugee identities enables membership in and access to community-based systems of support. I offer a case study of a refugee-led community-based organization (RLCBO) in the informal settlement of Kabiria, and explore how the ‘success’ of the local Congolese community is a product of linkages and membership to local, grassroots social infrastructures in the absence of state or humanitarian assistance. I discuss the role of trust in such relationships and introduce the role of the ‘social broker’, which I argue plays a vital role as a community-based migration intermediary. I give examples of how these individuals and organizations, frequently operating outside of the legal parameters of the state though not always autonomous of formal mechanisms, provide numerous services to the migrant community, including linking them with valuable opportunities and resources needed to make a good life for themselves in the capitol.

Following discussions of the role of RLCBOs, trust, and ‘social brokers’ in self-settlement, **Chapter Six** considers another type of a local support network- the church. By presenting a case study of a small ‘refugee church’ in Kabiria, I will examine how church membership provides important material and immaterial resources through the convergence of material, cultural and spiritual economies in the absence of formal support. I also show how the interconnectedness of religion and cultural identity enables Congolese migrants to maintain ethnocultural subjectivities and differentiate themselves from other migrant groups while forming important bonds with local citizens within a faith-based setting.

Continuing with the previous chapter’s exploration of the benefits of ethnocultural distinctiveness, **Chapter Seven** explores the theme of curated self-expression through sartorial and cosmetic performances and consumption. Literature for this chapter traverses a number of disciplines, including cultural studies, anthropology, feminist studies, and fashion theory, in exploring the role of fashion in identity formation and/or maintenance within the context of displacement. Texts will contribute towards a wider analysis of sartorial negotiations of agency within contexts of intersecting identities and power imbalances. The chapter discusses the concept of “Congoleteness” among Congolese migrants in Nairobi and argues that in spite of, and sometimes directly as a result of, the social, political and economic conditions that impede
integration in Nairobi, fashion subculture is a critical means of expression, subjectivity, and self-determination within the process of self-settlement.

**Chapter Eight** will provide concluding thoughts of the research, summarizing the main themes covered in the thesis and contributions made to relevant fields of study.
Chapter Two: Background and Context

Having discussed an overview of the aims, conceptual parameters and structure of this thesis, this chapter will now provide historical, social, political, and geographical context for the study. It will open with an overview of the history of forced migration from the DRC and patterns of Congolese migration into Kenya, specifically. Following this, it will offer a historical and contemporary analysis of refugee policy in Kenya, and the evolving relationship between the State and UNHCR. Lastly, following the chapter’s discussion of the formal parameters shaping labour rights and mobility for migrants and refugees in the country, attention will be given to the theme of informality, particularly with regards to the informal economy and informal settlements.

History of Migration from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

The third-largest country in Africa by land mass, the DRC is also potentially one of the continent’s wealthiest, with enormous mineral reserves, hydroelectric capabilities, and strategic geographical location (Clément 2005, 7). Despite its natural wealth, the country is also one of the world’s poorest: in 2018, an estimated 73 per cent of the population lived below the international poverty rate (USD $1.90), ranking 175 out of 189 on the 2020 Human Development Index (World Bank, 2021).

Following independence from Belgium in 1960, the DRC would experience significant human migration movements. Belgians out-migrated en masse, while volatility from secessionist conflicts and the assassination of the country’s first prime minister, Patrice Lumumba, resulted in widespread internal displacement (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016). The country experienced a relatively strong economy from the arrival of Lumumba’s successor, Mobutu Sese Seko, in 1965 to the mid-1970s, driven by large natural resource reserves, drawing large numbers of migrant workers from neighbouring countries (Ibid.). The economic and political situation in the country was already in decline when Rwanda invaded then-Zaire in 1996 following the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, where Hutus targeted the Tutsi minority ethnic group Tutsis and some Hutus (Okosun and Kibiswa 2013, 486), resulting in the First Congo War (1996-1997). Along with the Congolese forces of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo (AFDL), Rwandan Tutsi forces began tracking both military and civilian Hutus who were seeking refuge in eastern DRC,
resulting in mass human rights violations of both Rwandan Hutu refugees and Congolese civilians (Ibid). Eventually revolutionary leader Laurent-Desire Kabila, backed by military forces from neighbouring Uganda and Rwanda, would oust President Mobutu Sese Seko. By 1996, much of the country’s population was ready for a change in leadership; under Mobutu’s reign Zairians had seen infrastructure and industry fall to ruin. Inflation rose to 5000 per cent and ineffective economic policies resulted in people earning on average little more than half of what they were just six years prior (Stearns 2011, 95). The Second Congo War (1998-2003) would follow soon after to (unsuccessfully) depose Kabila. These two wars would result in widespread and long-lasting social and economic devastation across the region. Foreign and domestic forces would steal natural resources (Raeymaekers 2014, 11), the rape of women and girls was rampant (Trenholm, Olsson & Ahlberg, 2011), and although exact numbers will never be known, millions of lives were lost (Clark, 2011). Amidst this turmoil, an estimated 1.2 million Congolese became Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), and multitudes fled to neighbouring countries (Flahaux and Schoumaker, 2016).

The majority of those I interviewed had originated from North and South Kivu province, in the eastern part of DRC (see Figure 1). The region continues to face high levels of volatility, driven by armed conflict and sexual violence at the hands of domestic and foreign military and rebel groups (UNHCR, 2020b). Far from the political and commercial capital of Kinshasa where state interventions are largely concentrated, other drivers of forced migration in eastern DRC include poverty and limited access to public services (Weijs et al, 2012, vi). Many scholars, humanitarian organizations and policy makers remain largely focused on the causes of death and displacement among Congolese meaning that “the Congolese people and their everyday lives remain completely peripheral” to analysis of the ‘crisis in the Congo’ (Raeymaekers 2014, 7). As previously stated, one of my intentions with my research is looking beyond the victim stereotype of Congolese refugees and focusing instead on agency and fulfilment within their everyday lives.
History of Migration to Kenya

Kenya has long been a destination for migrants from across the region and beyond. Pre-colonization, the area saw a great diversity of nomadic and semi-nomadic African clans and communities migrating east to create settlements and complex societies (Ndeda, 2019). Kenya’s long eastern coastline granted access to regions across the Indian Ocean with longstanding commercial interests in East Africa, and Arabs, Indians, and Persians had explored and traded along the coast and inland for many centuries (Adam 2015, 2). During and after the colonial era, the Horn of Africa received massive inflows of migrant workers and traders from around the world,
and regional migrants moved towards urban centres like Nairobi, driven by livelihood opportunities, political instability, and climate change (Ghai, 2004).

The name ‘Nairobi’ was born from a Maasai phrase meaning ‘the place of cool waters’, likely owing to its presence on multiple intersecting rivers. Originally created in the colonial era as a British outpost, the surrounding area is also extremely marshy, and the geographical positioning of segregated settlements were drawn up according to higher and lower land levels to afford Europeans better quality land, and Africans in the lower, wetter territory with poorer infrastructure. Evidence of this territorial-racial segregation remains in the city to this day, though typically manifested more in income level than race (Mitullah 2004, 2). The high-income, low-density neighbourhood of Gigiri, for example, which also happens to house the Nairobi headquarters of the United Nations (UNON) where I did my internship with UN-Habitat, sits on drier, elevated land in the north of the city. Originally designated for Europeans, some of the original colonial-era administrative buildings and residences can be seen there to this day (or at least, glimpsed at through cracks in their surrounding gates). The informal settlement Kibera, on the other hand, lies in a valley to the south of the city, and is prone to flooding every rainy season. Kibera and the city’s many informal settlements are perhaps among the starkest examples of racist colonial urban planning legacies in Nairobi.

Though Kenya’s policy response to refugees today is largely one of containment, the country exercised a much more open response to asylum-seekers before the 1990s. Prior to 1987 the number of registered refugees did not exceed 10,000, a number primarily representing those from Uganda, Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia), and Rwanda (Milner 2019). This period has been described as a “hospitable” period of Kenya’s refugee response (Kagwanja 2002, 98), where refugees received freedom of movement and the right to work (Milner 2019). The shift from this more lenient era of refugee policy in Kenya to the system of encampment as it enforces today is often tied to a number of global, regional, and national shifts; firstly, beginning in 1990 the country saw a significant increase in the arrival of asylum-seekers from Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia, with the refugee population to grow to over 5.8 million (Ibid.). The encampment policy was largely in response to fears within the government that, rather than positively contribute to the economy, the influx of refugees would create too great of a strain on resources as well as pose a national security risk (Loescher 2001, 226, as seen in Milner 2019). Globally, wealthier nation states were becoming
less interested in lending support for the growing refugee population throughout the Global South, and, as Jeff Crisp notes, such unwillingness to become involved ‘exacerbated’ the level of standards for protection and care for refugees across Africa (2000, 6).

As of February 2021, the UNHCR reported a total population of refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya at 512,494 (UNHCR Kenya, 2021). The majority of registered refugees reside in refugee camps, with 44 per cent (224,462 people) in Dadaab refugee camp and 32 per cent (163,299) in Kakuma refugee camp (Ibid.). Nonetheless, a significant portion, 16 per cent (81,574) live in urban areas, predominantly Nairobi (Ibid). This urban number is likely to be much higher, as the UNHCR reports only formally registered refugees and asylum-figures. As well, the numbers of those registered in refugee camps do not account for the fluidity of movement between camp and city.

As previously mentioned, Congolese refugees in Kenya represent the third largest country of origin, with 8 per cent (37,438) of the total (registered) refugee population, behind Somalia and South Sudan (Ibid), though they represent the largest refugee population in Nairobi (UNHCR, 2021). Congolese refugees originate predominantly from the provinces of South Kivu and North Kivu because of the long-standing political volatility in the region. The Congolese diaspora is incredibly linguistically and ethnically diverse, however, and the notion of a diasporic ‘community’ belies its heterogeneity. Though the DRC does not touch any of Kenya’s borders, it does share boundaries with several of Kenya’s neighbouring countries, including South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Tanzania (see Figure 2). With most of the DRC’s forcibly displaced population originating in the eastern part of the country, Kenya is a relatively close destination point. The numbers of refugee and asylum-seeking Congolese arriving in Kenya has increased steadily over the years, growing from a reported 394 in 1990 (UN DESA, 2015) to a reported 45,266 in 2020 (UNHCR, 2020b).

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12 Somalia represents 54.5% (256,683) and South Sudan 24.4% (118,067) (UNHCR, 2019) of the registered refugee population in Kenya (UNHCR, 2019). Other countries represented include Ethiopia (5.9%), Burundi (2.8%), Sudan (2.1%), Uganda (0.5%), Rwanda (0.4%), and Eritrea (0.4%) (Ibid.).
Among the reasons I heard for individuals coming to Kenya rather than one of DRC’s neighboring countries included i) knowing someone either directly or indirectly, such as a family member, friend, or mutual friend, who had offered to help them upon their arrival, ii) believing Kenya, particularly Nairobi, had better opportunities for work and school, and iii) Kenya put further distance between them and DRC if they were fleeing out of fear of attack, usually from political opponents.

In keeping with Kunz’s (1973) reference to ‘two-vector movements’, many of these migratory patterns were not direct, uninterrupted trajectories, but rather were perforated with other stops along the way, usually in neighbouring countries (primarily Uganda and Tanzania) for a period of time, and sometimes back to DRC, before continuing on to Kenya. Within Kenya, as well, movement would often take ‘interruptions’, as Kuntz would say, with migrants sometimes going to Nairobi then on to Kakuma in the northwestern part of the country and then back to Nairobi. At a city level, even, the movement continues, with many moving in between different neighbourhoods and settlements. The problem with the term ‘interruption’, however, is that it implies a disruption to the continuity of a linear process, and this is rarely the nature of migration trajectories for forcibly displaced peoples. It is difficult to think of Nairobi as a ‘final destination’ on this trajectory; some Congolese told me they were content living in Nairobi and wanted to stay,
though others expressed their desire to DRC as soon as it was stable enough, while others hoped to be resettled abroad.

How do so many registered refugees live in Nairobi when the GoK calls for encampment? There are several reasons for this, including formal exceptions being made by the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS) for individuals who can prove that they need to remain in the city for health, education, or livelihood reasons for themselves and/or family members, though toleration should not be confused for promotion (Campbell, Crisp & Kiragu 2011, 1). There is also the issue of policy versus practice; though on paper there are legal restrictions to registering and remaining in Nairobi, in practice these policies are not always implemented (Campbell, Crisp & Kiragu 2011, 6). In Chapter Four I will speak further to the blurriness of legality and status within Nairobi, and how informal practices enable the circumvention of rigid government policies around mobility.

**Kenyan Refugee Law and Policy**

The nature of the Kenyan state response towards refugees and asylum-seekers in the country has shifted dramatically since the country’s independence in 1963. Kenya’s refugee law can be characterized as three distinct periods: “the golden age”, “the rise of encampment policy”, and “the balance of protection and national security” (Maina 2016). The ‘golden age’ of refugee management, between 1963 and 1990, was defined by a relatively small number of refugees in the country, estimated to be no more than 5000 and primarily from Uganda, Ethiopia and Somalia (Ibid). During this time, refugees enjoyed *de facto* freedom to work and travel within the country (Verdirame and Harrell-Bond, 2005). The next period, the rise of the encampment policy, from 1991 to 2007, was characterized by the country receiving unprecedented waves of migrants fleeing political crises in neighbouring countries. With the collapse of the national governments in Somalia and Ethiopia, Kenya’s number of registered refugees ballooned from 15,000 to an estimated 700,000 in 1991 (NRC & IHRC 2017, 8). Unable to meet the increasing demands for refugee processing and protection, the GoK transferred refugee affairs to the UNHCR (Campbell 2006, 399), while fears for national security led to the GoK implementing an encampment policy in 2014 (Goitom, 2016).
Though formally set in place in 2014, the country’s policy of containment dates back to the early 1990s following the arrival of hundreds of thousands of Somalis entering the country fleeing political instability, a number that rose to an estimated 430,000 by the end of 1992 (UNHCR 1993, cited in Milner 2019). The GoK responded by ceding responsibility for processing refugee affairs to the UNHCR and beginning a policy of containment, which required all refugees and asylum-seekers to live in one of the country’s two refugee camps, Dadaab and Kakuma. Anyone living elsewhere without official permission was considered to be committing a criminal offense at risk of deportation (NRC & IHRC 2017, 1). The GoK’s discouragement of local integration reflects what Rutwina (1999) identifies as an intentional policy measure by African governments to deter asylum-seekers from arriving or staying, in line with perceptions of refugees among host populations as taxing on resources and increasing insecurity (Jacobson, 2001).

Maina (2016) describes the third period, ‘Security versus Protection’ as existing from 2007 to 2015, though I would argue the country remains in this phase today. This period is characterized by legislation and politician response driven by the securitization of refugee spaces and shaped by security concerns. The shift began with increase in Al-Shabab attacks in Kenya and the closing of the Kenyan-Somali border, stricter encampment measures, and the capping of refugees in country at 150,000 (though this was later deemed to be unconstitutional and overturned by the High Court of Kenya) (Ibid., 2016). The registering of ‘urban refugees’ by the RAS (which was responsible for processing refugee applications at the time of my research) has long been inconsistent (Amnesty International 2016, 11), but decreased significantly after 2012 when new legislation gave greater power to the Commissioner of Refugee Affairs to reject refugee applications on the basis of security concerns (Prevention of Terrorism Act 2012, section 48(1), as seen in NRC & IHRC 2017, 9).

Kenya lacked a comprehensive national refugee framework until the creation of the Refugees Act in 2006. This Act was created “to make provision for the recognition, protection and management of refugees and for connected purposes” (Refugees Act 2006, 5). The Act also created the Department of Refugee Affairs (DRA) (which was later disbanded to become the RAS in 2016) to oversee all refugee-related administration and work alongside the UNHCR and partner agencies (Refugees Act 2006, section 7(2)). In 2014 the responsibility for processing RSD would shift from
a collaborative effort to one overseen primarily by the GoK, as will be explored further shortly when I discuss the changing relationship between the GoK and UNHCR.

The adoption of a new Constitution in the country in 2010 guaranteed a new variety of rights to both citizens and refugees and codified international refugee law into Kenyan law (The Constitution of Kenya 2010, article 2.6), which included the 1951 Refugee Convention, 1967 Protocol Relating to the status of Refugees, and 1969 OAU Convention, all of which call for the protection and non-discrimination of refugees and provision of identity documentation to them (NRC & IHRC 2017, 8). Despite its adoption of these global and continental frameworks that call for the safeguarding of refugee rights, the GoK’s response to refugees over the last two decades has been increasingly xenophobic (Campbell 2006) with rising rates of detention and deportation (O‘Callaghan & Sturge, 2018). In 2014, for example, the GoK initiated the anti-terror programme ‘Operation Usalama Watch’, which resulted in mass raids and arrests of migrants, particularly Somali, but including Congolese as well (Clerke, 2018). In the same year, the raiding of a church in north-eastern Nairobi saw the arrest of nearly 200 Congolese who were later transferred to Dadaab refugee camp (Ibid.). In August 2018, the Cabinet Secretary for Interior called for the arrest, detention, and deportation of illegal immigrants (Amnesty International, 2018). To aid in this process, on August 27, 2018, the Immigration Department established a ‘hotline’ phone number for citizens to report ‘irregular’ migrants. Around the time I had arrived in Nairobi in the first week of September 2018, there was a surge of the targeting of illegal immigrants by police and the Immigration Department as part of a ‘crack-down’ on undocumented workers, leading to hundreds of homes raided and individuals deported. With more restrictive government policies, public sentiment toward refugees also became more critical; as the GoK cited stricter immigration policies in response to increases in criminal activity, though unsubstantiated, Kenyans began to become more suspicious of refugees (Maina, 2016).

The Government of Kenya and the UNHCR: A Changing Relationship

The role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Kenya has also shifted significantly over the years. The GoK and UNHCR had worked together since 1991 to document refugees living within and outside of the camps through refugee status determination
(RSD) processes, which enable both agencies to determine the eligibility of an asylum-seeker to be officially recognized as a refugee, as according to international law (NRC & IHRC 2017, 1). If an individual in Nairobi has undergone the RSD process, they will likely have received either a UNHCR “mandate” certificate and/or a government-issued “alien card” (Ibid.) Both ‘officially’ designate them as a refugee. In addition to these documents, there are others, including “waiting documents”, signifying that they are still in process to receive their status determination documents (Ibid.).

Registration allows one to receive an Alien ID card or Refugee Identification Pass, which then makes them eligible to receive a Work Permit and Movement Pass (if they are in the camps and wish to travel to Nairobi) (RMMS, 2013), though these are very difficult to obtain. In reality, the lack of this documentation does not prevent refugees from working\textsuperscript{13}. I will discuss this further later in this chapter in my discussion of the ‘informal economy’, and in Chapter Four where I look at how engagement with the informal economy and petty bribery serves as a strategy for pursuing work opportunities without documentation.

The policy changes in Kenya reflect wider African and global shifts in attitudes towards forced migration. Kenya’s “Golden Age” coincided with the continent’s generally receptive response to refugees, with newly independent States embracing pan-Africanistic hospitality and accepting large numbers of refugees, while adopting regional and global refugee conventions\textsuperscript{14} (Crisp 2010, 3). Similarly, the GoK’s growing hostility and distrust of refugees after the 1990s occurred against the backdrop of rising African and global resistance to accepting refugee populations. Within the continent, many variables- the wearing off of the post-independence/pan-African ‘high’, struggling economies, significant increases in refugees crossing borders, decreasing international aid- contributed to waning support of refugees (Ibid., 5). Crisp (2010) reminds us that factors beyond the continent played a key role in this attitude shift, with states within the Global North taking ‘the lead in eroding the right of asylum and undermining the principles of refugee protection’, introducing increasingly restrictive refugee policies since the 1980s and providing less

\textsuperscript{13} Nor does having all the right paperwork guarantee your right to work un-harassed. Balakian (2016) explores how Somali refugees often feel money offers greater security within their interactions with police than legal documentation.

financial support to African States for long-term refugee assistance (Ibid.). These global, continental, and regional tensions persist to this day, though they have also inspired the creation of new global commitments towards greater responsibility-sharing for assisting refugees. Notably, the CRRF is a blueprint established by the New York Declaration (2016), “a milestone for global solidarity and refugee protection”, signed by all 193 Member States of the UN in 2016, containing “historic and wide-ranging commitments…to respect the human rights of refugees and migrants and to support the countries that welcome them” (UNHCR, n.d.). Paradoxically, while the CRRF and Refugee Compact emerged out of a reinvigorated focus on the need for improved responsibility-sharing for hosting governments following the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis, at the same time, and often directly tied to mass influxes of refugees, countries around the world saw rising levels of nationalistic and anti-immigration sentiments (Betts 2018, 623). Government opposition to the presence of urban refugees occurs in nearly every hosting African nation.15 Critiques of the Refugee Compact include its lack of specific instructions and legal obligations; as it is non-binding, its proposals rely entirely on the voluntary cooperation of states (Chimni 2018, 632), and the GoK’s commitment to promoting the inclusion of urban refugees has been negligible.

The UNHCR continued to be responsible for processing RSD in Kenya until 2014, when the GoK transferred power to the DRA (and later the RAS in 2016). The shift in RSD management signaled a move of the GoK to nationalize RSD management (Kiama and Karanja 2012, 26). Many urban migrants meet the UNHCR’s own definition of a ‘refugee’, however the organization, when based in a nation with an encampment policy, can only do so much for urban refugee and asylum-seeker populations. I experienced this first-hand during my internship with UN-Habitat in Nairobi in 2019. I asked a consultant in the Land Legislation Unit why there was so little consideration of urban migrants in the department’s work, even though urban migration was a steadily growing trend in the region. “Well, that’s a complicated question,” he said. “I suppose the UN hasn’t quite grasped the size of the issue…”

I pointed out to him that several recent UN-Habitat publications had clearly addressed the growing populations of urban migrants, including refugees, in Nairobi. “It’s difficult,” he responded. “You know, it’s not the UN’s place to be controversial. We abide by global frameworks, but at the end

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15 There are a few exceptions to this; South Africa, Egypt and Uganda do not enforce encampment policies, permitting refugees and asylum seekers to reside in urban centres. This does not preclude other discriminatory policies, however.
of the day, also government policies. And many governments don’t necessarily want migrants in their cities. We can’t be too proactive here, that’s the job of NGOs.” He gave the example of the demolitions of informal settlements that occur relatively frequently around Nairobi to make way for highways or shopping malls. “When those happen, and homes are bulldozed, it’s a human rights issue, yes, it’s what we’re all about, but around here,” he swept his arm out, signaling the office we stood in, “you’d never know it was happening. We don’t talk about it.” He shrugged. “There isn’t much we could do about it.”

This is not entirely true. The UNHCR, for example, in partnership with government ministries, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs), operates an ‘urban refugee program’ in Kenya, which as of July 2020 provided support to over 80,000 asylum-seekers and refugees in urban areas including Nairobi, Mombasa and Nakuru, in the form of financial assistance, access to legal aid, and access to health care (UNHCR Kenya, 2020). This assistance and advocacy for urban refugees aligns with an increasing commitment to global sustainable urban development frameworks and mandates.

The UN’s New Urban Agenda (NUA), for example, was created to promote and monitor urban dimensions of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11– “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable”, and offers a framework to evaluate global urbanization (UN Habitat 2020, viii). The NUA includes references to its applicability to urban refugees, and “acknowledges the importance of people-centred urban development and respect for the basic human rights of migrants, displaced persons and refugees. It also promotes equitable access to physical and social infrastructure for all” (UN Habitat 2020, 145).

Yet exaggerated as the UN consultant’s comments may be, they reflect a complicated, and sometimes contradictory, reality for the UN and other refugee-related organizations in Kenya. On the one hand, the UNHCR is abundantly aware of the presence of refugees, both registered and unregistered, in Nairobi, as evident in their aforementioned ‘urban refugee program’ and regional reports. On the other hand, with the transfer of refugee administration duties from the UNHCR to the state-run RAS in 2014, its authority is largely diminished. As illustrated by the consultant I spoke with and captured by Owens (2009), “The function of modern international organisations is
to manage refugee populations in a manner that does not radically undermine the framework on which the nation-state rests” (571). Within the global context of the push for the self-reliance model among refugees by mobility regimes, including the UNHCR and host governments, humanitarian organizations are left in a difficult position. As captured in the UNHCR’s 2009 urban refugee policy,

One of the most difficult questions confronting UNHCR in urban contexts is whether to promote refugee livelihoods and self-reliance in countries where they are denied the right to gain an income under national law and practice (UNHCR 2009, as cited in Skran and Easton-Calabria 2020, 10).

Informality and Inclusion

Increasing levels of urbanization throughout the Global South has required a rethinking of urban theories to respond to demographic shifts and corresponding socio-economic disparities (Parnell & Robinson 2012, 594). How cities are conceptualized have implications for rights, protections, and participation of their inhabitants. Parnell & Robinson (2012) add a decolonizing lens to urban theory, arguing that the hegemonic neoliberal urban policies implemented in the Global South are born from Western, post-industrial revolution conceptualizations which do not adequately take into account the diversity of urban experiences and narratives elsewhere (595-96). Neoliberal urban policies of deregulation and primacy of the market are reflective not just of another geographical context, but a temporal one as well, resembling a time in history when urbanism equated citizenship, ‘good government’, and the ‘ideal republic’ (Amin 2006, 1011). But how do these notions apply within the context of transnationalism, informal settlements and rising numbers of migrants who lack rights to live and work in the city? In this section I will explore the role of informality among Congolese migrants in Nairobi, looking at how it shapes a brand of urbanism that enables inclusion within a context marked by social, political, and legal exclusions.

The (In)Formal Economy and Access to Employment

Despite the GoK’s hinting at greater recognition of urban refugee rights, refugees in Kenya’s cities continue to live with limited options for formal employment, and access to affordable and quality
healthcare and education. Chapter Four, which offers a case study of a Congolese-staffed hair salon, will provide greater details and contextualization around legislation and the socio-economic interactions that span the formal/informal nexus. Here, I will mention briefly some of the more general parameters as they relate to working within the informal economy.

The Refugee Act of 2006 does grant the right to work, however being legally entitled to work is more of an exception than a rule. To work in Kenya requires a work permit, and to receive a work permit requires registering for an Alien ID card (RMMS, 2013). The UNHCR has been known to intervene on behalf of registered refugees to assist them to acquire business (for those who operate businesses) and work permits, however these efforts are more ad hoc than systematic (Sturge 2014, 18). Due in part to the small number of work permits issued, many urban refugees seek employment in the informal economy. In fact, the ability to earn money in the informal economy was one of the main reasons offered when I asked Congolese why they preferred to live in Nairobi as opposed to one of the refugee camps. The size and diversity of the populations of Kenya’s urban centres, particularly Nairobi, presents numerous opportunities for forcibly displaced peoples to secure a livelihood that enables self-sufficiency in the absence of state or humanitarian support (Campbell 2006), easier access to remittances and transnational networks (Horst, 2006), and work that is interesting and meaningful. As one of the managers of Angel Touch, the kinyozi in CBD where I based much of my research, told me, “I need to be somewhere where I can learn and innovate. In the camp, you are so limited.”

Informality has been the focus of significant research in urban anthropology and migration studies and is generally recognized among both academics and practitioners as crucial in improving access to goods and services not otherwise adequately provided by the state or humanitarian organizations (Brees 2008; Werker 2007). The informal economy is a shared characteristic among many cities in the Global South, and its presence and significance are increasing (Ghani and Kanbur, 2013). The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 61 per cent of the world’s population operates within the informal economy, and in Africa, specifically, an estimated 85.8 per cent (ILO 2018). In Kenya, specifically, the informal sector represented nearly 85 percent of total national employment in 2019 (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2019, 39). In Nairobi, the informal economy is often referred to locally as the Jua Kali sector. Jua Kali is Swahili for “hot sun”, designating those who often work outdoors in informal occupations, though the term is now
inclusive of anyone engaged in self-employment or small-scale enterprise (Hope 2014, 69). In Chapter Four I will discuss the ‘hustle’ culture that is often associated with working within the Jua Kali sector.

(In)formal Spaces

Diverse and complex processes of informality play a significant role in the aforementioned strategies among migrants in Nairobi, shaping their ‘everyday lives’ and the ways in which they create meaning, beauty and joy. I write (in)formality in the title of this section to mark the lack of a clear distinction between formal/informal spaces and processes in the city. Indeed, there is often a great deal of overlap, as will be demonstrated in detail in the subsequent chapters. For the purposes of this chapter, I will present a brief overview of ‘informal settlements’ in Nairobi, as they factored in large to my field research.

Previously I challenged the clear-cut camp ‘versus’ city comparison, as both the physical and imagined barriers between the two are hardly absolute. As stated by Gupta and Ferguson (1992), there should be less of a pursuit of comparison “between geographically distinct societies than in exploring the processes of production of difference in a world of culturally, socially, and economically interconnected and interdependent spaces” (14, italics in original text). In the same way, critiquing the ‘formal’ versus ‘informal’ divide assumes a clear distinctiveness that does not exist, at least in the case of Nairobi, and my focus will be more on the ‘production of difference’ between and within complex spaces and processes.

In Kenya, an estimated 47 per cent of the country’s urban population resided in informal settlements in 2018 (World Bank, 2018). This number has steadily increased along with Nairobi’s rapid population growth; in the last five decades, the city has grown from 0.51 to nearly 4.4 million people (KNBS, 2019). The sprawl of informal settlements is curtailed by infrastructural and topographical limitations, and so the population density skyrockets as nearly half of the city’s population resides on just 5 per cent of Nairobi’s residential land (Amnesty International 2019, 3).

Though my research centres on the experiences of Congolese who reside in the city, I do not wish to imply a clear divide between ‘the camp’ and ‘the city’ in the Kenyan context. The ‘refugee camp’ is as much an idea as it a physical space, and both the idea and the space are often fluid. In
the case of Dadaab and Kakuma, for example, there are physical boundaries marked by concrete and barbed wire, yet the borders are highly porous and see the regular movement of people, goods and money back and forth as it serves the inhabitants and local ‘host communities’ (Crisp and Jacobsen 1998, 28). As such, the camp versus self-settlement debate infers a false dichotomy, as well, and overlooks the hybridized approaches that many refugees adopt. One Congolese woman I met in the Nairobi neighbourhood of Kawangware, for example, told me that she had moved back and forth between Kakuma and Nairobi depending on the level of her health (she could access better healthcare in Nairobi) and on the relationship with her husband (Kakuma offered her a safe space apart from her abusive husband, who resided in Nairobi). This example challenges the narrative of the refugee camp as purely undesirable, demonstrating the ‘usefulness’ of it for the self-settlement process (Bakewell, 2014).

Nairobi’s informal settlements are frequently characterized by Kenyan politicians and media as places of chaos and danger, harbouring terrorists (Nairobi News, 2019), creating conditions for health hazards (Saya, 2019), and generally impeding state urban planning efforts at making a modern and sustainable city (Dodman, 2017). In response, forced evictions and demolition campaigns are common. Campaigns that illustrate informal settlements (particularly when the language of ‘slums’ is used) not only overlook the perspectives of the inhabitants but assign negative characteristics to the inhabitants (Gilbert, 2007) without taking into consideration their perspectives (Li and Wu, 2013), driving ‘apocalyptic and dystopian narratives of the slum’ (Roy 2011, 224).

At the same time, this study does not wish to glamorize life within Nairobi’s informal settlements. Many authors have examined the challenges of these places relative to ‘formal’ settlements or rural areas, including poorer access to health services (Fotso et al., 2009; Zulu et al., 2011), extreme climates (Scott et al., 2017), higher prevalence of infectious diseases (de Vita et al., 2019), and food insecurity (Macharia et al., 2018). Yet this is only part of the bigger picture. These urban and peri-urban areas provide important opportunities for refugees and other migrants. Though a 2011 study by Mudege and Zulu describes migrants as being “trapped” in informal settlements because of the lack of other affordable options (220), it also describes how living in these places enables inhabitants to save money and acquire assets over time. The study pertains to Kenyan rural-urban

16 A large informal settlement bordering Kabiria.
migrants, however many of the opportunities for refugees are the same. Housing is cheap, compared to other parts of the city, with smaller rooms and pay-as-you-go utilities, which is highly beneficial for those who lack the necessary documentation to register for long-term utility contracts. Rent can typically be negotiated with landlords and is paid ‘under the table’ with no need to show papers. For migrants without a KRA (Kenya Revenue Agency) number or proof of employment, which would otherwise hinder efforts to secure more formalized housing arrangements, this is important. Similarly, though spatial layouts and populations are typically highly concentrated, this also means that within neighbourhoods, social networks and key places are close by. A positive correlation has been found between spatial density and network density (Baybeck and Huckfeldt, 2002), and in the informal settlements, shops, churches, schools, hair salons and markets are all at walking distance, or a short matatu (public bus) ride away.

Nairobi’s informal settlements are highly transitory spaces, drawing in Kenyan migrants as well as refugees. It is difficult to conceptualize the Kenyans that live in and around these spaces as ‘locals’, though it is common practice within migration studies (and within this very thesis) to make reference to refugees versus ‘locals’/ ‘host community’. What makes one local? If it is the length of time spent living in a particular place, then by that logic many refugees in Nairobi’s settlements would be more ‘local’ than Kenyans living in the same neighbourhood. The majority of inhabitants of Nairobi’s informal settlements are Kenyans originating from rural areas who moved to the city (Zulu et al., 2011). Tim Ingold (2005), in his writing on ‘wayfaring’, refers to ‘inhabitants’ as opposed to ‘locals’, due to the avoidance of confining individuals to a specific setting that is just one place along a wider mobility trajectory.

The blurring of refugee camps and informal settlements manifests in ‘campscapes’ (Martin 2015). In the city, ‘spaces of exception’ are forged not just by borders of the physical or juridical nature, but instead lines of exclusion by social and economic disparities (Martin 2015). Such boundaries are rarely clear-cut, however. In the case of Nairobi, these spaces are highly porous and fluid, and their edges blur into ‘formal’ settlements. Though there are pockets of ‘communities’ of migrants throughout informal settlements in Nairobi, for the most part Congolese refugees live among Kenyan citizens in the same neighbourhoods17. There are physical boundaries on maps (though

17 An exception to this is the neighborhood of Eastleigh in Nairobi, where there is a high concentration of Somali nationals, refugees, and Somali-Kenyans.
these are often shifting), though perhaps more relevant to their inhabitants are the physical landmarks, like bus stages or railways, used to signify the beginning and end of neighbourhoods. Inhabitants regularly cross over these boundaries to attend church, grocery shop, or go to work. People living in other parts of the city will travel to informal settlements for the same reasons. As Gupta and Ferguson (1992) remind us, communities or localities should be considered not just as physically demarcated spaces, but also “interconnected spaces” (8). One of these interconnected spaces, the informal settlement called Kabiria, will be examined in greater detail in Chapter Three, where I provide an overview of my research sites.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has provided some key historical, socio-political, legal, and geographical context for the remaining thesis. It offered an overview of the history of forced migration from the DRC and patterns of Congolese migration into Kenya, then provided a historical and contemporary analysis of refugee policy in Kenya. Following this, the chapter explored formal parameters shaping labour rights and mobility for migrants and refugees in the country, and considered the capacity of informality (notably in relation to the economy and settlements) to both circumvent social, economic, and geographical marginalisation and reproduce it.
Chapter 3: Research Methods and Ethics

Data for this study was collected by utilizing a qualitative approach, including participatory observation, interviews, photography, and focus group discussions (FGDs). I conducted research over a nine-month period in Nairobi, Kenya, between September 2018 and December 2019, in Nairobi, Kenya. This time included a six-month internship with UN-Habitat in Nairobi, from June 2019 to December 2019, during which time I continued to collect and analyse data for my thesis. After leaving Kenya I continued to communicate with some participants and research assistants to fill ‘data gaps’ over virtual communications (via WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger) up until December 2021. Ethical considerations will be integrated into methodological discussions. The chapter will then offer reflexive analyses of my positionality as a researcher, followed by a brief overview of my approach to data analysis to answer my research objectives of determining how migrants cultivate a good life for themselves in a place marked by political alienation, learning more about the modalities of migrants’ subjectivities, from migrants themselves, and exploring how these subjectivities serve as strategies for achieving ‘the good life’ within the city.

Researching ‘The Good Life’

This study employed qualitative approach to investigate conceptualizations of ‘the good life’ among Congolese migrants in Nairobi. Anthropologist Maurice Bloch (1992) calls for researchers ‘to learn about society as the people we study do, through looking at daily practices and at material experiences’ (65, as seen in Calestani 2009, 142). In the next chapter I will dedicate more time to positioning the good life in relation to global and national discourses and policies surrounding forced migrants, and its relevancy for this study. Here, however, I will discuss some of the methodological considerations behind such a framework.

My interviews, participatory observation, and focus groups independently and collectively enabled me to study understandings and strategies of the good life among Congolese in Nairobi. They permitted me to peer into the small, day-to-day acts, seemingly mundane and insignificant, but nonetheless contributing to “a new focus on how people living in different societies strive to create the good in their lives…to explore the different ways people organize their personal and collective
lives in order to foster what they think of as good, and to study what it is like to live at least some of the time in light of such a project” (Robbins 2013, 457).

How, exactly, does one research such a nebulous concept as a ‘good life’? There is no singular nor ‘best’ anthropological approach to researching human wellbeing or efforts to achieve it (Matthews & Izquierdo 2009, 249). I join a growing number of qualitative researchers who employ different strategies to study how people around the world understand and engage in the pursuit of the good, through conceptualizations and practices of specifically anthropological investigations of hope (Mattingly 2010), wellbeing (Kral, M. J., & Idlout 2012; Matthews & Izquierdo 2009); and happiness (Mathews & Izquierdo, 2008; Thin 2018). Mattingly’s (2010) study of hope among African American families in urban hospitals dealing with life-threatening medical conditions, draws upon a longitudinal ethnographic study and narrative phenomenology to heavily depend upon individual stories to paint intimate ‘portraits’ of the social lives of her participants and the way that hope manifests itself. Kral and Idlout (2012), in their study of wellbeing among Inuit people in Artic Canada used open-ended oral surveys whereby participants were simply asked to describe what wellbeing meant to them. Norberg-Hodge’s ethnographic study among Ladakhi people describes how ‘joie de vivre’ persists despite contexts of hardship (1991, 83).

There is, of course, the risk of perpetuating tropes of the ‘noble, happy savage’ and the idealisation of the ‘Other’. There is a tendency in the Western tradition of literature and media to construct the ‘poor but happy’ stereotype (Kay & Jost 2003, 823), a cliché of the poor as “happy in their own way-carefree, happy-go-lucky, in touch with and able to enjoy the ‘simple pleasures of life’…” (Learner 1980, 20-21). I do not actually speak much of ‘happiness’ throughout my thesis, primarily because this was not often cited by my participants as the goal or result of the good life. This does not preclude the possibility that staying/becoming “happy” is, in fact, a pursuit among my research participants, but as the term was not one used, it would be misleading of me to frame this project as a ‘happiness study’ as others have done (Hagstrom, Pereira, & Wu 2021; Thin 2018).

In addition to challenges of conceptual ambiguity and the risks of perpetuating tropes, the concept of well-being and the good life is difficult for researchers because of the challenge of exploring it in a cross-cultural context (Izquieirdo 2009, 67). Well-being and happiness take on culture-specific forms, shaped by culture-specific influences including spirituality, language, and philosophy (Pflug, 2008). Even if one is to claim that the pursuit of wellbeing is a universal human endeavour,
the challenge remains of how to define the measures of such efforts (Izqueirdo 2009, 68). Approaches in the past have largely relied on quantitative, individualistic, and Eurocentric definitions and criteria (Diener 1999, 143). More recent cross-cultural studies, like that of Pavlish’s (2007) study of Congolese refugees in Rwanda and Gifford et al.’s (2007) study of refugee youth in Australia rely heavily on participant’s personal narratives. Studies like Izqueirdo’s (2009) research among the indigenous Matsigenka people of the Peruvian Amazon, and Jankowiak’s (2009) of Chinese in Communist China rely on both participant narratives and ethnographic observations. Similarly, I chose methodologies that would draw heavily upon the personal stories and daily experiences of my participants to help me learn what they determine a good life to mean. Within interviews, I asked many participants open-ended questions like, “What makes life good?” or, “What does the good life mean to you?”, though it should be reiterated that for much of the time during my field research I was not necessarily focused on researching pursuits of the good life or well-being, as such. It was not until I was well into my data analysis stage that I began to draw thematic linkages and see concern for and interest in producing and maintaining wellbeing as a common denominator between my research participants. My research project went through several iterations. The proposal to my Transition Board at the end of my first year concentrated on the nexus of energy access and conceptualizations of hygiene among Congolese living in informal settlements in Nairobi. As was mentioned in Chapter One, other than the interest in informality and the embodied experiences of displacement, there is little in common between the thesis in its current state and my original proposal, as within three weeks of arriving in Nairobi I decided to reframe the research project and pursue lines of inquiry that evoked greater interest among those I spoke to. The overarching theme of ‘the good life’ emerged over time, when I became interested in the patterns that my grounded theory approach revealed in habits of socialization and meaning making through fashion, religion and livelihoods, and the overall desire to have the freedom and control to make ones’ own decisions to curate improved realities and futures.

Collecting Informed Consent

Many migration scholars use the term ‘vulnerable’ when describing refugee participants (Hugman, Pittaway, & Bartolomei 2011; Liamputtong 2007). The definition provided by Silva (1995) describes people who experience “diminished autonomy due to physiological/psychological
factors or status inequalities” (15). While this may be accurate in some sense for my participants, I use the term ‘vulnerable’ with a bit of a wince. On the one hand, a big part of my study is counterbalancing the vulnerable-refugee narrative, by pointing out their agency and self-determination. To deny my participants the opportunity to participate based on my own determination of their incapacity to do so would have stripped them of their autonomy (Mackenzie et al. 2007; Miller 2006; Liamputtong 2007). Of course, there are significant ethical implications with this, and I do not want to deny the risk of undue influence or uninformed, non-voluntary, or non-continual consent.

On the other hand, I do not want to deny the very real presence of social, economic, and political vulnerability experienced by many of those I interviewed or downplay the risks of breaking confidentiality. Many of those I interviewed were living and working in Nairobi without proper documentation, for example. Should their identities be released there could potentially be very serious consequences, in the form of physical violence, persecution and requests for bribery by the police, and/or detention and deportation. In addition, some of whom I met fled the DRC because they come from politically engaged families and expressed fear of being found out by the cronies of current or past administrations looking for vengeance.

I believe many of the ‘vulnerabilities’ among my participants, particularly those who lived in informal settlements, were rooted more in their socio-economic conditions than their legal status. I also believe, however, that there are some unique structural challenges faced by forcibly displaced migrants in Nairobi that are not experienced, at least to the same extent, as other minority groups or socio-economically marginalized citizens. They often experience heightened levels of precarious living created by their legal status, risks of harassment and persecution by the police, and potentially greater burdens of having to recall painful memories for researchers and humanitarian workers (Clark-Kazak 2017, 11). I had several participants self-identify as a “refugee”, though I could not verify the veracity of this, in terms of the legal definition of the term. Far more relevant to the purposes of my study was that they would identify as such. ‘Refugeeness’ was also implied for many of those I spoke with; when I first arrived in Nairobi, for example, I had thought that my study would have a primary focus on the ‘refugee experience’ in the city. I sought participants accordingly, telling my research assistant, Dinah, that I was interested primarily in Congolese refugees; this would lead us to the Kabiria Community Centre (KCC) in
the Kabiria settlement, which had been described to us by a Kenyan contact as “a refugee community centre”. The three managers of the KCC all self-identified as refugees when we first met, and they agreed to help introduce me to other ‘refugees’ who were members of the centre. For this reason, during the research design phase of my project I consulted ‘refugee’ and ‘forced migration’ studies to examine how their methodologies considered social, economic and political vulnerabilities.

There are very real consequences for the safety and wellbeing of many of those I spoke with whose legal status was in limbo, or those living in Nairobi completely undocumented. I took measures to be extra cautious with the consent process, making sure it was continual during interactions, particularly when a line of questioning would venture into extra sensitive areas, like discussions of illegality or political connections back home. I would pause and remind the participant that they were welcome to not answer any questions they were not comfortable answering, and/or could discontinue the interview at any time. I told everyone at the beginning of each interview that I would not be including their real names in my final report, and I stressed this fact at the conclusion of particularly sensitive interviews. Taking a page from a study by Kirymayer et al. (2004) among detained asylum-seekers in Australia, I chose to respect my prospective participant’s ability to make their own decision on whether or not participation in my study was too risky for them (Kirymayer et al., 2004, as seen in Schweitzer & Steel 2008, 98).

Consent for participation in my study was always gathered orally, as opposed to written, due to the anticipation of high levels of illiteracy and/or unease with written documents among some of my research participants, particularly those that resided in informal settlements. As well, within this cultural context I expected that there may have been distrust of paper forms and resulting associations with the police or government officials (Hynes, 2003; Mackenzie et al., 2007, 303). Even with oral consent, I acknowledge that there was a challenge of gaining truly informed consent. Informed consent, in the academic tradition, is based on the assumptions of full autonomy of the participant and of equal power shared between researcher and participant, yet such assumptions may be unjustified in contexts of vulnerabilities (Mackenzie et al. 2007, 302). To address this challenge, Mackenzie et al. (2007) offers the model of ‘iterative consent’, developed among researchers working in indigenous Australian communities, based on the idea that ethical consent can be secured through an ongoing process of negotiation between researcher and
participant (307). Rather than quick, one-off consent to a bullet-point list of items to be covered in the consent process, this entails a meaningful conversation at the commencement of the research process and throughout all stages of the research relationship, refining and renegotiating, if needed, methodological approaches, questions to be asked, confidentiality measures, and feedback provisions (Ibid). In practice, this took the form of me stating repeatedly throughout interviews, particularly those that I felt were heading in a particularly sensitive direction, “you don’t need to answer if you don’t want to”, or, “I’m going to ask you a sensitive question, please don’t answer if you don’t feel comfortable doing so”.

I also made conscious efforts to honour the agency of participants through my sampling process and through my efforts to promote reciprocity. Firstly, at both of my primary field sites, I negotiated access to prospective participants beforehand by speaking with key ‘gatekeepers’ (Gueldner & Hanner, 1989). These individuals, typically older males, were figures within their respective communities that held positions of power or influence. These included business owners and managers, NGO staff, community organization staff, pastors, and association managers. More than just requesting research access, this represented a dialogue between myself and leaders of refugee groups that clearly outlined what my project was about, what participation entailed, potential risks for participants, and efforts I would take to mitigate such risks (Hugman, Bartolomei and Pittaway 2011, 662). Of course, there were limitations to relying on these gatekeepers for my research. Whereas they were crucial for granting me access to otherwise inaccessible communities, on the flipside, they determined who I would not have access to. Their recommendations were determined by who they had within their circle of influence, and as most of my key gatekeepers were male, there was also the risk that they were excluding, either intentionally or unintentionally, females from participating. There was also the risk of losing access to networks of participants to whom I only could interact with via the gatekeepers if our relationship soured. This was certainly the case of one key interlocuter, as will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter when I offer a reflexive account of power and positionality. Once I built rapport with these gatekeepers and gained their trust and support of my project, they helped create a ‘snowball’ effect, giving me access to wider networks of participants.18

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18 Snowball sampling has been criticized within the context of self-settled refugees because of the ethical risk it prevents in asking someone to share contact details of another refugee, who may or may not want their identity known (Bakewell 2008, 445). For this reason, as well as due to conceptual liabilities as discussed earlier, when asking
Research Settings and Sampling

My research occurred across three primary field sites in Nairobi: Africa International University (AIU), the Kabiria Community Centre (a community-based organization), and Angel Touch hair salon. I was already familiar with the AIU campus as my uncle had taught there as a professor of Theology for over two decades, and I lived with him and my aunt on campus when I was in Nairobi doing my Masters’ research in 2015. Dinah, my research assistant, had attended school there and was still in contact with many of her Congolese colleagues, and so the campus seemed like a natural place to begin our research and networking. Through Congolese students we met on campus, ‘snowballing’ led us to Kabiria, where we were told there was a sizeable Congolese population, as well as to the salon in downtown Nairobi.

Throughout this thesis I hesitate to describe my access to a Congolese “community” in Nairobi; such a word implies a certain degree of cohesion and uniformity that belies the complexities and heterogeneity of this population in the city. Unlike Somalis, who are often described as a ‘community’ in relevant studies, which is largely concentrated within the Eastleigh neighborhood of the city, Congolese seem to be far more dispersed throughout Nairobi. When I first asked my Congolese contacts upon arrival in the city where I should go to “find Congolese”, the response was typically one of “oh, they’re all over”. This is not likely entirely accurate; I found that among those who I was introduced over the course of my research, Congolese in Nairobi, like the majority of Kenyans in the city, reside in informal settlements as opposed to the more affluent formal residential areas or peri-urban suburbs. There also seems to be ‘pockets’ in particular informal settlements- I was told by a few individuals that Kawangware, Kabiria (a branch of Kawangware), and ‘South C’ had the greatest populations of Congolese. Geographical placement aside, if ‘community’ implies a level of cohesion on the grounds of shared nationality, then this too is a complicated matter. The DRC is an incredibly diverse country, linguistically, spiritually, culturally, and ethnically, as the chapters that follow will demonstrate, and such differences are perhaps sometimes too great to overlook in favour of some ‘myth’ of national solidarity. Yet the term ‘urban refugee community’ has been used to describe a wider presence of refugees from participants if they could refer me to someone else who might be interested in being interviewed, I specified that I was researching among “Congolese in Nairobi” rather than refugees, specifically.
different nationalities within cities (Women’s Refugee Commission 2011), and Campbell (2006), in her study of refugees in Nairobi uses the term ‘community’ to refer to refugees as a spatially-organized group. My application of the term is closest to the Jabareen and Carmon’s (2010) conceptualization of ‘communities of trust’ formed by Congolese in Kampala, Uganda, defined as “a socio-spatial setting in which substantial relationships of trust among people exist, and in which people feel sheltered and safe because they do not perceive other community members as posing them a risk” (as seen in Lytinnen 2017, 992). Chapter Five will explore in greater detail Congolese understandings of trust and the high degree they place within other individuals and membership-based institutions, like community centres and churches, based on kinship, shared circumstances, and nationality. The chapters that follow will also show moments of embracing what I have already described as “Congoleseness”, ethno-cultural traits which are leveraged when it serves the interests and needs of the individual and collective. Chapter Four, for example, looks at how Congolese embrace the Kenyan-held stereotype of Congolese being expert hair stylists as a livelihood strategy, and Chapter Seven explores the role of fashion in ‘looking Congolese’ as a means of celebrating uniqueness and distinguishing oneself from other migrants.

It is largely because of the heterogeneity of the Congolese in Nairobi that I made the decision to conduct a multi-sited ethnographic study. Socio-economic class is not frequently discussed throughout my thesis, though there are moments where it is referenced by participants. In Chapter Five, for example, Dinah, my research assistant, critiques a local Congolese radio show as being “for the rich” because the poor could not likely afford a radio or data for their phones to stream it online. It is difficult for me to say what ‘class’ any of my participants would find themselves in, though I did strive in my sampling to access a cross-section of economic categories across my field sites. The easiest distinguishing features may be occupation and geographical location in the city; many of the AIU university students I interviewed lived on campus in the well-off neighborhood of Karen, for example, while those I met in Kabiria could easily be assumed to represent a lower economic class, as they mostly worked within the informal economy and lived in small rental units in an informal settlement. Yet even these indicators are complicated; many of the university students I met, for example, had received scholarships from the university or private donors and received subsidized or free campus accommodation. I do not know what economic status they came from back in DRC. Furthermore, the class of those living in Kabiria could be greater than what their occupation or living conditions implied- one man whose house I visited hinted at
financing a political movement back in eastern DRC, supported through his own income and remittances from family resettled abroad. Though beyond the scope of this study, there is clearly more than meets the eye when it comes to socio-economic class of migrants in Nairobi, and it is a complicated subject deserving further attention.

I focused on a limited geographical selection for several reasons. Firstly, I believed that rich data is often derived from multiple conversations and deeper rapport with a small number of participants (Schweitzer and Steel 2008, 14). Secondly, out of practicality, my initial participant sampling efforts brought me personal connections with individuals ‘based’ at each of those three places, and snowball sampling introduced me to participants in their local geographical vicinity. By and large, the three primary field sites became my study’s “anchor houses” (Bernard 2011, 152), permitting me to observe daily rituals and interactions with each other and their surroundings. I did, however, expand my research to other locations around the city when the opportunity presented itself. I was always open to serendipitous opportunities to visit other field sites, typically going wherever my participants invited me as long as it was during daylight hours and I could be accompanied by my research assistant, for safety reasons. I was often invited to the churches of my participants, for example, and while I would typically politely decline (as I tried to jealously guard the sanctity of my weekends as my ‘down time’) on two occasions I agreed to attend- one was a predominantly Kenyan Catholic church in the Dandora neighbourhood in Eastern Nairobi, and the second was a large multicultural Pentecostal church in the Kilimani residential area. I would also ask participants to take me along when they went shopping for food or clothing; in this way I tagged along to markets in Kabiria for vegetables and sodas, outfit shopping at the Toi Market (one of the city’s largest mitumba markets), and on one occasion, shopping for a second-hand mini cooler on the ‘electronics strip’ of Kawangware, accompanying a participant as he searched for one for his new shop. These excursions were often unexpected and spontaneous- one day a participant’s wife had recently had a baby and I just happened to be in his neighbourhood when he was on the way to visit her in the hospital, and he invited me to tag along. I got the opportunity to visit her in her hospital room and see her baby, just a day old. Other unexpected journeys were more solemn in nature; one day when I was at KCC I was told that one of the Burundian members of a ‘refugee church’, who I had watched sing and dance at the front just a few weeks prior, had died in childbirth, along with her unborn child. I will speak more about this particular experience more in Chapter Six.
As previously mentioned, though I ‘got my start’ at AIU and conducted two FGDs there with students, I spent far more time in the other two locations- the community centre in Kabiria and the hair salon in Nairobi’s CBD. I will now provide an overview of the context of each of my key field sites and then discuss the data collection methods I relied upon.

Kabiria

Kabiria (see Figures 3, 4) is an informal settlement nestled deep in the Dagoretti district on the jagged edge of Nairobi. A birds-eye view of the neighborhood would see a rusty brown quilt work of mabati (corrugated metal) rooftops crisscrossed with red roads and occasional splashes of green from small plots of maize and tomatoes. One would not be able to instantly differentiate it from surrounding neighborhoods from an aerial view, as there is nothing unique or distinctive about the nature of the dwellings or street layouts. Sitting just under five kilometres away from Junction Mall, a popular shopping centre off Ngong Road where the burgeoning upper middle class go to buy Levis jeans and sip overpriced lattes, Kabiria is home to many refugees and asylum-seekers, predominantly Congolese, Burundian, Rwandan and South Sudanese, though exact numbers are not included in any official records. The high concentration of migrants in this community has given rise to a number of civil society groups and organizations dedicated to supporting asylum-seekers and refugees, just like the one I based much of my field research at, KCC.

A 2013 Government ministry report puts the population of Kabiria at an estimated 3,500 (WaSSIP 2013, 3), yet this is likely much higher today given the annual growth of Nairobi. Very little information is available on the history of Kabiria, and demographic statistics are limited and outdated. This is not unusual for informal settlements, as they are outside of formally regulated and registered land.19 The last survey of the area was a ‘slum inventory’ conducted by the non-profit Pamoja Trust, in 2009 (Pumoja Trust 2009). The report consists of a 1- page description of the settlement, which it refers to as “Kabiria Village”, opening with a non-descript overview which could be applied to any settlement throughout the city. It includes, “The shanties are on small plots of land owned by individuals, who are purportedly unable to construct decent housing. Adjoining

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19 There are increasing grassroots efforts of informal settlement inhabitants to map their own neighborhoods and provide up-to-date demographical data. The project Map Kibera is one well-known example of this (www.mapkibera.org).
the shanties are high-rise buildings, permanent bungalows, and Maisonettes” (Ibid., 156). A bullet-point list follows with a brief overview of services offered in the area, including, “There are about three borehole water points… but they are only open from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m.”; “the plots have latrines erected by the landlords”; and “Kabiria has abundant churches, ranging from older ones to modern (Ibid.)”

Figure 3: Satellite image of Kabiria. Marker shows location of settlement in relation to Nairobi’s CBD. Source: Google Images.

Figure 4: Satellite image of Kabiria Road, running through Kabiria settlement. Source: Google Images.
Kabiria Road (see Figure 3) cuts through neighbouring sub-locations, but Kabiria proper is approximately 3 kilometres in width, with homes bleeding into other neighbourhoods. The settlements in Nairobi, particularly the informal ones, are nearly impossible to clearly demarcate. Many streets are nameless on mapping platforms like Google Maps, and addresses are rare. My own difficulty in mapping Kabiria, it should be said, does not reflect the real sense among residents of the area that neighbourhoods do, indeed, have demarcations. Though official boundaries are lacking, the participants I spoke with had an awareness of which side of an invisible line they lived, often referenced by whether they lived to the east or west of a particular matatu stage or kinyozi.

The compound of the KCC is a two-story building tucked into a row of kinyozis, butcher shops and vegetable stands on a busy road in Kabiria. On the edge of the compound sits a small one-room workshop where a small group of people sit around a plastic table to make banana-leaf embossed nativity sets to sell in bulk to the Salvation Army to sell abroad in charity shops, the primary source of income for the KCC’s activities. Other services offered for members include tailoring workshops for single mothers, free English and Swahili classes, dance class, and mixed-media training (sound and video recording). Up an uneven flight of stairs on the main building, one can usually find a row of youth sitting in coloured plastic lawn chairs on their mobile phones, using the free internet connection provided by the Centre to chat to loved ones back home, watch YouTube videos, or scroll through Instagram.

Central Business District (CBD)

Nairobi’s CBD (see Figure 5, 6) is a hive of activity by day, with men and women in business suits hurrying alongside and between the steady line of traffic that chokes its streets. On the same street one can find vendors selling designer men’s suits for two thousand dollars and knock-off for ten. The colour palette is one of hues of greys and browns in the colonial-era buildings and faded green from dusty trees growing alongside the streets. New buildings of glass and steel punctuate the growing skyline, beyond which to the south is the sprawling Nairobi National Park.
The CBD holds the headquarters of several large corporations as well as the Parliament Building, City Hall, and a number Central and Municipal Government Offices. The CBD has undergone some significant changes over the years. Once the preferred location for embassies, corporation headquarters, and banks, today the CBD is known more for small-scale vendors, parking, and transfer zones for public transportation coming in and through Nairobi. The shift of large-scale commerce and corporations outside of CBD was brought on by security threats, notably the 1998 bombing of the United States embassy, and changing zoning regulations that allowed for commercial buildings to incorporate into residential zoned areas (Cap, 2016). This saw former tenants of the CBD move to once-residential areas of the outlying area, such as Kilimani, Gigiri, and Westlands, where high-rise apartments and skyscrapers now dot the horizon.

Despite the transformations, CBD continues to see some of the most concentrated population flows of people in the city, with people coming through for work and layovers (the city’s railway and main matatu stage are just South of the CBD). While this contributes to the city’s infamous traffic congestion, it also means that the CBD continues to be one of the most strategic locations for businesses taking advantage of the heavy foot traffic. The Angel Touch salon, which I will introduce in greater detail in Chapter Four, is one of the many small-scale businesses found throughout the CBD that attracts a high volume of clientele who either live in the city or pass through. I was told by the manger of Angel Touch that taxes in the CBD are often higher than in...
other, less commercially developed, parts of the city, and businesses lacking proper documentation are more likely to gain the attention of City Council officials who walk the streets looking to hand out fines. According to him, however, these challenges were far outweighed by the opportunity of having access to higher numbers of wealthier Kenyan clientele who either live or work around the CBD.

![Satellite map of Nairobi's Central Business District (CBD). Source: Google Images.](image)

**Research Methodologies**

Having provided some context on my two primary research sites, I will now offer a description of my qualitative research methodologies that I used within these spaces, along with my justification for using them and challenges and limitations I encountered.

**Participatory Observation**

Participant observation is an ethnographic method of data collection, as defined by Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte (1999), as “the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting” (91). Observational methodologies, though resource-consuming, are likely to produce deeper understanding of
complex community issues, or “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). This observation afforded me with valuable non-verbal evidence (Schmuck, 1997) of the practices of the everyday and aspirations and strategies for a better life, examined on the basis that “by looking at rituals of a given society-i.e. at its largely expressive, symbolic, formalized acts-we can get profound insights into its values and institutions” (McLeod and Thomson 2009, 91).

By spending as much time physically with my participants as possible, within the environments that they lived and worked, observing what was said and done (or not said and done), taking copious notes, and later interpreting the significance of what I witnessed, I was able to piece together a rich data set. In some cases, I vacillated between participant-observer, where I was physically among my participants in their place of recreation or work yet in more of a passive role, and ‘complete participant’, where I would engage more fully in the activities of my participants. Both of these ethnographic approaches enabled me to observe people so as to create more intimate understandings of them and their wider contexts.

Data was often found in unexpected places. I spent anywhere from one to three hours a day commuting on matatus, rickety public buses that became field sites in their own right. Though I was not typically riding along with any of my participants, I was in a setting that was familiar and instrumental to them. As such, I would attempt to observe, record, and interpret what I saw in the matatus through the lens of a non-Kenyan. I would make note- in my mind, on my phone, or in one of the notebooks that I always carried with me- of what I was seeing, hearing, and feeling. I would take photos of the seemingly mundane, like the faded notices taped to the side of the minivan walls describing fare changes (evidence of formalization and regulation within a still-largely informal industry) or posts notifying passengers of the need to provide identification if asked (presenting challenges to undocumented migrants).

At the hair salon in downtown Nairobi, I became a participant observer by ‘apprenticing’ on the salon floor Tuesday mornings. There, I would closely watch as the workers braided and wove intricate lines, sewed wefts into mesh wig bases, and curled weaves ready for display. The Congolese staff taught me how to remove braids, wash and shampoo, and give customers head massages (see Fig. 7). In the salon perhaps more than anywhere else, my research took on a greater form of ‘intimate labour’ (Zelizer 2005). Shampooing and conditioning hair requires an unusual degree of physical closeness between researcher and participant. As a researcher, putting my hands
in the sink and into the hair of my research participants was a closeness I had not previously encountered. Not only on a physical level, but on a social level as well. Washing their hair and massaging shampoo and conditioner into their scalps and hair was, for me at least, a bonding experience and was significant in the rapport process. A higher degree of trust is required between two people for one to lay back and let the other touch their hair.  

Participant observation also gave me an opportunity to incorporate the values and practices of reciprocity into my research approach. A growing amount of refugee research aims for ‘giving back’ to promote a more mutually beneficial relationship (Field & Johar 2021; Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Mackenzie et al., 2007). Diver and Higgens (2014) discusses the notion of ‘dynamic reciprocity’, or an “ongoing practice of exchange for mutual benefit between academic and community research partners”. Accepting the fact that my contributions were likely never on par with what I received from the individuals and communities with which I engaged, I nonetheless aspired to the values embedded in collaborative research of forming relationships “based on empathy and mutual respect” and knowledge-sharing (England, 1994). It was this intent to ‘give back’ in some way that motivated me to volunteer as an English teacher at the KCC twice a week, where they had free English classes for their members. The classes, which ran from 9 a.m. to 11:30 a.m., Monday to Friday, were attended by around eight students at varying proficiencies. In both cases of KCC and the hair salon, motivations for ‘giving back’ blurred into motivations to collect data through participant observation; the two were certainly not mutually exclusive. Teaching English and working at a salon both gave me more time with Congolese people to observe their daily lives and get a better sense of who they were. I will discuss both contexts in greater detail later in the chapter when I return to the topic of participant observation and its role in my research.

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20 I was intrinsically aware of the historical-racial dynamics at play with me, as a Caucasian person, touching African hair, having been raised in North America where there is a strong taboo against white people touching (often without consent) a black person’s hair. The histories of white and black relations are different in North America and the contexts in which I was researching, and the significance and historical weight behind my touching black hair quite likely very different significance for my research participants. Chitando and Chitando (2004) offer a fascinating study of post-colonial hair identities among Black females in the context of Harare and discuss how contemporary hair trends are heavily imbued by social responses to negative colonial attitudes towards Black hair.
There is no question that my presence changed the spaces in which I conducted research. The question is how, exactly. A more in-depth discussion on reflexivity will be offered in this chapter, but I will dedicate some time here specifically in terms of how my presence during participatory observation may have shaped the research process.

Later in this chapter, when I explore processes of reflexivity further, I discuss how I used clothing in an effort to ‘dress Congolese’ and minimize difference between myself and my participants. Though this was done more out of respect and in an effort to build rapport, Stuart (2017) discusses how it is precisely the differences, and not the similarities, that enable researchers who ‘stand out’ during ethnographical processes to capture certain insights (215). By their very presence causing disruptions to the status quo, this act of creating ‘transgressions’ reveals norms, conventions, and behaviours considered ‘normal’ only by ones’ presence being ‘abnormal’ (219). My presence at the Congolese-owned hair salon in downtown Nairobi, for example, as a white PhD student from Canada, was certainly abnormal.

When I first started attending the hair salon on Tuesday mornings, I would be met with what seemed to be mostly bemusement on the clientele’s part; they knew I was ‘with’ the management, because I would either be sitting near the reception or chatting with one of the staff members, usually with a notepad in hand. Clients would typically be speaking to the stylists in Swahili, but I could tell by the way they would point with their head in my direction that they were asking about me. I never approached clients other than when I was asking questions to one of the stylists about
what they were working on. I would always ask permission to the client when the stylist would offer me a comb to take over to take out braids or prep the hair for washing.

Another occasion of participant observation came when I engaged in a photo shoot for the *Sapeurs*, which I will discuss further in Chapter Seven. Paying for a photo shoot was predominantly an incentive to get as many of them together in one place at one time as possible, as this had proven difficult in the past due to their busy schedules. The experience enabled me to observe the *Sapeurs* in action, but it also gave me the opportunity to go shopping with Maurice ahead of time. I told Maurice that I also wanted to take part in the photoshoot and asked if he would help me pick out a suitable outfit. He offered to take me shopping to Toi Market, where he liked to shop for his own outfits. This shopping excursion enabled me to witness and observe through photography and written notes of the way he navigated through the maze of clothing stalls, negotiated prices in Swahili with the vendors, and his ‘rules’ of fashion when choosing colours and styles.

![Figure 8: Three Sapeurs pose at a photoshoot. Source: Author’s photo.](image)

**Interviews**

Most of my qualitative data was collected from one-on-one semi-structured or unstructured interviews. Interviews were selected to be part of the data collection method of this project due to their ability to allow participants to share their experiences and opinions in their own words (Keller and Conradin, 2018). Over the course of my research I collected 52 one-on-one interviews, most of these one-off discussions. These interviews generally lasted between 15 and 45 minutes. The
number of interviews does not include the many informal and unstructured chats I had with Kenyan Uber drivers or hair stylists as they asked questions about my work and I in turn asked them for their opinions on things.

Most of the formal interviews took place either at the campus café at AIU, in a classroom or office in the KCC building, or on the floor of the Angel Touch hair salon. Participants were both male and female, though I would estimate that at least 80 per cent of those I had one-on-one interviews with were male. Possible reasons for this, as well as implications for data, will be discussed later in the chapter. Ages also varied, though having the minimum age of 18 was one of my selection criteria, for ethical reasons which I will discuss further later in this chapter. Though education level was not typically a question I asked, with the exception of the university students I interviewed at AIU, few participants disclosed having attended college or university. Another exception to this would be those who identified as pastors, many of whom told me that they received formal education via a seminary, either in DRC or Kenya. Most of those I interviewed, including the students from AIU, originated from either North or South Kivu provinces in the eastern part of DRC. I would typically ask participants how long they had been in Nairobi, and responses would vary, anywhere from two weeks to twenty-four years.

There were several key individuals who I had reoccurring interviews with. Some of these individuals are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five where I explore the role of ‘social brokers’; as well as being important intermediaries for migrants in the city, they also acted as crucial knowledge brokers for my study. I spent more time sitting and talking with the management team at KCC- three Congolese men- and Emmanuel at the salon in downtown Nairobi. I would also consider Dinah, my research assistant, a key source of data for my study, and I discuss her multiple roles- and implications for the study- in greater detail later in this chapter. Aside from Dinah, those I had reoccurring conversations with all held prominent roles in their respective communities and therefore had interesting perspectives on the experiences of Congolese in the city. Pragmatically, however, and this may have been the most important factor- they were all fluent in English. With Dinah translating for other participants, I was able to glean their responses to my questions, but I was never able to feel like I could truly engage with them in the same way or build the same level of rapport that I could with the management at KCC or Emmanuel at the salon. For those that could speak English, I was able to sit back and listen. Especially at KCC, where time slipped by a bit
more lethargically than it did at the salon, I began showing up without Dinah. I would sit in the workshop out back where men worked on crafts to sell or up in the main office on the second floor of the building, overlooking the courtyard below where a ragtag bunch of chickens pecked. New people were in and out—mothers and their toddlers, there for sewing classes, young people gathering to work on a new dance routine for an upcoming competition, old men with their English books under their arm for language class. Usually, I would have a topic on my mind and a few questions that I had jotted down in my notebook or on my phone on way over, and one of the management would take a seat behind the desk across from me to respond. Their thoughts would sometimes be met by more questions from me, which they would always graciously answer, but just as often as not their thoughts would slip into unrelated tangents which had little to do with my original line of questioning. Now and then one of the KCC members—usually a teenager or young adult—would wander into the office and sign their name in a notebook—signifying that they were there to use the Wi-Fi. Toddlers would amble in to climb up in our laps and then eventually wander back out when they were bored or hungry. Someone would come by with a tray of tea and mandazi, purchased from a café down the road. Far more of the time we spent together was left unwritten—unquantified in time or text. But this time, spent talking, drinking chai, ruminating about the weather, commenting on the mundane—holds great value. In its aggregate, along with the interview notes and observations I jotted down, it contributes to my overall feel for the place and the people. But much more than that, it was crucial for building the kind of rapport, friendship, trust, and comfort that is so key, not just within the ethnographic process, but just for being human with each other. Most questions were open-ended to enable participants to take the discussion in directions that were interesting and relevant to them. Many of my inquiries were devised ‘on the fly’, according to what I felt was interesting or pertinent at the time. My research project was highly iterative, making so many ‘pivots’ along the way that there was never an identical line of questioning for any two participants.

In-depth interviews, while considered one of the strongest methods for constructing validity among displaced peoples (Jacobsen and Landau 2003, 8), also raise ethical challenges. Refugees living in urban centres, particularly those who may be engaging in illegal/semi-illegal activities or residing there illegally, may be less inclined to disclose personal and truthful information to the interviewer for fear of being compromised (Jacobsen and Landau 2003, 8; UNHCR, 2014). The anonymity of my participants was therefore of the utmost importance. As such, all names of participants within
this study, as well as the names of organizations and businesses within research field sites, have been anonymised and stripped of identifying information.

Most of my one-on-one interviews were conducted with the assistance of my research assistant, Dinah, who helped translate questions and answers. Dinah was introduced to me through my cousin, who has many Congolese contacts in Nairobi through his business dealings between Nairobi and Goma. It was important to me from the onset that I work with someone who was Congolese, primarily because I needed someone who could understand and interpret my participants’ languages. My first research assistant was male, which I initially preferred because of the greater sense of security I felt it brought me. Eventually, for reasons which will be elaborated upon later in this chapter, I needed to find a new assistant. Dinah is Congolese by birth, with family originating in Eastern DRC, but attended secondary and high school in Uganda. I met her shortly after she had completed a university degree in Nairobi.

Much has been written about the use of interpreters in qualitative data collection (Kapborg & Berterö, 2002), including cross-cultural research (Temple, 1997) and research with refugees, specifically (Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway 2007, 304). Different languages result in ethical, methodological and epistemological challenges, as language shapes the way one understands and experiences life (Larkin, de Casterlé, & Schotsmans 2007, 468). The role of the interpreter thus cannot be overlooked, as their own life experiences and knowledge of languages can impact their translation abilities and data quality (Spivak, 1992). During one focus group discussion, for example, conversation became heated between Dinah and one of the older male participants. When I asked her later what had happened, she told me that the gentleman had been suspicious of her and questioned if she was “really” Congolese because she had spent so little time in DRC. As put succinctly by Temple and Young (2004),

The translator always makes her mark on the research, whether this is acknowledged or not, and in effect, some kind of “hybrid” role emerges in that, at the very least, the translator

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Anonymisation of locations was done with the exception of Africa International University (AIU). Its large and fluid student body, paired with my anonymization of participant names, significantly mitigate the risk of participant identification.
makes assumptions about meaning equivalence that make her an analyst and cultural *broker* as much as a translator (171, italics added for emphasis).

Indeed, as highlighted by this quote, Dinah was never some “shadowy figure” (Temple 2002, 853) in the background; in addition to being my research assistant and translator/interpreter, she was also an important collaborator and knowledge ‘broker’ for the study. In an effort to make the project co-creative to ensure robust data (Birbili, 2000), Dinah and I would sit down and go over the questions (as much as possible) before commencing interviews and focus group discussions. I would highlight certain words or phrases I anticipated causing confusion, such as technical vocabulary that may not exist in their preferred languages. Examples of this were humanitarian/policy terms like ‘integration’ or ‘self-settlement’ which I occasionally asked for their thoughts on. Instances like these made researcher-translator consultation crucial (Temple & Young, 2004); even if such words did indeed exist in the participant’s native languages, it was not uncommon for Dinah to struggle to find the ‘right’ words, and she would signal this to me in advance. In that case, we would agree upon an alternative term or phrase that reflected the meaning I was trying to get at. In the case of ‘self-settlement’, we agreed upon the alternative phrase, ‘making a life (in Nairobi)’. There were also times we brought the participants in as co-collaborators in the translation process, with Dinah describing to them the general meaning or significance of a line of questioning, and they would suggest a word in their native tongue that would be a suffice as an accurate translation.

**Focus Groups**

During my research I conducted a total of four focus group discussions (FGDs), with an attendance of between three and 10 participants at each, for a total of 22 participants. Two focus groups were held at the KCC, one at the AIU café, and one at a restaurant in downtown Nairobi. At the KCC nearly all participants self-identified as ‘refugees’, at AIU participants were in Kenya on a student visa, and those I met at the café in downtown Nairobi were members of a local group of *Les Sapes*, primarily from Western DRC and originally having arrived in Nairobi on visitors’ visas. With the

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22 ‘Translator’ typically refers to someone who converts written messages into a different language and ‘interpreter’ refers to someone who converts oral communication. I use both terms in this section, as Dinah did both for my research, unless I am specifically referring to her real-time interpretation during interviews or focus groups.
consent of all participants, the meetings were recorded with my cell phone, and then later transcribed by Dinah, as participants typically spoke Swahili. Focus groups were selected for this study for their capacity to convene “a broadly representative demographic spread” (Goulden et al., 2014), while offering qualitative data that “cannot be gathered through one-on-one interviews” (Sweeney et al., 2013). In my case, the data that I felt could only come from focus groups was related to intergroup interaction. As the vast majority of my interviews were done one-on-one, I lacked insights into the dynamics and tensions that result from group discourse over the topics I was asking. I was particularly interested in divergent opinions, and at the beginning of each focus group, through Dinah’s translations, emphasized that I was as interested in disagreements as I was in agreements. There were no wrong answers, we stressed, and everyone was entitled to their opinions. With my cell phone at the centre of the table recording dialogue for Dinah to transcribe later, I was free to sit back and observe physical language of the participants (perhaps more so than if I had been focusing on listening and understanding what they were saying with their words). I would jot down the time of the meeting and make notes on particularly animated body language or vocal tone- people leaning across the table, raising their voices, or withdrawing into themselves. Immediately following the meeting, I would then ask Dinah to describe what was being said by whom to result in such physical responses. The particular sub-themes of what was being discussed to create such tensions would then signal to me that there was something particularly interesting at play here and was worth following up on more during my one-on-one interviews to follow. This was part of my simultaneous process of data collection and analysis, as will be discussed further at the conclusion of this chapter.

These discussions were organized by myself and facilitated and/or translated by Dinah, as some FGDs were conducted primarily in Swahili, with a small mix of French and Lingala. The topics varied on location and participants; at AIU, my very first focus group was on the topic of energy usage (as this was my research project’s focus at the beginning of my fieldwork); at KCC the topics were ‘the role of church’ and ‘social media, fashion and beauty’, and with the Sapeurs, questions surrounded their motives for getting involved in the fashion subculture and their general experiences in Nairobi. As an incentive, participants were provided with a small snack and beverage following the session. In the case of KCC, this incentive was decided on in consultation with the organization’s management. I did this to avoid offering an incentive that was too
significant to create undue influence (Head, 2009) but enough to show my gratitude for people’s time and effort. Participants were selected based on being over the age of 18 and identifying as Congolese. I did not ask to see any documentation to verify either age or nationality; regarding age, most of my interviews were generated through the ‘snowballing method’ where I would specify my interest in only interviewing those who were 18 or older. Legal status was not an eligibility criterion, though I believe that most participants, particularly at the KCC setting, were forcibly displaced as most originated from North or South Kivu in DRC. Participants were invited with the assistance of my research assistant in the case of the AIU FGDs, who had personal connections on campus, and with the help of management at KCC.

Positionality and Reflexivity

Reflexivity describes the “analytic attention to the researcher's role in qualitative research” (Gouldner, 1971, 16, as cited in Dowling, 2006). It is rooted in the belief that the researcher- their belief systems, subjectivities, and assumptions- does not exist apart from the research process and outcomes but is actively engaged and continuously shapes it (Hesse-Biber 2007, 17). It is also the belief that researchers both influence and are influenced by their participants (Joottun et al. 2009, 45). Applications of reflexivity within feminist research methodologies emphasize the importance of considering power differentials within the research process (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2007). I will dedicate some time here discussing this interplay of influence within the research process, power imbalances, and implications for data collection and analysis. I will begin by exploring my own positionality within the field, interrogating notions of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’. I will speak to my efforts to ‘dress Congolese’ in an effort to ‘fit in’ and build rapport among my participants. I will then focus on appropriating gender through my behaviour and outfits among male participants, touching upon ethical implications for power (im)balances between researcher and participant.

Positionality is based on the belief that researchers’ various and multifaceted characteristics, experiences, and biases inevitably shape the data collection and analysis (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Decolonial and feminist literature (Hamilton 2019, 520; Kaspar & Landolt 2016, 2) addresses the impact of intersectionality on relationships in the field, which proposes that social identities such as race, gender, and class are pluralistic and overlapping, and that they can contribute to creating or perpetuating systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989). Within my own
research, I had to continually consider how my positionality affected the researcher-participant dynamic and try and determine how power differentials were shaping the research process and outcomes. In this section I will explore some attributes of my positionality as a researcher-including nationality, language, and gender- providing examples of how these may have shaped the research process, relationships with participants, and my own wellbeing.

My nationality and ethnicity as a Caucasian Canadian female certainly impacted my research experience and outcomes. Having white skin certainly made me stand out, particularly when I was based in the informal settlements. Given the question of legality among many of my prospective participants and my desire to maintain some semblance of their privacy and anonymity without drawing unwanted attention, my skin colour made this all but impossible at times. Another methodological challenge presented by my skin colour was the common association among individuals living in the informal settlements of white people as staff members of large INGOs conducting field surveys; I remembered from my time doing field research in Nairobi, as part of my work-based placement during my Master’s degree at the University of Edinburgh, being told by a Kenyan colleague that white people in ‘slums’ were thought to be INGO staff. As such, they were often assumed to have power or influence to provide goods or services on behalf of the organization, resulting in participants emphasizing or holding back certain elements of their experiences in an effort to receive/increase support. To avoid the risk of undue influence and make sure that participants knew that I could not offer them any material benefit in return for their participation, I made a point of including in my informed consent ‘speech’ prior to every interview that I was not affiliated with any government or humanitarian organization.

Intersecting with my nationality, my inability to speak the languages of some of my participants certainly presented methodological challenges, as was discussed earlier in this chapter. Whether the participant spoke to me in English, French, or through Dinah as the translator, there was always the very real risk of losing or diluting cultural and linguistic nuances for the sake of inclusion in my study. Of course, even had I been fluent in the languages spoken by my participants, this would not have negated the challenge of interpreting and analysing culturally bound concepts and vocabularies (Olukotun 2021, 1421).

Though I felt my whiteness and my inability to speak with individuals in their own language(s) made me a clear ‘outsider’, the multifaceted and intersectional nature of identity, for both
researcher and participant, means the distinction between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ for researchers is rarely clear or static (Olukotun et al., 2021). One example of this was my identity as a Christian, similar to many of my participants. While, on the one hand, being Caucasian presented certain methodological liabilities, Jandt (2007) talks about ‘group identity’ in terms of ‘shared systems’ - and I would argue, shared understanding - of symbols, meanings, and norms (7). In practice, this meant being able to walk into any of the churches I was invited to, regardless of location in the city or denomination, and have some semblance of an idea of the acceptable norms and practices surrounding greeting, taking communion, and singing. Of course, there are also significant differences within new cultural settings; in Nairobi, for example, many churches, particularly those attended predominantly by migrants or lower-income Kenyans, had songs in Swahili which were new to me.

Gender was another significant attribute of researcher-participant positionality during my field research. Upon arriving in Nairobi, my stance on positionality had (rather naively) considered the balance of power being liberally tipped on my side; as the white, foreign, researcher, I held a disproportionate degree of power ‘over’ my research participants. My gender identity, however, as well as other identity traits such as age, tipped the scale towards older, male participants with positions of authority within their community. I found men would make efforts to exert their power. Oftentimes this manifested itself physically, via their physical space in the room, claiming it by sitting on the edge of a desk above me, or in some cases, sexual dominance through comments or physical contact. I, in turn, would find myself constantly negotiating and renegotiating what was an ethically ‘acceptable’ usage of my gender and femininity. I will further explore the dynamic collision of gender and power later in this section on positionality when I provide an ‘auto-reflexive’ account of sexual harassment in the field.

Clothing is a significant component of a researcher’s ‘impression management’ during the study to influence how they are perceived by others (Schmidt 2007, 93; Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2004, 368). As a significant component of my thesis concerns sartorial expression and subjectivities, I will spend some time here applying a reflexive lens to my own image construction - specifically, in terms of clothing and behaviours - and its impact on the research process. Clothing was a key

23 I will interrogate the complexities and heterogeneity of the label of ‘Christian’, and implications for this study, more in Chapter Six when I discuss the social role of religiosity among Congolese in Nairobi.
method of ‘growing’ or ‘shrinking’ my gender, depending on where I was and who I was meeting. I would often carry with me a baggy sweater in my tote bag along with my notebooks and wear it on the *matatu* ride from home. This was also for practical purposes- anyone who has ridden this form of public transportation knows how easy it is to catch and tear fabric in the jagged edges of seats or windows on your way in and out of your seat. More importantly, this was because to board the bus one must double over and scurry between seats in the low vehicle. In this case, a sweater was convenient to draw around my front to prevent anyone from seeing down my blouse. Then, when arriving at my destination, and depending on who I was meeting, I would either remove the sweater to reveal my more fashionable outfit underneath or keep it on if I felt whoever I was meeting was giving me ‘bad vibes’. My physical demeanour would correspond with what I was wearing, as well; with the sweater on I would physically become smaller, arms in at side or crossed over front, head down. Sweater off meant head up and tall stance.

Another way in which fashion played a key role in my positionality and ‘impression management’ is illustrated in the way that my clothing choices evolved over the course of my fieldwork. Initially, I had arrived at my field sites in clothing that I found practical for conducting research: sensible closed-toe shoes; worn jeans that I would not mind getting torn while getting in and out of the sharp-edged *matatu* seats; and long-sleeved shirts to protect me from the sun and heat. Over time, however, I replaced my muddy trainers with a pair of fashionable sandals and my ponytail with a braid. A knock-off Gucci bag and Chanel pin (‘Made in China’, but it was hard to tell) became part of my research kit.

One of the main reasons for this transformation was that I became self-conscious of looking rather shabby next to many of my Congolese contacts. This self-consciousness was largely born from comments made by Dinah one day- “Why are your trousers so baggy?” she asked, pointing at the way they sagged around my hips and thighs. I did not think they were ‘baggy’ as much as ‘comfortable’, but I began to see them in a new light, particularly when standing next to her in her form-fitting jeans. To ‘fit in’ more and minimize difference between myself and my participants (Thapar-Björkert and Henry 2004, 368-9), I began attempting to dress more ‘Congolese’. This went beyond just ‘dressing well’ as a sign of respect. A pair of ironed trousers and tailored blouse would have been respectful and professional. ‘Dressing Congolese’, however, as I came to understand it, was *more* than just dressing well. A simple black blazer is dressing well. A black
blazer with a sequined lapel to match golden smoking slippers is ‘dressing Congolese’. As Dinah liked to call it, “it’s ‘extra’”. There is often a fine line between tacky and stylish; the difference lies in fine lines, pressed pleats, orderly disorder (multiple colours in one outfit, but somehow, they just *work*), and thoughtfulness of design. ‘Camp’ may best describe the style I saw around me- the aesthetic of being over-the-top yet (perhaps inexplicably) appealing to the senses. Of course, there is no singular Congolese dress code. Yet as generalizing as it may be, the stereotype of “Congolese” style in Nairobi remains. The distinctiveness here lies mainly its comparison to ‘Kenyan style’. I did observe a *general* difference in the way many Congolese dressed compared to their Kenyan counterparts. I was not the only one- I asked Congolese, Kenyans, and other nationalities their opinion on the matter. Along with other stereotypes (i.e. wealthy, musical) I was told time and time again that Congolese are more fashionable. This aspect of ‘Congoleselessness’ will be explored in further detail in Chapter Four and Chapter Seven, where I discuss how such ethn-cultural stereotypes are leveraged by Congolese to their socio-economic advantage; Chapter Four looks at how Congolese hair stylists leverage Kenyan stereotypes of them being better at styling hair, and Chapter Seven gives the example of a local group of *Sapeurs* putting on a fashion show at a local restaurant for Kenyans, also leveraging stereotypes of Congolese as more fashionable.

For me, ‘dressing Congolese’ meant adorning myself in high-end labels, like Chanel, Gucci, and Tom Ford (though typically knock-offs found at local second-hand clothing markets), staying tidy (keeping mud and dust off of myself to the best of my ability, keeping my hair from becoming unruly), and looking stylish. Necklaces, broaches and earrings served as ‘props’, used not just to decorate myself, but to create legitimacy (Coffee 1999, 65). Admittedly, this was rather fun for me, and not much of an ‘Othering’ of myself- I have always enjoyed ‘dressing up’ in the latest fashions. Perhaps this is why I was so drawn to the aspect of fashion and beauty within my research. Within the context of field work in the informal settlements of Nairobi, wearing a Chanel broach was a new experience, however. For my fieldwork, fashion became a shared language and an important basis for rapport-building. Coffey (1999) writes, ‘The ability to ‘look’ as we are expected to (or not!) is a key factor in our ability to conduct the research; to promote trust and reciprocity” (71). Clothing and accessories became a point of conversation for ‘breaking the ice’ with new participants, and ‘dressing up’ was one way I could say to my participants, ‘I get it. I respect what you value, so much so that I imitate it’.
Returning to the issue of my evolution of dress in Nairobi, however, there is the question of why I felt the need to dress shabbier than normal at the onset of my field research. Other than when I was conducting interviews, never in my life have I worn baggy trousers in public. Beyond ‘the field’, my personal taste and style prevail. I wear high heels to the campus library not because they are practical (they are most certainly not, particularly in cobble-stoned Edinburgh), but because they make me feel good and I want my colleagues to see me as I see myself- stylish and confident. Even when I was ‘in’ the field, specifically the suburb of Karen where I lived for six months, I liked to dress nicely. Perhaps this is what led Dinah to comment on my baggy trousers. We saw each other on days we were not doing interviews, so she knew I had a better-fitting wardrobe. Why dress differently just because I was in Kabiria? Why, then, do I change myself for research “in the field”? If I were conducting research in Edinburgh, for example, would I wear plain sneakers and shapeless t-shirts as I did in Nairobi at the beginning of my research? Perhaps subconsciously I was trying to emulate the ‘scruffy anthropologist’, as if the weary sun-soaked and dust-blown look gave me feelings of authenticity, not only internally but also meeting the expectation of what I believed my participants would expect a researcher to look like. Not only was this ‘othering’ me, making me stick out with my unkempt hair and ‘baggy’ trousers in a world of feminine outlines and tailored lines, but it also disrespected my participants. My prioritization of dirty footwear and loose trousers I would not mind getting dirty or torn was both practical and reflected the weather-beaten anthropologist aesthetic, seeing only the ‘dusty Africa’ trope, instead of honouring the style and beauty in well-tailored suits and form-fitting dresses among the people who inhabit such spaces.

Having explored some of the ways in which my positionality affected the research, I want to dedicate some space in this thesis to an ‘auto-reflexive’ discussion. Auto-reflexivity, or self-reflexivity, as it is also known, has become increasingly more important among qualitative researchers. Whereas reflexivity permits the researcher to divulge how their positionality affects their research, auto-reflexivity provides the space for them to share how the research has affected them (Heinze, 2020). Despite its growth in popularity among researchers, particularly within feminist and Queer methodologies, its exploration often remains limited to blogs, conference panels or journal articles as individual ruminations, and less so grounded in empirical research application or included within the methodology section of a PhD thesis, for example.
Auto-reflexivity challenges what is often the minimizing or trivializing of researcher abuse in the field (Heinze, 2020). Sexual harassment was a nearly a daily occurrence during my fieldwork. Every day that I would make the journey from my home to my research sites via a combination of matatu, boda boda, and walking, I would be confronted with a barrage of staring, catcalls, unwanted touching, and innuendos (though commonly in Swahili, which Dinah would translate for me when I asked). This primarily occurred around the matatu ‘stage’ in a place called Banana Hill, where I would change busses. I half-jokingly referred to this as the daily “walk of shame” in my field diary, owing to the long walk (it was likely only twenty yards but felt like 200) from one end of the stage to the other.

Unfortunately, there were also a few incidents among my research participants. In three cases that stand out in my memory, older male ‘gatekeepers’ became flirtatious and, in some cases, physical. Flirting can be understood as “a communicative and embodied social interaction that adds a sexual component to a mostly one-on-one interaction, in which sexual attraction to the interlocutor is expressed” (Kaspar & Landolt 2016, 2). Though there are many ways in which flirtation can be expressed, ranging from benign to harassment, most times I would characterize the interactions as innocuous. The matter is complicated by different cultural/personal ‘weight’ put on the significance of flirting; what I may have considered as inappropriate or flirtatious behaviour may or may not have been considered as such by the flirter (Hofstede, 2001). While I acknowledge that possibility, I do not let cultural relativity discredit my own perspective and experience. During each of these incidents, my primary thought process was somewhere along the line of “I can’t make a big deal out of this- I need him for my research!”

The irony (if that is the right word) of the majority of my participants being male when sexual harassment at the hands of men was such a significant component of my research experience is not lost on me. I did not set out to interview more men than women. Ideally, I had hoped for more of a gender-balanced representation. Circumstantially, I believe that I engaged with more men because I relied so heavily on ‘gate-keepers’, who, for socio-political reasons beyond the scope of this study, were more often than not men, at least in the contexts that I worked. I relied heavily on these individuals not only for access, but I tended to seek reoccurring interactions with these individuals to build rapport and create richer data. As I had mentioned earlier, these participants were those who could speak English fluently; perhaps there were greater levels of fluency among
male Congolese than females in the informal settlements and CBD due to differences in education levels in the DRC.

In one instance, a young Congolese man who was a key gatekeeper to an important network of prospective participants became increasingly inappropriate in his interactions. Dinah and I began to distance ourselves from him. I took longer to reply to his text messages and made excuses as to why we could not visit him. Because he was a key contact, this meant that I also had significantly decreased my access to others whose participation in my study had always been arranged through him. Heinze (2020) describes the common occurrence of data shortcomings to be blamed on researcher ineptitude, even when such shortcomings are the result of the researcher prioritizing his or her safety and wellbeing over the depth of data. Auto-reflexivity embedded in the methods section provides the researcher a space to describe this process of prioritization, if it occurred. For me, I will admit that my originally intended scope of research suffered because of my unwillingness to engage further with this particular participant. My data may have suffered, but I would not. Eventually, I made peace with this trade-off.

Recognizing the academic importance of researcher experiences and emotional responses is crucial for current and future researchers to have a more accurate understanding of the realities of fieldwork and be aware of the importance of reflexivity as a core component of academic work. One of these realities, particularly for female researchers, is the risk of sexual harassment. Yet postgraduate researcher emotional responses to the stresses and dangers of fieldwork remain a highly neglected dimension of qualitative research, despite the “fixations” of ethnographic research of solitude, danger and intimacy (Hanson and Richards 2017), resulting in researchers placing themselves in dangerous situations motivated and justified by an andocentric culture that valorises precarious field experiences (Ibid.). Traditionally, violence and trauma in the field have been viewed as an acceptable risk or a rite of passage for researchers (Ghassem-Fachandi 2020). Auto-reflexivity challenges power imbalances outside of the field, as well. By bringing my experiences of sexual harassment from the periphery of my research, to exist only in my field diary or a feminist blog, to co-exist at the centre along with my introduction, findings and conclusion, I challenge academic institutions’ prioritization of data collection over researcher wellbeing (Hanson and Richards 2019; Heinze, 2020).
Data Analysis

For the data analysis process of this study, I continually returned to transcripts from interviews and focus groups, consulted observations made in my field journal, and reviewed images taken in the field to produce, confirm and/or challenge themes. I used a grounded theory approach, which enabled me to iteratively generate theories ‘grounded’ in the data as it developed (Glaser and Strauss 1967). As part of this approach, I did not wait until data collection was complete to begin the analysis phase, but rather did the two parallel to one another, creating thematic categories based on phrases and thoughts pulled from participant interviews and focus groups, and informing future enquiries.

Analysis began the minute I started my first interview and continued alongside the duration of research and long after. I transcribed all of my fieldnotes into my computer, then read, and re-read each of them multiple times, manually highlighting key words, then extracting elements and combining them into relevant sub-categories for my empirical chapters. Very much a visual learner, I put these key words and themes into hand-sketched then digitized mind maps to assist with drawing data linkages and forming a coherent analysis. This side-by-side data collection and analysis was crucial in what Bodgan and Biklen (1992) identify as the ability to widen or narrow the scope of the study, identify meaningful ‘leads’, and develop what questions to ask. In this way my analysis was a cyclical process of both inductive and deductive analysis, building theories from emerging themes, and then testing themes against those theories (Ruona 2005, 238). Once themes from my interviews and observations began to emerge, I began to compare these themes against each other by putting them in categories.

As previously discussed, the focus of my analysis changed so dramatically and frequently (particularly within the first several weeks of arriving in Nairobi) that it became a bit of a friendly joke among some of my other PhD colleagues; one would ask, “So, what is your research about this month?”. I was a bit jealous of my colleagues whose research project in Year Three or Four so closely resembled what they had set out to do in Year One. Miles and Huberman (1994) speak to the iterations that are so common within research, and the need to maintain balance between being ‘explicitly mindful of the purposes of your study’ while also ‘allowing yourself to be open and re-
educated by things you didn’t know about or expect to find’ (56). Indeed, this thesis is the product of a great deal of unexpected research discoveries.

So far, the thesis has provided the reader with an introduction of the topic, its relevancy and contribution to literature, an overview of social, political, and geographical contexts of the study, and an overview of the data collection methods and ethical considerations. Having done so, the chapters that follow will now begin presenting empirical data and analysis, beginning with Chapter Four’s exploration of the themes of livelihoods, informality, and ‘hustling’ in pursuit of the good life.
Chapter 4: Tangled Legality: ‘Hustling’ and The Good Life

Angel Touch Salon is a word-of-mouth type of place; no signage announces its presence in the nondescript brick building in downtown Nairobi. The salon can be found down a short set of stairs, past two bored-looking security guards who slide over a worn book for visitor’s signatures. One smells the salon before seeing it, with strong scents of hair relaxers, nail polish, and steam from hair wrapped around metal tongs wafting down the hallway. Across from the salon’s doorway is a lingerie shop that sells cheaply made stilettos and sequined bras. Inside the salon, a reception desk is topped with an assortment of mannequin heads sporting electric eyeshadow and wigs in various stages of completion. In one corner is an electric massage chair for pedicures, next to which sits two reclining chairs with sinks for washing. Lining the wall across from them sits a row of four chairs and mirrors for hair styling. At the opposite end are two tables for manicures, above which sits a small TV perched on a shelf that alternates between Nigerian music videos and Kenyan news channels.

Open from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m., Monday to Saturday, the salon employs twelve stylists: seven Congolese and five Kenyans. Benjamin, the owner of Angel Touch, is from Beni, in DRC’s North Kivu province. Benjamin frequently travels back and forth between Nairobi, Beni in North Kivu, DRC (where his original salon is), and Kampala, Uganda, where he is opening a third location. In his absence, his cousin Emmanuel works as the manager of the Nairobi branch.

Once a week for approximately three months as part of my research I “apprenticed” at this Congolese-owned salon, helping tidy workstations, take out customer’s braids, and wash and condition hair. Most of my one-on-one interviews at the salon were held with Emmanuel,24 who came to Nairobi in 2011 with his Congolese wife, also from Beni, and has two young sons who were born and raised in Nairobi and attend elementary school there. Emmanuel told me, “I was in Kenya doing other business, he [Benjamin] came and we started it [the salon] together. I didn’t know anything about hair care, I was doing the management side. I learned by watching others do it.”

24 Not only was Emmanuel fluent in English, allowing us to converse for longer periods of time without translation, but as the boss, he was in a position to express his eagerness to engage in critical conversations.
Customers would come in waves, and during slow periods the stylists would fall into a relaxed stupor, as if relishing the calm before the storm. The building has Wi-Fi that the salon pays for access to, and during lulls nearly all the staff are on their smart phone, silently flicking their thumbs through Instagram or watching YouTube videos. The atmosphere with customers was typically jovial, with customers alternating between conversing with the stylists, flipping through their phone, or ordering KFC from a food runner as they sat through the long hair sessions. The stylists liked to joke with their regulars; one day, Marko, a Congolese stylist, introduced a pretty female Congolese customer to me as “my girlfriend”. The young woman laughed and said to him, “I left you,” then batting her eyes, jokingly asked him if he would pay for her appointment. “No,” he replied, “I left you, remember?” Most of these conversations with Congolese clientele were in a rapid mix of French and Lingala, and Swahili with Kenyan customers.  

I asked the salon workers what the good life meant to them. Divine, a female Congolese stylist, described the importance of working to achieve it. “You are earning and can support yourself,” she told me over a customer’s head in the sink, her strong fingers working up a thick lather. “Enough to pay for the basic needs to support your family and pay bills—it doesn’t have to be extravagant. If you don’t have a job, you’ll end up begging on the road. Then how would life be for you?”

For Ruth, another female salon worker, getting the good life also required having income, but for her it is not so much about supporting her family as it is about being able to purchase “nice things”, including clothing, jewellery, and expensive hair weaves. She then likes to return to her hometown of Beni in DRC because “C’est Stake” [Congolese French slang meaning “to show off nice things”]. “I’m proving to people back home that I’m making it here”, she tells me. Outside of the salon, I heard others echo the ties between the good life and consumerism. Blessing, who had lived in Kakuma refugee camp in north-western Kenya for four years before moving to Nairobi, told me that the good life did not exist in the camp because “The food is mostly sorghum and maize.” She continued, “People who live the good life there are the ones who have family elsewhere to send them money to buy better things and better services.” For both Ruth and Blessing, having an

25 I asked Dinah later to clarify why Lingala, a language predominantly spoken in western and parts of northern DRC, was spoken among the staff members, many of whom originated from eastern DRC. She insisted that she heard a mix of Lingala and French being spoken but mostly when there were Kenyans, either staff or clients, present “so these others couldn’t understand what they were saying.”
income enabled them to buy ‘better’ things than those that they would otherwise be given or be able to afford, whether for them that meant expensive hair weaves or flavourful food. Furthermore, mobility factors in to achieving the good life, allowing them to move within and across borders either for job opportunities, greater market access, or ‘showing off’ their purchases to others.

The differences in Divine’s, Ruth’s, and Blessing’s responses are indicative of the variety of conceptualizations of the good life that I heard from other Congolese during my time in Nairobi. The belief that having the ability to work to make money, however, was a reoccurring theme. For Ruth, income enables consumer power which goes beyond basic human needs for patterns of ‘luxury consumption’, contributing to her ability to ‘prove’ to her social networks in her hometown that she has achieved a satisfactory level of success while living and working away from home. For Divine, the good life is more about being self-sufficient and having the ability to care for ones’ family by providing their basic needs.

Not everyone believed that having a way to earn money guarantees a good life. I asked individuals across other locations in the city how they understood the good life and its relation to working; Sammy, a 23-year-old Congolese man from Bukavu, who has lived in Nairobi for four years and
works in music video production, says that the ‘good life’ meant “a peaceful life” and that “I can have a good job and not have a good life.” He did add, however, that having a job made achieving the good life easier - that although “a job doesn’t guarantee a good life, it’s difficult to get a good life without a job”.26

These vignettes show the centrality of work and earning money in conceptualisations of the good life. The themes of this chapter - around the ability and desire to work, agency, and informality - make it a good foundation for the core part of my thesis as I begin to present findings. This chapter explores what the concepts of legal and illegal actually mean to people, and the various ways in which economic and social practices exist in the grey expanse between legal and illegal, formal and informal. Such a discussion is important because it presents widely practiced activities in the lives of Congolese in Nairobi as they navigate contexts of social, economic, and legal precarity. This chapter’s focus on the far-reaching impacts of informality in the city provides a strong jumping off point for the other findings chapters to follow: in many respects, as will become clearer over the course of the remainder of this thesis, the lives of Congolese in Nairobi are lived in the in-between, the liminal spaces of social and legal realms where the resulting ambiguities can be both marginalising and to the advantage of those who are equipped to navigate the precarities.

After providing an overview of global and national policies and frameworks surrounding legal employment, this chapter will examine the everyday social and economic practices among Congolese who engage in ‘hustling’ in the ambiguous zone between legality and extralegal in their attempt to achieve a good life. I will also look at practices and cultures surrounding petty bribery in Nairobi between public officials and Congolese, demonstrating how it simultaneously perpetuates power imbalances and enables migrants to circumvent restrictive labour laws.

**International Frameworks and National Legislation**

Though discussed briefly in Chapter One, I will offer a brief overview of the legal context surrounding refugees’ and migrants’ right to work in Kenya, as it is relevant to this chapter’s wider

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26 His remark on how ‘good’ equates to ‘peaceful’ offers a glimpse into the temporal and transnational nature of ideas of wellbeing; though beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth considering (and recommending for future research, as I do in the concluding chapter of this thesis) how past experiences within the displacement process shape conceptualizations and strategies of the good life.
themes around navigating the legal/illegal nexus. I will first examine policies concerning refugees, specifically, and then frameworks for the wider ‘migrant’ category, as the first category does not apply for so many Congolese in the city who do not fit the government’s narrow definition of ‘refugee’.

As previously discussed, the GoK does not typically permit refugees and asylum-seekers to be legally employed, despite international frameworks and instruments calling for state observance of the right of forced migrants to work. It should be noted that this is not necessarily in contravention to the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (UN General Assembly, 1951): for the many Congolese living in Nairobi as asylum-seekers or undocumented migrants, the Convention’s first tier of rights does not include lawful employment, and even those who are ‘lawfully present’ are afforded the right to ‘self-employment’ (Article 18). According to the Convention, only those who have been legally recognized as refugees and residing in the country for a minimum of three years are to be granted the right to paid employment (Article 17). For those with refugee status, the Kenyan 2006 Refugee Act provides refugees the same rights to employment as other non-citizens, as stipulated by the Kenya Citizenship and Immigration Act 2011 (Kenya Citizenship and Immigration Act 2011) which permits the granting of ‘Class M’ permits for non-nationals which generally last two to five years. This, of course, requires them to have refugee status and permission to live in Nairobi, and does not apply to the many Congolese in the city who do not have legal refugee status. Even for those who are legally recognized as

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27 Some exceptions are made; within the country’s refugee camps, with the government’s permission humanitarian organizations can sanction work in exchange for financial ‘incentives’ (UNHCR, 2020). The payment is relatively low, however, and these work opportunities are scarce. Far more opportunities come here through the informal economy, where complex goods and service exchanges take place between the inhabitants and host communities (Kaiser, 2016; Oka, 2011). Here, economic stability varies between nationalities based on myriad of reasons, including access to remittances, and the length of time in country (UNHCR, 2019). Yet despite this, one of the most cited reasons among my participants for choosing to live in Nairobi was the belief that the city afforded more opportunities to work both formally and informally- than the camps.

28 The 1951 UN Convention has been the most relied upon international instrument regarding the rights of refugees, with Articles 17, 18 and 19 concerning the right to work, specifically. Other international and regional legal instruments on the right to work for refugees include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the ILO Migration for Employment (Revised) (No. 97) and Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions), 1975 (No. 143), and the 1969 Organization for African Unity (OAU, now African Union) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa.

29 Permit applications must be accompanied by a recommendation by a prospective employer and a letter from the RAS confirming refugee status (Zetter and Rudel, 2017). Considering the limited availability of formal employment opportunities, acquiring a recommendation from a prospective employer is difficult.
refugees in Nairobi, it is extremely rare to be granted a Class ‘M’ permit. Should one obtain such a permit, this does not guarantee work: as one Congolese man with refugee status expressed during a focus group in Kabiria, “I came with a degree in project management, but I couldn’t access any jobs. We are human beings, we have rights to live, but to live without a job, is very difficult. I have refugee status from UNHCR, and that document can help you to do small jobs, but you are so limited.”

Far more Congolese in Nairobi fall outside of the narrow legal category of ‘refugee’ status. National migration and labour policies for foreign nationals are outlined and governed by the Kenyan Citizenship and Immigration Act of 2011 and the Kenya Citizenship and Immigration Regulations 2012. Obtaining a work permit as a foreign national, however, is not without its challenges. Several policy changes were introduced in the summer of 2018 to crack down on foreign nationals working illegally. Visitor’s visas, needed to enter the country, were reduced from three-months duration to one-month in 2018 in an effort to minimize unauthorized labour (IBN 2020). To receive a work permit, one can no longer apply once having already arrived in country on a visitor’s visa and must apply before arriving. Lengthy and costly application and issuance processes can take several months, and the applicant is required to provide the name of an employer who can prove that no Kenyan citizens could do the same job. New regulations from the Department of Immigration have also required foreign nationals to appear in person before public officials to provide biometrics that can be cross-checked with appropriate visas and work permits (Ibid.). There are, of course, ways to circumvent such challenges; I will return to this in greater detail later in this chapter when I explore practices of informality and petty bribery in accessing documentation and/or ensuring public officials turn a blind eye to ‘illegal’ practices.

‘Hustling’ for The Good Life

It is within this challenging policy climate that Congolese in Nairobi pursue work and the good life. Oftentimes, hustling is the only viable option. I heard this word- “hustle”-many times in Nairobi, from both Kenyans and Congolese. Typically in reference to earning money, it differs from ‘working’ in that it signifies a certain head-down-work-hard spirit, infused with experiences of marginalization, and typically occurring within the informal sector. As one Congolese woman put it, “Hustling is fighting to live day to day, trying to find money to survive”, and a young
Congolese man said, “it means trying to push life forward, *kusukuma maisha* (‘pushing life’ in Swahili)”. Hustling, for them, incorporated a level of marginalization, hard work, precarity, and informality not necessarily associated with simply “working”.

Anthropological studies of the “urban poor” striving to overcome social/economic/legal barriers have largely been relegated to studies of informality (Meagher 2010), yet this chapter strives to position economic activities both outside of and within formal institutions, processes, and players, as well as everywhere in between. As empirical evidence from this chapter will show, tethering informality to an extra-legal/formal realm is neither accurate nor always possible, given the lack of a clear demarcation between formal/informal, legal/illegal within the Nairobi context. One example of this is how the GoK has formally acknowledged and legitimized the large informal sector. When postcolonial Nairobi faced neoliberal economic policies that stunted wage employment for the growing number of urban laborers in the city, many politicians acknowledged the vital contribution of the *Jua Kali* sector (Thieme et al., 2021, 3).

*Figure 10: An example of Jua Kali; a road-side vendor in Nairobi sells hygiene items. Source: Author’s photo.*

Not only is the informal sector widely acknowledged and legitimized in Nairobi, but Thieme et al. (2021) talk about the widespread vernacular of ‘husting’ in Nairobi and describe how it transcends
gender or class divides; it is used by poor urban youth, as well as by media personalities and politicians, adopting/appropriating the term to be ‘cool’ among the public (5). In 2020 Kenyan opposition leader Raila Odinga claimed that past and future presidents are “hustlers”, owing to their ambitiousness and work ethic (Iraki 2020). Even multinational companies tap into the popularity of the term; one day I saw a large billboard along Ngong road advertising Kentucky Fried Chicken’s “streetwise” menu with the caption, “When the hustle is hard, mealtime is easy” (Fig. 11), illustrating the collision of global consumerism and localized informality.

![Figure 11: Billboard appealing to the 'hustle culture' of Nairobi. Source: Author’s photo](image)

Hustling is also a common term in American rap and hip-hop music, which I would frequently hear blasted through the matatu speakers during my daily commutes. Under the watchful gaze of these musicians, who often covered the bus walls or ceilings (Fig. 12), I would listen to them sing in praise of ‘the hustle’. Eminem, in ‘King Hustle’, raps “I had to hustle, my back to the wall, ashy knuckles” (Mathers, 2011), and Jay-Z’s ‘Can’t Knock the Hustle’ features the lyrics, “I got extensive hoes, with expensive clothes, And I sip wine, and spit vintage flows, But y'all don't know, Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, 'Cause you can't knock the hustle” (Carter, Foster & Miller, 1998). What these songs shared in common were the themes of struggle, racial and economic marginalization, and against-all-odds-success.
Kenyan politicians, American rappers, and multinational fast-food companies aside, it is important for this study to interrogate the usage and interpretation of ‘hustling’ among Congolese, rooted in a belief of the importance of seriously considering specific and place-based ‘vocabularies of Southern urban practice’ to expand understanding of these contexts (Bhan 2019, 640, cited in Thieme et al., 2021, 5). I would hear the word said in English, intermixed with Swahili; sentences like “naenda kuhustle” (I’m going to hustle) and “maisha ni kuhustle tu” (life is just a hustle).

Among my participants, I found the term to be fluid in its connotation, and heard it used as both insult and compliment. A Congolese woman bitterly told me that Kenyans “are hustlers” when she described how a Kenyan church hired her husband to preach there without pay for two years. To her, in this context to “hustle” meant to take advantage of others for personal gain. On the other hand, I had several Congolese tell me that they personally “hustle”, describing their capacity to make money despite the challenges they face. Blessing, the Congolese status refugee living in Kawangware, for example, told me, “Life in Kenya is hard- I have to hustle to braid hair for money”.

Figure 12: Posters of American rappers and hip-hop artists decorating a matatu. Source: Author’s photo.
In the home of a participant who had invited me to share a meal with his family in Kabiria, hanging on the corrugated metal wall of the living room was a framed image of a large brick mansion in the suburbs. It was the type of house that a Hollywood movie would feature for the quintessential American family. A cherry red Lamborghini sat photoshopped in the driveway. Above the mansion were the words in thick cursive, “Success is the product of hard work”. No people were in the picture, which may have been the point; the viewer could mentally superimpose themselves, like the Lamborghini, in the front yard of this opulent house. The words aligned with the definitions of the ‘good life’ I had been hearing; one must work hard to achieve ones’ dreams. To ‘hustle’ is also done with an end-point in mind; success means that one must hustle to get to the place where hustling is no longer needed (Munive 2010, 334). Like one 18-year-old Congolese girl in Kabiria settlement described for me when I asked her what the good life meant: “Flashy cars, fancy parties, shopping in malls, never needing to hustle…”.

Hustling is a transnational phenomenon and is not exclusive to Congolese migrants in Nairobi. I often heard Kenyans and other migrants self-identify as ‘hustlers’. The harsh economic conditions and government policies make earning a stable, legal income difficult, regardless of nationality. Of course, they are not encountered to the same degree, and migrants have the added challenge of needing a work permit. Yet as illustrated by Raila Odinga’s application of the label to Kenyan politicians and KFC’s billboard to its majority-Kenyan clientele, Congolese clearly do not have a monopoly on the term. How distinctive are the economic challenges faced by irregular migrants in Nairobi who must ‘hustle’? Are the same economic challenges and opportunities not encountered by economic migrants and Kenyan nationals as well? Werker (2006, as seen in Betts et al., 2017) explores the distinctiveness of structural barriers to economic participation among migrants; though his study is situated within the refugee camp context, he points out three distinctive experiences which can easily be applied to many Congolese in Nairobi, irrespective of migrant status. Firstly, policy distortions, or how legal barriers to social and economic mobility disable their participation in trade and labour beyond the camp; second, status/identity distortions that perpetuate socio-economic discrimination by the ‘host society’; and thirdly, distortions arising from physical isolation away from primary commercial centres. I would argue that certainly the first two of Werker’s distortions- policy and status distortions- certainly do apply to Congolese in Nairobi to some degree. However, as pointed out by Betts et al. (2017), causes of ‘market imperfections’, like informality, are also sources of opportunities.
Aligning with this more positive framing of informal economic activity, I join other scholars who study it the African context use it to signify survival and self-determination within unpredictable economic conditions (Amankwaa et al. 2020; Harney and Moten 2013; Mwaura, 2017). This is not to outright reject the conceptualizations of hustling within the realms of precarity and ‘waithood’ (Thieme et al., 2021). Indeed, just as one of the primary goals of my research is to challenge tropes of informality born from despair and desperation, I must avoid paying into a stereotype at the opposite end of the spectrum, of precarious economies being places of unbridled innovation (Thieme 2017, 2). The reality, I propose, is somewhere in between, and more optimistic framing contributes to a more nuanced, localized appreciation of the topic. This is comparative to Robbins (2013) oft-cited recommendation within these chapters of ‘anthropology of the good’ as complimenting, rather than replacing, ‘anthropology of suffering’. Aligning my own analysis with that of scholar Jairo Munive (2010), I would also posit that ‘hustling’ in the informal economy in Nairobi goes beyond a mere survival strategy to not just ‘make do’, but to add flavour, beauty, meaning, and purpose to life in the city. In other words, hustling to achieve maisha mazuri, the good life.

**Kitu Kidogo and Licensing Informality**

Hustling does not just occur within the realm of informality; as this chapter has explored earlier, the lines between legal/illegal and formal/informal are rarely clear, and many aspects of the economic lives of Congolese occur in the bleeding edges of these categories, resulting in both benefit and risk. In this section, I will speak to the prevalence of petty bribery in Nairobi, specifically in regard to public officials (namely, police officers and city council officials) asking Congolese for bribes in exchange for turning a blind eye to their working and/or operating businesses without permits in Nairobi. Petty bribery is an important contextual element in the exploration of the good life because its prevalence in the city and its role in simultaneously producing precarity and circumventing it for Congolese as they make efforts to generate income in pursuit of the good life.
Before arriving in Kenya, I was already familiar with the statistics around how few work permits are typically granted to refugees (Betts, Omata and Sterk 2018, 25) and migrants in general (Matsvai-Mutsau, 2018). As a result, I was rather surprised to see the paper hanging up on the wall of so many of the Congolese-owned kinyozis and shops I visited, including Angel Touch salon (Fig. 13). Illustrating the complex interplay between formal and informal in Nairobi, the large size of the informal sector in Kenya does not reduce the number of business licenses or work permits applied for but actually increases demand for licensing for the appearance of formality (Transparency International Kenya 2015, 28). Obtaining this licensing is done through various means at multiple points along the spectrum of legality; I had heard stories of business owners acquiring one from the infamous River Road (a shopping district known for the sale of counterfeit documents), while others had a Kenyan spouse or business colleague register. Several of my participants told me they purchased theirs directly from the city council. The means of acquiring or the authenticity of the licence seems to be of less importance than its presence on a business’s wall.

In Angel Touch, Emmanuel pointed to a framed paper on the wall over the reception desk that held the salon’s business license. Regardless of the legality of the business or the staff members working there, the risk of harassment and penalization by the authorities persist. He told me about a time one of the salon’s female Kenyan clients was left disgruntled after receiving what she considered to be a sub-par service.

Last week, a customer brought a police officer here. She was upset about her hair order so she brought two police. She wanted 3,600 Ksh for herself and 2000 Ksh for the police. She knew we were Congolese and that we don’t have anyone to defend us, so she brought a couple ‘friends’. We didn’t want the hassle- they’ll say ‘you’re a foreigner, how about we put you in the car and take you to the station?’ Honestly, it’s better to pay the bribe and avoid the hassle. If you have an issue with someone they’ll just respond with, ‘Who do you think you are? I can get you deported!’ It makes me feel angry, but what can I do? I feel so powerless.
In theory, there are real consequences if one is caught without a work permit or business license. Section 53(1) (m) of the Kenya Citizenship and Immigration Act (2011, 49-50) states that any person ‘not being a citizen of Kenya, engages in any employment, occupation, trade, business or profession, whether or not for profit or reward, without being authorized to do so by a work permit…’ commits an offense liable to a fine of up to five hundred thousand Kenyan shillings (approx. USD 5000), imprisonment up to three years, or both. The consequences are dire not only for unlicensed migrant workers, but also for their Kenyan employers: the Act stipulates that any person who hires a foreign national not legally registered for employment is also liable the same fine and/or imprisonment (2011, 50).

Avoiding arrest or harassment by police was a key reason given to me by many I interviewed for why they sought paperwork to operate a business. As explained to me by the staff of Angel Touch hair salon, for example, a great deal of licensing is required to (formally) operate a salon in the city; it must have a business license, as well as licenses for playing music, playing a television, and having a fire extinguisher. Emmanuel pulled out a thick binder and dropped it on the front desk, flipping through loose sheets of paper- certificates, permits, notices. He told me, “Those guys who were arrested [in a 2019 crackdown], they didn’t have the right paperwork. So there’s
definitely more stress, but if you follow the rules, it’ll be ok. I have a family now; I have to make sure I follow the rules,” he said, motioning to the binder. What rules, however, are followed, seems to vary within the salon. Emmanuel later told me, for example, that because the business permit price was partially based on the number of staff working on the premises, he underreported the number of people employed. This was easy to get away with within the salon industry, he explained, because of the variability of staff shifts and hours worked. The difference, perhaps, then lays in which rules are more visibly apparent when followed/broken, versus those which are far easier to hedge and get away with.

More than just something that has to be done for the sake of ‘following the rules’ (whose rules, it is not always clear) or avoiding penalties/harassment, I encountered a desire among Congolese migrants to demonstrate the operation of ‘legitimate’ businesses. In Nairobi, licensing is something that must be displayed publicly in all places of business (Trade Licensing Act 2006, 7), and to not do so can occur penalties (Ibid.). Legitimacy, then, is largely tied to the acquisition and display of paperwork. Motioning to the thick binder again, Emmanuel told me, “If you don’t have paperwork, you can pay bribes, but it’s not professional. It disturbs the customers. We are a legitimate business,” he insisted, weighing the thick folder in the air for proof. For Angel Touch’s business license, he pays 13,700 Ksh (approx..USD 130) a year. “We were undercharged because we told them we don’t have employees- it’s believable because salon workers usually work on commission”. One of the reasons for obtaining a license, for him, is because “It’s not cheaper to pay bribes instead of buying a business license in the long run.” This, he claims, is “because city council will keep coming for bribes, and they’ll call someone else who will come, and it’ll never stop.” If it was as simple as buying one, then, I asked him why everyone doesn’t have a business license.

“If you have a cover,” he shrugged, “You don’t need one.”

I asked what he meant by “cover”.

“You know,” he said, “a connection to city council. Just call them and the officials will keep their distance.” He continued,
“Nothing is impossible, just more expensive. Everything is possible in Africa- if you have enough money. I don’t feel controlled, but I think the government is going in that direction. But the more things they make more difficult- like getting a cell phone or opening a bank account, just makes it more expensive for us. You just have to know the right Kenyan to bribe.”

In a country where the simplest task can become bogged down in red tape and paperwork, ‘knowing someone on the inside’ can expedite processes exponentially- for a fee, of course. Bribery, at multiple levels, is rampant in Nairobi (Transparency International, 2017). At the local level, it is not uncommon for police officers and city council officials to ask for “kitu kidogo” (Swahili for ‘a little something’) or “chai kidogo” (‘a little tea’), code for a small bribe, to look the other way when they encounter unregistered places of business among refugees and immigrants. A 2012 study of livelihoods among urban refugees in Nairobi found that an estimated 1 per cent of refugees’ income is spent on bribes (DRC and UNHCR, 2012). Corruption is not encountered by foreigners in the city alone; 45 per cent of Kenyans polled for the 2019 Global Corruption Barometer (Transparency International, 2019) believe “most or all” local government officials are corrupt, up from 26 per cent in 2015 (38). Though a more recent report does not exist, a 2003 survey by Transparency International, the ‘Kenya Urban Bribery Index’, found that the average urban-dwelling Kenyan paid 16 bribes per month, amounting to an estimated 30 per cent of their monthly income, with public servants representing 99 per cent of the recipients (2003, 7). I encountered requests for kitu kidogo myself on several occasions during my fieldwork from police officers and bureaucrats at the visa office. Bribery is so prolific in Nairobi it transcends fringe corruption- it is a system, a culture, a commonplace way of life where the legal/illegal lines become blurred as part of the “daily negotiation” that is the local bureaucratic apparatus (Blundo 2006, 814).

Though informal transactions like these between migrant and public servant may seem chaotic, they occur within constraints and parameters to result in an order of sorts. Lipsky (1980) points out in his study of ‘street-level bureaucrats’ that there are limits to how much a bureaucrat can demand from a ‘client’, as an over-abuse of power would result in a depletion of the clients’ resources and the inability to continue future transactions (58). When I asked a Congolese hair stylist in South C if she worried about her unregistered salon being shut down if she did not acquire
a business license, she replied, “They [city council] will take bribes, but they won’t shut you down. Because then where would the bribes come from?”

Tying in with the next chapter’s discussion of ‘social brokers’, local authorities, like city council members, serve as important brokers to state institutions and bureaucratic processes (Blundo 2006, 799). This “street-level bureaucracy” has traditionally been viewed through a Western governance lens as a major contributor to defunct states, who act in various degrees of juxtaposition and/or complementarity to the state and play a significant role in public affairs (Ibid., 800). Despite the significant role that city council workers and police officers play in both challenging and enabling refugees’ livelihoods in Nairobi, there are relatively few empirical studies about local bureaucrats in Africa and throughout the Global South (Bierschenk & Blundo 2014, 39), and even fewer ethnographic studies of these players’ daily on-the-ground functioning.30

A key issue here is that there is a significant gulf between international and national legislation and policy and what occurs in everyday life ‘on the ground’. Critical analyses of bribery reflect this divide, commonly viewing it through a legalistic lens as a form of corruption without considering more complex localized understandings, such as gifts or social obligation (Polese 2014, 382). While I initially strove to think of these transactions as amoral in an effort to strip my own moral/cultural alignments from prejudice, Olivier de Sardan, in his conceptualization of a “moral economy” of corruption in Africa (1999) suggests that the amoralization of bribery overlooks important social and cultural norms that are important for legitimizing the transactions in the minds of its participants (25). In other words, regardless of where these transactions are in relation to ‘formal’ policies, “corruption”, in all its forms, is often viewed as legitimate by those who participate in it (Ibid). While Transparency International defines corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (n.d.), I would suggest a lop-sidedness in this conceptualization in that it only considers the negative implications of localized forms of corruption, such as bribery, and that this perpetuates the unfair, and inaccurate, narrative of refugees as victims of abuse. As

30 Though far more studies of local bureaucrats in the Global North exist, notable authors who have provided ethnographies of the day-to-day practices of Southern bureaucrats include Eames (1986), Blundo (2006; 2014), Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan (2014), and Anders (2005; 2009), Fuller and Bénéï (2000), Fuller and Harriss (2000), Hull (2003), Nuijten (2003), and Eckert (2004, 2011).
de Sardan (1999) comments, corruption in Africa must “be studied from the viewpoint of the participants” (25).

While I never had the opportunity to get the perspectives of police or city council members who had asked for bribes, I did speak to Congolese who had experienced being asked for kitu kidogo. There was sometimes a sense of inevitability in their accounts; if one has a run-in with the police, one can expect to be asked for a bribe. A 23-year-old man in the city for four years told me that he had recently paid a ‘kitu kidogo’ to police officers after being arrested once (he did not say what he was arrested for), and when I asked how the experience of being asked for a bribe made him feel, said, “I felt normal, because this is Nairobi.”

Not everyone I spoke with had been asked for a kitu kidogo by public officials. An 18-year-old female told me she had not “because I have not collided with city council or cops anywhere”. This sentiment was shared by another, a 27-year-old man, who, over the past two years he has been in Nairobi, says that he has never been asked for a kitu kidogo from the police or city council since he had never “kupatana uso kwa uso” (met a cop ‘face to face’, in Swahili). These two responses imply that bribery results not from just any dealings with these individuals, but a negative ‘clash’ of some sort that necessitates something in return for the police or city council.

Several individuals I asked shared their firm belief that asking and paying for bribes was ‘wrong’. One 23-year-old man who has been in Nairobi for four years said plainly that kitu kidogo- both asking for it and paying it- is a ‘bad thing’, because “It encourages criminal activities since most are arrested and they pay something small to be released.” He himself had been arrested by police and then released, only after paying a bribe. A young woman whose brother had recently been arrested by police for not wearing a mask during the pandemic was released only after paying them 1000 ksh. “People who pay bribes,” she said, “only think of themselves. They are selfish”. Yet often when I pushed further the complexity of bribery would be revealed. The young man referenced above, for example, when I asked if kitu kidogo was “always a bad thing”, responded, “it depends. Being asked for a kitu kidogo if you don’t make a mistake might create a bad image for the citizens and the country, since it’s the officers taking advantage of innocent people just to benefit themselves”.

This is not to say that bribery did not have its own moral value among my participants. There are numerous studies that explore how, across the continent, petty corruption is justified by local moral
norms, namely obligations to family and friends (Mbembe 2001; Blundo & Olivier de Sardan 2006; Anders 2009; Anders et al., 2020). Felices-Luna (2016), in her qualitative study of corruption and illegality in DRC, talks about an ‘alternative moral order’ that exists among members of military and police she interviewed, all of whom admitted to engaging in corruption in some form or another, as it was so ‘embedded in the activities of everyday life’ (134). This reframing of behaviour, according to Felices-Luna, was a mechanism used to maintain claims of morality while engaging in ‘immoral’ behaviours (Ibid.). This complicated and often perplexing dance of logics was encountered among my own participants.

I asked the girl whose’ brother had been arrested, for example, since she had said that people who pay bribes are “selfish”, if that would include her brother, who had paid 1000 Ksh to be released from police custody. She modified her position to include intent; “it depends, because there are people who pay bribes with bad intentions, but for my brother he just wanted to get away from the cops”. She also separated illegality from corruption; “the person that pays [a cop] won’t be corrupt, but that would be against the law.” She added that the matter is further complicated by the question of intent on the police officer’s side, suggesting that “some may be wanting to buy food for their families”.

Many authors have examined the economic practices and attitudes within neoliberal societies from a moral standpoint at the intersection of material, social, and cultural phenomenon (Whyte and Wiegratz 2016, 4), asking how values around money have changed and what is considered to be appropriate, legitimate and justifiable in how one earns a living (Iglesias-Pérez, Blanco-Gonzále, & Navalón 2018; Whyte and Wiegratz 2016, 4). Discourses and practices centred on self-interest and entrepreneurialism embedded within neoliberal policies, for example, have promoted and enabled the ‘marketization of all social relations’ and ‘the corresponding restructuring of people’s subjectivities, relationships, and everyday practices’ (Harrison 2005, 2010, as seen in Whyte and Wiegratz 2016, 4).

Cultures of hustling and *kitu kidogo* reflect not just a ‘marketization of social relations’, but also a marketization of asylum and migration, whereby earning and paying money is a means for survival, protection, and wellbeing. Campbell (2005), in her study of Somali business owners in Nairobi’s Eastleigh neighbourhood, describes the imbalance of risk and gain of corruption;
For wealthy entrepreneurs the system often works to their advantage, enabling them to purchase desired properties and turn them into commercial enterprise, despite zoning laws or other restrictions. For less wealthy and poor refugees (the majority), bribery-or extortion-is a source of abuse and harassment, under which hard earned wages often disappear into the hands of eager police, leaving the person with no money and hence nothing with which to buy necessary daily staples (21).

Campbell’s quote highlights how bribery ‘works to the advantage’ of the rich. Without valorising corruption or glossing over its severe consequences, particularly for the most socio-economically ‘vulnerable’, I would offer a supplementary argument: that bribery can also serve a purpose for less financially-secure migrants.

Police bribery, for example, provides a way for migrants to “circumvent the law”, leading to economic growth and social development (Hoinaru et. al, 2020), especially when the law is seen as unfair or selectively applied, and a method for participation in economic processes the state excludes them from (Gupta 1995). These local officials have the capacity to expedite procedures, protect their ‘customers’ from penalty, and enable them to assert their rights (Blundo 2006, 816). In the case of my participants, the protective function of local authorities was illustrated when one of the Congolese managers of the Kabiria Community Centre told me that he pays rent for the building to the local police chief, who owns the property. In return, he says, the local police leave him, the organization, and its refugee members alone. Whether this is a simple payment of rent between tenant and landlord, or bribery paid from refugee to an authority figure in exchange for protection, or a little of both, is not clear. The reality is likely somewhere in the hazy space between, the legality left unspoken yet the practical implications understood by both parties. This transaction- whatever it is - is beneficial for both.

Petty bribery can also illustrate a means to navigate barriers presented by documentation requirements. Following two attacks in 2014 for which the terrorist organization Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility, for example, the Kenyan government called for a counter-terrorism security mission called “Operation Usalama Watch” (“usalama” in Swahili means “security”). This military operation predominantly targeted Somalis, who were subjected to a rapid crack-down

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31 The practice of refugees paying local police for protection is explored in greater depth by Crush et al. (2017) in their study of refugees working in the informal sector in South Africa.
resulting in harassment, mass arrests and forcible relocation (Amnesty International 2014). During this time, Balakian (2016) states that as police were not accepting the legitimacy of State/humanitarian-issued official identification papers, Somalis resorted to using cash. Balakian posits that rather than view these cases of bribery and extortion as an absolute stripping of rights, the Somalis’ use of cash signals how money represents a new identity, one not limited only to limited state definitions, but to a wider global one based on transnational connections, remittances, and the free-flow of capital (2016, 89). This concept of “money as their government” was thus a form of Somali migrant resistance against an exclusive political system and nation-state definitions of migrants. This consideration of the ‘usefulness’ of bribes must be tempered by the reality that, during this period the cost of bribes increased significantly, and many Somalis were killed and deported, including Kenyan citizens, regardless of their ability or willingness to pay. This is an illustration of how state/humanitarian mandated paperwork is institution-defined legitimacy, but this is not always accepted as legitimate at all levels or by all public officials. This can be tied back to the earlier-cited example of Emmanuel, the manager of Angel Touch salon, being asked for bribes by police despite his thick folder of licenses. When the acquisition and accepted legitimacy of government-mandated paperwork fails, cash becomes the license to live and work in Nairobi, demonstrating the difference between ‘human rights’ and ‘rights based on money’.

I do not wish to propose a sugar-coated cultural relativism, nor ignore the many well-documented cases of police violence and oppression against migrant populations, including forced removal from homes, rape, beatings, and theft (Human Rights Watch 2013, Raddatz & Kerby). This brutality is not only targeted towards migrants, however, with many documented cases of widespread police violence carried out against nationals as well (Human Rights Watch 2020; Oluoch 2020; Ombuor & Bearak 2020). It is difficult to speak to the level of police abuse experienced by Congolese migrants in Nairobi. Most of the documentation on police violence against refugees in the city focuses on Somalis in Eastleigh (Balakian 2016; Lindley 2011; Mwangi 2017). In my own research, despite specifically asking questions related to mistreatment at the hands of police, though many Congolese spoke about being asked for bribes, only one reported violent mistreatment at the hands of police officials. This is not to suggest that police violence and oppression does not occur among Congolese in the city. Two Congolese men shared the general feelings of fear and anxiety born from being foreigners in the city and being wary of consequences at the hands of authorities. As one man told me who had recently arrived in the city,
“This is my first time living in a foreign country. If you don’t have the right paperwork, you fear even going outside. You feel in your heart that they will arrest you.” Another, a 27-year-old male originally from Kisali, Haut-Lomami province in south-eastern DRC, has been living in Nairobi since 2014 on a long-expired tourist visa. “Of course I’m nervous,” when I asked. “I don’t feel at home here.” He told me about an incident with the police when he was driving a friend’s vehicle and two police vehicles cornered him on the street.

“They got out and started shouting, got me out of my car and searched my clothes. They wanted to see my passport. I said I didn’t have it. I did, but I didn’t want them to take it for a bribe. They took me to jail and left me there overnight, pressuring me to pay a $1000 bribe. They just terrorize you. They arrest you and don’t tell you anything. They left me overnight. It was the worst place I have ever seen. A cell, I was in there with homeless people, criminals. I couldn’t sleep, I was on floor in the dirt. In the morning, they made me clean urinals…totally inhumane.”

To get out, he told me, “I had to sell my ring to pay the bribe so that they would let me go.”

Though these two accounts speak to fear of encounters and oppressive experiences at the hands of police, there was a relative absence of complaints of police brutality in my interviews. This is not to imply that my sample is representative of the Congolese population- it is not- but it is worth mentioning that police brutality was not visible or explicitly described to me. This is notable, particularly when compared to the narratives among Somalis, and may be one indicator of different encounters with police between forced migrant nationalities predicated more on prejudices of nationality rather than legal status alone. Omata (2020) touches upon this briefly in comparing the Congolese and Somali refugee experience in Nairobi, suggesting that the latter may experience greater degrees of police violence due to their poorer command of Swahili and public perceptions of them having links to terrorism (15).

Conclusions

Throughout this chapter I have drawn attention to the tensions between aspirations for the good life, made possible by the ability to earn money. In a context characterized by precarity and uncertainty, many Congolese employ creative means to circumvent such barriers in their pursuit
of the good life. In the every-day life-worlds of people in Nairobi, the line between legal and illegal is often too blurred in its practical application to be able to attach ‘rightness’ and ‘wrongness’ to the two categories (particularly when the actors assigned to carry out the law- in the case of this study, police officers and city officials, can hardly be held as the plumbline for legality). Within this study’s wider examination of strategies for achieving the good life, this chapter examined the existence and role of complex realms of legality, illegality, and the socio-economic activities that occur in the vast space in between. It speaks to the ways in which engaging in the informal economy, in the context of restrictive labour laws, is a way of exercising agency while pursuing the good life. It examines the ways in which legal/illegal hybridizations around licensing and enforcement enable the circumventing of legal barriers, while simultaneously perpetuating social, legal and economic precarity.

I provided empirical and conceptual discussions around the concept of ‘hustling’ as a creative strategy to negotiate economic precarity, and examined the widespread practice of petty bribery, or *kitu kidogo*, that both perpetuates and challenges migrant discrimination. Within the moral economy of informality and extralegality, I have argued that Congolese often operate within their own sets of norms and values that best suit their pursuit of the good. Sometimes one must do something ‘bad’ in order to achieve the ‘good’ life. I argue that the desire to create an income to pursue happiness and wellness for individuals and their families shape the morals, logics, and norms around interacting with legal parameters, which often means circumventing them, within the context of Nairobi.

Aligning with my thesis’s more ‘optimistic’ framing, I have offered a more positive framing of informal economic activity. This chapter builds upon and contributes to the work of others who study it within the African context as a signal of agency and negotiation of economic precarity (Amankwaa et al. 2020; Harney and Moten 2013; Mwaura, 2017). Importantly, this chapter also builds upon the opinions of bribees themselves, a perspective which is often overlooked in critical literature on bribery and corruption.

Whereas anthropological studies of the urban poor have often limited their economic lives to a distinctive realm of ‘the informal economy’ (Meagher 2010), in this chapter I have explored how social and economic processes often exist within an entanglement of legal/illegal and formal/informal, with both public officials and migrants leveraging the ambiguities for their
benefit. The conversations with Congolese featured here builds onto scholarship surrounding practices of ‘making a living’ among migrants while going beyond critical analysis of just ‘making do’ in urban contexts in the Global South (Thieme 2017, 529-530). Hustling may be hard, precarious, risky, and informal, yet it cannot be separated from the good life. In fact, as has been demonstrated in this chapter, for many it is a core strategy in the pursuit for individual and collective wellbeing.

The chapters that follow this one will build upon the foundation laid by the empirical and conceptual discussion presented so far. Within the context of simultaneously occurring forces of formality and informality, risk and opportunity, conceptualizations of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’, the subsequent chapters will provide more illustrations and case studies of diverse and complex Congolese subjectivities, expressions of agency, and pursuits of happiness and wellbeing amidst trying contexts.

Against the backdrop of the legal frameworks and informal practices that shapes economic ‘self-reliance’ for refugees and other migrants in Nairobi, the next chapter will take a deeper look at systems of dependencies, where informal monetary interactions between police officers, city council workers and unregistered migrants that work as both a barrier and enabler for refugee and asylum-seeker livelihoods. It will continue this chapter’s discussion of the role of public officials by examining them as key ‘social brokers’ of services and information for Congolese in the city, and the significance of trust for building a good life.
Chapter 5: Trust, Dependencies, and ‘Social Brokers’

In the last chapter I described the ambiguity surrounding the rules concerning migrants in Nairobi, and the role of informality and petty bribery in circumventing restrictive and labour laws. In this chapter, I dive deeper into the roles that key figures (whom I refer to here as ‘social brokers’) play in assisting migrants to navigate precarity and confusion, and the importance of trust in such transactions.

I spoke in Chapter One about the increasing push for refugee ‘self-reliance’ from the beginning of the Twenty-First Century in response to the growth of protracted displacement and dwindling support from international donors (Omata 2017, 3-4). Refugee self-reliance is typically defined within the humanitarian sphere as the ability to meet one’s needs without government or humanitarian aid (Jacobsen 2005). This is made extremely difficult for those living in places where it is typically illegal to work, like Nairobi, as I discussed in greater detail in Chapter One and Four. In the absence of empowering policy infrastructures and humanitarian aid, migrants in Nairobi must rely on other networks of support.

The term ‘self-reliance’ is somewhat deceiving, therefore, inaccurately implying that life for forcibly displaced migrants in a new setting is free from often-complex networks of dependencies or interdependencies between diverse actors, systems, and sites. While this chapter focuses on Nairobi as a receiving city, and localized actors in the ‘informal’ domain assisting irregular migrants, linkages across borders and through levels cannot be ignored. There are a multitude of actors who enable ‘self-reliance’ among refugees in the city. The heavy reliance on others within forced migration trajectories is alluded to by Engbersen and Broeders (2009), who state, ‘The unknown cities of illegal immigrants also feature numerous actors from the overworld: legal compatriots, employers, clergymen, lawyers, and public service workers, including police officials and mayors who sometimes turn a blind eye or assist illegal immigrants’ (868). Though this comment was issued in reference to South-North migration, it is not less accurate for South-South migration and settlement. This chapter illustrates this further with its discussion of the role of ‘social brokers’, who play a vital role in assisting the migrant community to overcome everyday challenges in the absence of state support.
Divine, one of two women working at the Angel Touch salon in downtown Nairobi, is a Congolese woman in her late 20s, with a long brown weave, round cheekbones, and wide-set eyes. She was wearing a gold-embroidered tuxedo jacket when I first met her. She speaks almost no English, so she would talk in Swahili for Dinah to translate. Originally from Kisangani in the Tshopo province in DRC, she has been in Nairobi for four years. She tells me that she is a self-taught hair stylist and learned the skill back home by watching others in hair salons. She is proud of her styling abilities and tells me, “It comes naturally- I’m not good at anything else”.

She said she came to Nairobi not knowing anyone beyond the family she arrived with, her husband, sister, and her two-year-old son. She is still orienting herself to life in Kenya, and when she has questions about life there, “like questions about paperwork”, she asks her Congolese co-workers, “because they arrived [in Kenya] before me. They probably had the same challenges, so they probably have the answers”. As well as having answers to her questions, “They keep me from being taken advantage of. They tell me what to say or not say, what to do, where to go and where to avoid”. She counts her fellow Congolese and Kenyan co-workers among her closest friends in Nairobi, though she is not content with such a small social network; “I’ve been in Nairobi for four years, and I still don’t have as many friends as I had back home,” she says. Part of the reason for this, she explains, is her busy schedule at the salon, where she works Monday to Saturday, leaving home at 5 am to open the salon at 7 a.m., and then closing the salon to return home between 6 and 8 p.m. With working so much and needing to take care of her son, she does not have much time to socialize.

Another reason may be her general suspicion of those beyond her small circle of family and colleagues. She tells me, “I don’t trust new people”. Though she may ask her colleagues for the occasional piece of advice, less now that she has been living in the city for four years, asking for advice is one thing, and trusting is another. She is wary of the intentions of others she does not know well: “I trust only my husband,” she tells me. “Even my close friends have abused my trust, so now I only trust him”.

Divine’s account captures themes that were prevalent within other interviews I conducted, of needing to depend upon others in a new place yet also great uncertainty in who to trust. She describes trust based upon kinship, but hints at how dependency and trust are matters of degrees. She trusts Congolese more than Kenyans, for example, and her Congolese workers more than
Congolese she does not know well; but she trusts her husband above everyone else. Her dependency upon her Congolese co-workers for advice and Emmanuel’s description of the salon as a knowledge hub for Congolese signifies the importance of people- and place-based connection building in the city.

The preceding chapter set the stage for further analyses of how Congolese migrants in the city live- and live well- in situations of precarity and informality. This chapter expands upon such discussions to explore how, within the contexts of extralegality described in the last chapter, non-state actors serve a crucial role in increasing access to knowledge, opportunities, and material support. I spoke about ‘hustling’ in the last chapter as a method of achieving relative self-sufficiency in contexts of widespread informality and restrictive labour laws. Yet the ‘self’ in ‘self-sufficiency’ belies the often widespread and complex systems of dependencies and interdependencies within migration networks- like the ones that Divine briefly referenced- as well as process of trust that make living in the city possible.

This chapter will continue by examining some of the intimate and embodied dimensions of trust among Congolese migrants in Nairobi. How do Congolese conceptualize the importance and nature of trust in the city? I will examine how trust and reliance is exercised within and beyond identity groups, with particular attention to the role of ‘intimate labour’ within the hair salon as fostering inter-group trust. The chapter will expand upon its definition of ‘social brokers’, exploring their roles and the socio-political contexts that create demand for their services. Following this, two case studies will be offered capturing different social brokers to provide empirical evidence for the chapter’s themes, both engaged in civil society in Nairobi’s Kabiria informal settlement.

The Matter of Trust

As previously mentioned, trust was a reoccurring theme throughout the narratives of my participants. It was often described in matters of degrees, rather than an absolute, and forged and maintained along lines crafted by moral obligation, kith and kinship ties, and shared experiences of hardship. Highly relevant to this study’s interest in how Congolese overcome daily challenges, trust emerged as a key factor in such efforts. It also speaks to the thesis’s guiding question of the
capacity of the city itself to aid Congolese in navigating hardships of overcoming daily challenges, as key urban geographies are both a producer and product of trust.

I asked some individuals how they themselves would define trust; one woman responded “kuaminia mutu”, or “it’s believing in someone or in God to believe they will be there to help you”. Trust is important, she said, because “it makes living together easier, especially when you are a foreigner you need to trust other people to live with them”. Another young woman, twenty-seven years old and studying in Nairobi, said she defines trust as “someone I can tell my secrets and talk to freely.” It is important, she said, because “without trust we can’t rely on others or even respect their opinions; we need a level of trust to live with people knowing they won’t harm us or to even work together we need to trust each other to some extent”. To these two women, trust means a belief in the dependability of God and/or humans to help and not harm them.

Some spoke in extremes, highlighting high levels of distrust, often born from bad experiences of being taken advantage of. Jolina, a 25-year-old woman with Congolese parents but born and raised in an informal settlement in the Dagoretti area on the outskirts of Nairobi, for example, told me emphatically, “I don’t trust anyone.” This was because, she said, “especially since my best friend, who was a guy, did something bad to me”. Though she did not provide more details on this event she referenced, it was, she explained, why she dates girls. Her experience of losing trust in someone close to her compounded the lack of trust in others around her; she said that the matter of her bisexuality was a sensitive topic that had caused tensions among her family and friends. “I’m getting judged by some of my friends, and it affects me a lot”, she said. Her father knows about it “but I don’t know how he feels about it”, and her mother “took me to a counselor to be talked to.”

For others, the issue of trust (or lack thereof) is more intrinsically tied to being a newcomer. A 26-year-old male from Kinshasa who came to Nairobi to study at a university told me that one of the biggest challenges after arriving in the city was “knowing who you can trust. You don’t know people, they approach you, but you don’t know if you can trust them’. Of course, confusion around whom to trust after arriving in a new country and/or city is nothing unique to Congolese nationals in Nairobi. Yet there are certain ‘othering’ characteristics non-Kenyans experience that may make them more susceptible to ‘being taken advantage of’, as Divine put it. Language and accent were frequently highlighted as characteristics that caused anxieties around being ‘outed’ and taken advantage of. ‘Congolese’ fashion, as well, was a ‘tell’, however this was also used to the
advantage of participants when leveraging ‘otherness’ was socially or financially beneficial, as will be the focus of Chapter Seven.

Mistrust of others, particularly when it comes to economic exchanges, is an issue not just among foreigners, but among Kenyan citizens as well. I had heard of the city referred to by Kenyans and non-Kenyans alike as ‘Nairobbery’, referencing the city’s infamy for petty theft and corruption. This section on trust takes a different approach to the issue of extralegality than in the preceding chapter. Whereas both consider Congolese’s interpretations and methods of navigating the ‘grey space’ that exists between legal and illegal, the last chapter applies a more positive lens to unregulated cash transactions and bribery, suggesting that they enable migrants to circumvent restrictive labour policies. Here, I focus more on the darker side of un/under regulated economies to offer narratives from Congolese that demonstrate the anxieties that arise from suspicions of being taken advantage of. The two perspectives are complementary, not mutually exclusive. Anxiety, hope, trust, mistrust, uncertainty and innovation can co-exist, and do, within the life worlds of migrants in the city.

Matatus, the ubiquitous minivans used for public transportation in Nairobi, were specifically mentioned by several Congolese when they listed places where they needed to be extra wary of extortion. One individual cited an incident as one of his ‘hardest’ experiences in Nairobi, the constant not-knowing and discrimination on public transportation; “I pay too much for matatus—when they hear my accent, they know I am a foreigner and charge too much.”

I heard similar complaints from other Congolese; matatus are the most common and affordable means of transportation in Nairobi, and the lack of regulation (or at least that which is abided by) around fares makes for a frustrating experience for passengers. I spoke in Chapter Four about the ‘hustling’ culture in Nairobi; matatu ‘touts’ (fare-collectors) are considered by many to be big players in the ‘hustling economy’.

While living in Nairobi I became close friends with a Kenyan named John, a former tout, who offered some interesting insights into the art of the matatu hustle. I had spent countless hours over

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32 The matatu industry has become more regulated over the years, and most post standard fares on the wall with set fees based on journey length. Not all matatus have such signage, however, drivers do not always stick to ‘official’ pick-up or drop-off zones, and touts will frequently determine ad hoc fares. I experienced fare extortion first-hand multiple times, particularly when the touts did not recognize me and were not aware that I knew the correct fare. In these cases, refusing to pay the raised fare can be met with either acquiescence or hostility from the tout.
the course of my fieldwork watching these young men work, with little else to do during the agonizingly slow commutes. I would note how they would delicately fold bills in half lengthwise and drape them between their middle fingers on one hand, and loudly rap on the window with a coin held between their knuckles to let the driver know when to pull over to drop off or pick up customers. I would also note how, when passengers would pass up their fare, the touts would sometimes frown and shake their head, handing out their palm for more. The passenger would eye the faded fare list taped to the wall (if there was one), and either shrug and pass along more money or adamantly refuse. At this point the tout would either argue back or shrug nonchalantly and look the other way. I asked John if he had ever seen other touts charging more from foreigners, just because they were foreign. “Sure,” he replied casually, “all the time. I never liked doing it, but everyone else did it. I remember one time there was a couple, and they wanted to go somewhere not too far away. The rate was 100 KSh, but I overheard another tout asking for 500 KSh. I scolded him and called the couple over to my mat [slang for matatu’]. I only charged them 300.”

“Even though the going rate was 100 KSh?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Well, they were going to pay 500.”

Petty extortion is not necessarily rooted in anger or hatred of foreigners; as evidenced by John’s account, everyone is trying ‘hustle’ to make a living, and foreigners just happen to make easier targets. This is not to say that extortion is unique to non-Kenyans, as the tout explained; “Passengers don’t trust touts, and touts don’t trust passengers.” He said this a generalization, not specific to migrants. Compared to the anger and frustration I saw from Congolese when describing how they often extorted on matatus, John described his methods with a shrug and a smile. It was like “a game”, he said, and passengers were welcome to play. He explained, “Like when I owed change- you never give change right away, always wait a while because they might forget how much you owe them- sometimes I’d pretend to forget. Then it’s like a game- you’re looking at the passenger, and they’re looking at you, and if they don’t say anything, then maybe you just made an extra 10 bob (slang for shillings).” I ‘played’ this ‘game’ myself many times, particularly on new routes where the touts did not recognize me or know that I was familiar with the fare system. In this case, I would hold eye contact with the tout and hold out a flat palm, waiting for my extra change. There were times, however, when I could not be certain; the tout would shake his head and insist that there was a ‘fare change’. This was not unheard of; during my time in Nairobi the
government instituted a crack-down on all *matatus* that did not have seatbelts installed. This pulled a significant number of vehicles pulled off the road until they could get the belts installed,\(^{33}\) and as a result, *matatu* fares spiked. I could never be sure, however, if the tout was being honest or if I was being ripped off, and this was always frustrating. Regardless of whether attempts to earn a few extra bob was a practice employed against all passengers, by virtue of them being in the seat and not by their ethnicity or status, as John claimed, experiences of price extortion on *matatus* remained a source of deep frustration and mistrust among many of my participants and belief that they were being singled out because they had a foreign accent.\(^{34}\)

In the last chapter I had discussed the culture of ‘hustling’ as a (largely informal) strategy for economic gain within difficult contexts. This chapter takes a deeper look at the role that trust plays within such social and economic interactions. Wacquant examines what he calls the ‘social art of hustling’, describing it as ‘a field of activities that have in common the fact that they require mastery of a particular type of symbolic capital, namely, the ability to manipulate others, to inveigle and deceive, if need be by joining violence to chicanery and charm, in the pursuit of immediate pecuniary gain’ (1998, seen in Collier 2016, 166-67). Though this is positioned within the American context, the same connotations of hustling for personal gain exist within Nairobi. This illustrates the catch-22; many of the Congolese I asked admit to hustling themselves, yet do not appreciate being hustled. It is likely that not all hustling is based in deception; as was discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four on ‘hustling’ in Congolese’s own words, there is hustling ‘to get by’ via engaging in informal business practices, and there is hustling by taking advantage of others (like *matatu* touts driving up fares for riders with a foreign accent). Yet whatever the form hustling takes, it is infused with connotations of risk-taking, cleverness, and competition that is both born from and births uncertainty and suspicion.

\(^{33}\) As a comical sidenote, some of the *matatus* that I rode deemed roadworthy had seatbelts, but they were not actually attached to anything. Whenever a police vehicle would pass by, customers would synchronously reach for the strip of fabric and lay it across their laps.

\(^{34}\) Distrust and a general dislike of *matatu* drivers and touts is common among Kenyans, as well. Mutongi (2006) has an interesting article that explores changing public perceptions of *matatu* workers over the past several decades, shifting from viewing them as savvy entrepreneurs in the 1970s to ‘thugs’ today.
Trust and Identity Groups

For many of those I spoke to, trust is being able to believe in the ability of another to help them in times of need, and to not harm them. Who does one trust, then, in the city of ‘Nairobbery’? Having explored how trust is an important social factor enabling one to make a new life in the city, this section explores various subjectivities that shape patterns of trust, interdependence, and obligation among Congolese. I will first examine relationships with other Congolese, underpinned by trust and obligation, followed by an analysis of how ‘intimate labour’ with Kenyan citizens both produce and rely upon mutual trust.

Trust among Congolese

Divine, the Congolese salon worker described at the beginning of this chapter, referred to kinship-based trust (“I trust only my husband”). She also refers to dependency on Congolese co-workers, not necessarily because of shared nationality but shared circumstances (“they probably had the same challenges, so they probably have the answers”). Transmigration scholars often refer to the existence of ‘bounded solidarity’ among social networks, or the strengthening of social ties necessitated by contexts of displacement (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993).

Different levels of trust are needed depending on the nature of travel and arrival in Nairobi, particularly if migration was due to displacement or not. The university students I interviewed, for example, chose to study in Kenya and had less need for trust in individuals than compared to the asylum-seekers and refugees I met. The consequences of trust being abused is different, as well, as the stakes are far higher for those living in Nairobi illegally. A 24-year-old woman, originally from Goma and living in Nairobi awaiting status determination, said that she found it difficult to navigate her way through the city, and “the currency was very confusing.” She said, “I realized money was just going because the people who changed the money lied about the exchange rates.” Furthermore, she said that she found the weather was very cold and depended on others to cope; “I had to borrow warm clothes from other people around me.” A 22-year-old Congolese woman in Nairobi for five years, and originally from Bukavu who had left “due to the war” to go to Tanzania before Kenya said that she first relied on her aunt for shelter and food upon arriving in Nairobi, because “the only person I knew was my aunt”. She stayed with her a week, and then she said she relied on new friends she had made at church.
Coping with life’s hardships drive the “making and remaking of ethnic communities”, resulting in the “differentiation of co-ethnic refugees on the basis of their affiliations or identity groups back home” (Al-Sharmani 2004, 2). Studies of Congolese community networks in Johannesburg by Nzinga-losango (2006) and Monche (2007) demonstrate how they rely heavily upon networks of “Congolese brothers”; other Congolese migrants, notably family and friends, help with finding work and accommodation, locating places of worship, signposting to NGOs, and help with processing documentation. Several individuals expressed a reciprocal trust along family lines; A 27-year-old student from Goma, in Nairobi for seven years, when I asked who trusts her, she said, “My sisters trust me so much because am their ride or die in many situations.” Upon asking for clarification on what she meant by this, she replied, “This is a kind of relationship where you know you got each other’s back. Like they will be there for you and you will be there for them and in the event they are not there is a valid and honest reason why they were not there.” Yet kinship was not a guarantee of trust for everyone; one woman told me, for example, “I do not trust my family members, because they have told me many lies”. Yet when I asked if anyone trusts her, her response signified an assumption of trust and mutual support based on kinship ties; “I cannot tell who trusts me because I have no husband or children maybe then they would trust me because they would love me.”

I frequently heard self-identification with the plural ‘Congolese’ when my participants would describe their identity associations (e.g. “I dress Congolese”). Despite the country being home to as many as 250 tribes (Tshilolo et al., 2009, 35), I did not hear many references among my participants to tribal or ethnic distinctions. A 27-year-old male, originally from Goma who has been in Nairobi for four years on a student visa, told me that within the Kenyan context, he considers tribe less relevant. Where he comes from, he told me, “Tribes don’t mix in marriage”, and that “these traditions are so deeply embedded in people- they are passed down from generation to generation. People learn them from a young age.” In Kenya, however, he tells me that “When Congolese come here, you forget the tribe, you’re just Congolese. You all came from the same place, and that’s all that matters.” Not everyone felt the same; When I asked her if she trusts Congolese over Kenyans in Nairobi, a 24-year-old woman from Goma responded that “It depends on how long I know them. It doesn’t matter if you’re Congolese or Kenyan or whatever as long as you don’t talk bad about me or spread rumours.” She added, however, “I trust my community a bit more because we have shared problems and we are united by patriotism.” She also said, “I trust
myself and family, because Kenyans are thieves. Not all of them, but when they know you don’t understand the language, they con and rob you.”

Some scholars speak of a sense of ‘ethnic obligation’ from within a particular migrant community, which drives service provision and support (Gold 2004; Wilson 1996). When I asked Dinah if she felt obligated to financially support Congolese family and friends, she quickly replied, “of course.” Her fast response carried a caveat, however; “they have to be close”. She elaborated upon expectations of this support being mutual and the risk of it not being reciprocated, illustrating the downsides to being depended on. Dinah explained the proclivities of young Congolese in the city who liked to curate a successful image on social media as at risk of creating unrealistic expectations from their own family and friends who wanted their financial support. As we rode a matatu together, she pulled out her phone and started scrolling through her Instagram feed, showing images of extravagantly dressed young men and women, often posing in shopping malls or in front of high-end cars. She used the word ‘Barbie’ to describe these young women.

“Why Barbie?” I asked.

She laughed. “The Barbie doll never works, she’s always being carried around. You ever see Barbie work or cook? If you’re rich, you live a Western life. Posh life, like in the music videos. You want 20 cars because Chris Brown [a popular American musician] does.” The nickname ‘Barbie’, this symbol of Western (traditionally Caucasian) success and hyper-femininity reflects themes around globalism and popular culture that will be discussed in further detail in Chapter Seven on fashion consumerism and the good life. Dinah continued to explain the downside of affluence, real or perceived, and perhaps one of the pitfalls of having ‘the good life’ (or at least advertising it on social media).

“You don’t want your friends calling you a Barbie,” she warned, “because maybe they’ll get jealous, and if they think you have money, they’ll start asking for it. Then you’ll become a money lender. You might be independent, but then your friends will become dependent on you, trying to get that good life.”

I asked Paul, a 26-year-old Congolese university student in Nairobi, about the ties between dependency and trust. He told me that when people borrow money, “you have to trust them, that they’ll repay you.” Though he said that he did feel an obligation to lend money to his ‘close’ family
and friends, he added with a laugh, “If they’re Nigerian, know that you’ll never see your money again.”

Paul’s response highlights both trust based on kith and kin-based ties, and suspicion grounded in nationality. This was not the first time I heard the stereotype of Nigerians as untrustworthy; this suspicion was shared by several other Congolese I spoke with, as well as Kenyans. I took many Uber trips in Nairobi, particularly when I needed to get to a destination quick, and I was struck by what seemed to be a common practice of drivers calling my phone immediately after I booked a trip. I asked a female Kenyan Uber driver about why this was, and she said she liked to hear the passenger’s voice before agreeing to pick them up because it gave her a “vibe” about the person. “If I hear a Nigerian accent,” she said, “I cancel the trip. I don’t trust them.”

Distrust of other migrants seemed to be fairly reserved for Somalis and Nigerians among the Congolese I asked; friendship and support networks, if not absolute trust, was commonly forged with other nationalities. For example, the 27-year-old student studying theology in the city told me that, because his entire family is still in Goma, except for one sister in Arusha, and due to the high cost of calling them by telephone (they do not have access to reliable Internet), he seeks support from those he has befriended in Nairobi. “I go to my [Kenyan] pastor for help,” he says, but also “I’ve made some other international friends, like Burundians, because we have the same challenges. We help each other.” These challenges, he explained, included the unexpectedly expensive cost of living in Nairobi and the difficulty of finding affordable housing. He also cited struggles relating to having to learn Kenyan cultural norms and local vernacular.

One notable example of a support network based on shared nationality that I came across in Nairobi was the Federation of Congolese Abroad (FCA). Having heard from a member of KCC about a “Congolese radio station” in ‘South C’, a neighborhood in the South of Nairobi near Wilson Airport, I paid a visit the hosting organization. It is located in a large two-story complex barely visible behind a tall stone wall, a large vinyl sign on the outside of the second floor spelling out FCA and listing its services in thick letters beneath. Inside, I was given a tour by Peter, a Congolese staff member, who introduced me to the administrative staff on the first floor and showed me production rooms upstairs. We spoke in a room adjacent to the ‘green screen room’ where a TV show for Congolese in the city was filmed. Two cameras on tripods were set up in front of what
looked like a green bedsheet hung from the ceiling. The recording studio featured soundproofed walls and a round table with three large microphones protruding from the centre.

27 years old and born in Kindu in Maniema province, Peter was taken to Burundi as an infant in 1997 because of the war. He has been in Nairobi now for 20 years and speaks Swahili and Sheng\textsuperscript{35} fluently. He listed the services that the FCA provides; “it helps Congolese connect with government services, helps them with visas, connects them with embassies, runs youth programs like the FCA Football club, holds cultural events and concerts, provides language classes, and has a TV, radio and social media platform”. The head office is in Paris, and the Nairobi office had been operating for two years by the time I interviewed him, employing 12 staff members, all Congolese.

Peter explained that the FCA makes its money from membership plans purchased by Congolese in the city, many of them “refugees”. Members can subscribe for the “executive” level, at 3000 KSh a year (approx. USD 30), or “basic”, at 300 KSh (approx. USD 3) a year. The Executive level offers members “first class service” and free access to FCA events. In addition to access to cultural events, Peter says, both levels provide members with a card that has a number for the Nairobi office that they can call at any time “if they have problems with the police”. He estimates that the Nairobi FCA has over 1,500 members. The most common thing members ask for information and guidance on is ‘documentation’, he says. “Without that, you can’t get other services, like opening a bank account or getting a SIM card.”

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fcart.png}
\caption{A man holds a Federation of Congolese Abroad membership card. Source: Author’s photo.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{35} Swahili slang.
The sense I got from Peter was that the FCA was a valuable resource for Congolese—
including refugees, both documented and non-documenteds—in Nairobi. With over 1,500 members, 
at least according to Peter, and a staff of 12, it seemed to me that the organization was an established 
and well-utilized resource. Leaving the building to catch our matatu back, however, Dinah scoffed. 
She had never heard of the FCA, and her complaint was on the accessibility for the very people 
they claimed to help. “That radio show is for the rich,” she scoffed. “They aren’t even on the radio-
they’re on an app or Facebook livestream. But not every refugee can afford a smart phone or buy 
data to livestream it”. When I asked a manager at the KCC about this, he agreed with Dinah. “Of 
course,” he said, “very few refugees can listen to the Federation streaming, very few.” This 
was why he said that the KCC was discussing the idea of hosting their own radio show that would be 
aired on the radio, and in theory be more accessible to low-income refugees. This concern around 
accessibility indicates a converging of trust and support based not just along ethnic lines, but 
perhaps class as well, and illustrates the capacity of support networks to reinforce structural 
inequalities.

**Spaces of Trust**

Shared space is vital for the creation of ‘communities of trust’, described by Jabareen and Carmon 
(2010) in their study of Congolese refugees in Kampala, Uganda, as ‘a socio-spatial setting in 
which substantial relationships of trust among people exist, and in which people feel sheltered and 
safe because they do not perceive other community members as posing them a risk’ (447-448). As 
I witnessed during my research, kinyozis, churches, and community centres all provide these socio-
spatial ‘communities of trust’ (Lyytinen 2017). *Kinyozis* are unique ‘communities of trust’ in 
Nairobi in that they create opportunities for unusually high degrees of physical intimacy and trust-
building between Congolese and Kenyans. Though there are many other spaces of intergroup 
interaction within the city—including churches and community centers, both of which I explore in 
my study, hair salons require a much greater degree of physical contact. Hair styling in Nairobi 
creates and sustains particular cross-cultural relations that exchange intimacy for not just money, 
but trust, as well.

The hair salon where I ‘apprenticed’ in downtown Nairobi is an example of an important ‘cultural 
enclave’ or ‘microspace’ (Lyytinen 2017). Alexander (2003), in his ethnography of the African
American barbershop, describes such spaces as “as a site for cultural exchange and maintenance” (120). The sinks are a particularly revered space within the salon; as soon as the client sits, they close their eyes, and conversation between them and the stylist politely ceases. At Angel Touch I found the process mesmerizing to watch; the stylist’s strong fingers working in and out of their clients’ hair with such rigour, followed by a delicate wiping around the edge of the forehead and ears with the edge of a towel. This is a place where trust and dependency collide for Congolese staff and Kenyan clientele. ‘Doing hair’ is intrinsically social and requires a great deal of trust and reliance on others. While hair can be done in the comfort of ones’ home,36 there are many reasons to visit a kinyozi. More specialized services are typically offered here, and there is the expectation that the salon workers have greater skills and experience to do a professional job. Another reason is the consideration of personal safety. Hair relaxer products often come with warnings on the side against “unprofessional” application to avoid bodily injury (e.g., eye injuries, chemical burns on the scalp if left on too long). The hot tongs used for curling hair, if not properly, can also lead to burns of the scalp or neck. The risks are high, and one must have a high degree of faith in the competency of the stylist to carefully handle these supplies and tools.

In tandem with having trust that ones’ stylist will not cause physical harm to the hair or body, the client must have faith in the competency of the stylist and feel comfortable in exercising a high degree of vulnerability in the chair. During hair washing, for example, the client must lean back and close their eyes for a few minutes, completely trusting the stylist to keep their clothing dry, apply the right amount of product, and rinse properly. Another reason having ones’ hair done requires trust and vulnerability is because of the high degree of exposure. When replacing a weave, for example, the weave must be removed from the head, exposing the braids and scalp beneath. When hair has been tightly woven for several weeks, there is a certain build-up of naturally-occurring oils and often dandruff created by dry skin. This is one of the reasons why the washing process is such an important component of having ones’ hair done. The physical exposure necessitates emotional vulnerability. It means that whoever is touching your hair and scalp can be trusted to be courteous and non-judgmental during such an intimate act. The hair cut or styling

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36 Indeed, many women and girls in Nairobi have their hair braided by female family members or pay for someone to come to their home to do it. This allows for a greater degree of privacy and is either free (as in the case of braiding being done by a family member or friend) or much cheaper than visiting a salon.
requires even more trust, and one of the key reasons why so many of my participants told me they were loyal to the same stylist.

In the case of Angel Touch Salon, it was unique to other spaces in the city which enabled or promoted Congolese-Kenyan interaction, because here, Congolese were in positions of power and control ‘over’ Kenyans, requiring Kenyans to trust them with their hair and bodies. The intimacy of hair styling may generate deeper, more complex interactions and relationships between Congolese and Kenyans that goes beyond the intimacy-for-money transaction, and implications of the trust and intimacy required for and created by the client-customer relationship within the hair styling sector take on a new poignancy when viewed through the lens of refugee-‘host’ relationships in Nairobi. I borrow from Hart’s (1988) definition of ‘reliance’ here, as opposed to ‘dependency’; according to him, ‘reliance’ “expresses complete confidence”, and to rely on something, or someone, “is to be tied to it, bound” (187). This is an accurate description of what I witnessed at the hair salon; the literal binding of client to stylist, their two bodies intricately connected through rituals of washing, shaving, weaving, and braiding. Here, I would offer, Hart’s distinction between ‘reliance’ and ‘dependency’ becomes germane to the topic at hand; reliance becomes dependency, according to him, when there is no choice. I would argue that both exist within the four walls of the salon in terms of the client-stylist relationship; the Kenyan clients, particularly, are not without choice when it comes to picking a salon. One cannot walk down a street in Nairobi without being within stone’s throw of a hair salon. The clients of Angel Touch chose to come here, knowing that the stylists are Congolese. To sit down at a chair in a salon and hand over the fate of your hair (and scalp) to the stylist standing behind you requires what Hart (1988) would call ‘complete confidence’ (or ‘reliance’). As soon as the hot tongs, the scissors, or the relaxer chemicals approach ones’ head, however, the client loses choice in the matter, and reliance turns to dependency. With roles reversed, the stylists are “bound to the clients’ discretion beyond the walls of the salon, where they could, if they so pleased, cause trouble with police officers or city council workers. The minute services are rendered, the Congolese staff become wholly dependent on the civility of the clients.

Intimate labourers such as hair stylists are often holders of “knowledge and attention that are not widely available to third persons”, their insights gained from those that they provide services to including “shared secrets, interpersonal rituals, bodily information, awareness of personal
vulnerability and shared memory of embarrassing situations” (Zelizer 2005, 14). The hours spent in the chair promotes a social familiarity between the two, and I would sit and listen as the Congolese stylists would chat with their Kenyan customers in Swahili about everything from weather, to politics, and family (Dinah would translate bits and pieces for me). Because customers have “their” stylist who they return to exclusively every few weeks, the stylist becomes very familiar with the lives of their regular customers. The physical layout of the salon also promotes conversation between stylist and customer; the customers’ chair faces away from the stylist so for nearly the entire duration of their time in the salon they do not make face-to-face contact, creating “the illusion of distance” that can make customers more comfortable to feel personal details (Meyers 2012). Though the physical closeness that comes with hands on bodies and in hair shrinks the psychological and social distance (Anzaldúa 2012, 20).

Of course, the importance of trust ran both ways; the Congolese staff had to trust that their Kenyan clientele would not cause trouble for them with the authorities. This was illustrated in Chapter Four with the hair salon’s manager’s story of the disgruntled Kenyan customer breaking his trust and reporting the salon to the police after she was upset with the quality of service and using his and his staff’s foreignness as a tool against them to collect restitution.

Social Brokers

Having explored some of narratives and practices surrounding trust and interdependencies among Congolese in Nairobi, I will now take a closer look at the role of key individuals and organizations in shaping and utilizing these processes. These ‘social brokers’, as I refer to them here, operate within complex social and economic networks to enable and/or disable migrants’ access to material and immaterial goods and services, while also benefiting themselves in various ways.

Brokerage is a broad term, and its role has been analyzed to designate different things across a myriad of disciplines. Within migration studies, specifically, the term is commonly used to denote individuals engaged in illicit processes, orchestrating illegal and unregulated cross-border transportation including labor migrant movements (Arimoto, Machikita, & Tsubota, 2018; Fernandez, 2013; Heckmann, 2004), human smuggling (Kyle and Liang, 2001; Pastore, Monzini and Sciortino, 2006); international human organ trade (Harrison, 1999), sex trafficking (Macklin,
2006; Poudel and Carryer, 2000) and human trafficking (Molland, 2012; Renshaw, 2016). While there is a growing body of literature on the legal frameworks surrounding and operations of human smugglers and traffickers (Arimoto, Machikita, & Tsubota, 2018; Fernandez, 2013; Vogt 2016), this chapter is concerned with the lesser-explored area of the social and economic mechanisms that occur to assist individuals to ‘settle’ in a new place after arrival, not within the traditionally-understood/defined category of smuggling or trafficking, yet also still outside of conventional migration processes. This study offers a more positive approach to the relationship between network members and brokers than has previously been described, joining others, such as Vogt (2016), to frame intermediaries not just as illicit or hardship-profiteers, but also as community members engaged in empathetic, intimate, and innovative interpersonal relationships. Similarly, Clayton Boeyink (2021) examines brokers, or *madalali* as they are locally known, in Tanzanian refugee camps, exploring how camp inhabitants appreciate the role they play in enabling the liquidation of food aid for cash.37

This chapter defines and frames the ‘social broker’ as an *advocate* for the Congolese urban community, borrowing from Magadzire et al.’s (2013) analysis of brokers connecting disparate groups in South Africa with health care services. The word stems from the old French *avocat*, meaning ‘lawyer’, borrowed from the Latin *advocare*, meaning ‘to call to one’s aid’. Just as *avocats* are monetized positions of aid, so too can social brokers be paid for their services. To be clear, the term ‘broker’ is one I use as it is well-explored in social science literature, yet it was rarely used by my participants, at least not in the way I use it in this chapter. I assigned the label to individuals I witnessed or were described by participants as having a prominent social function in their lives in Nairobi, including ‘pastor’, ‘manager’, and ‘community leader’. In fact, the term ‘broker’, according to one young Congolese woman, refers to a land broker, specifically. More than this, this broker figure “is always a bad thing” she says, because “it’s mostly believed they are scammers”. When I pressed her for whether there was a word in Swahili (as this is her first language) for the type of individual I had in mind, she hesitated, and eventually suggested a word she got from her French-speaking Congolese uncle: *commissionaire*. Interestingly, this label explicitly refers to the exchange of a fee, or ‘commission’. The term did not have a negative

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37Importantly, Boeyink positions *madalali* within complex hierarchies of power and influence within camp economies and politics, bringing attention to the heterogeneity among ‘brokers’ and the different public responses (often negative) that are evoked depending on the broker’s level of engagement.
connotation for everyone; one university student used the word to describe someone who connects him to designer clothing for sale, acting as a sales intermediary. I asked my assistant, Dinah, what she might suggest the closest equivalent to ‘social broker’ may be. In addition to the French commissionaire, she suggested connecteur- though also French, she said that she knew of Lingala-speakers (including herself) to use this to denote an individual who “connects people”. I asked others what they would call a member of the community who connects them with services and information: One woman, originally from Bukavu and in Nairobi for five years, used the word “muchuruzi”, Congolese Swahili slang for “a trader of sorts”. A 24-year-old man originally from Goma called this individual “mutu wangu wa maana”, Swahili for “my personal person”. A 27-year-old university graduate, originally from Goma and in Nairobi for seven years, used the term “msaidizi”, Swahili for ‘assistant’. These terms- connector, trader, personal person, assistant- all imply having a relationship with an individual who has the position and capacity to link others with relevant services, goods, and/or information.

Returning to this chapter’s earlier discussion of trust, social capital theory would suggest that building and maintaining trust is crucial for brokers because it is intrinsically linked to their strength of position, which is access to resources and information (Burt 2004). The absence of trust among network members is also a precondition for brokerage, according to Marsden (1982), who defines brokers as “intermediary actors who facilitate transactions between actors lacking access to or trust in one another”. Emmanuel, at Angel Touch Salon, is an example of this intermediary actor to serve as the go-between in his anecdote of being confronted by the female customer and police officers at the salon. Fluent in Swahili and in a position of authority (salon manager, cousin of the owner), the absence of trust between the customer, police officers and salon workers necessitates his role as an intermediary. This is someone who understands the expectations and processes of authorities in ways that the other staff may not, and as such is positioned to be able to navigate the blurred ‘rules’ discussed in the previous chapter.

**Social Brokers: Why they are needed and what they do**

In contributing to one of this thesis’s guiding questions of how Congolese overcome challenges to achieving ‘the good life’, this section takes a closer look at the role that social brokers play in such processes. First, I will discuss the conditions that create demand for local intermediaries and the
various roles they occupy, followed with a case study of civil society actors to contextualize discussion. I will provide examples of real social brokers I met within the Congolese migrant ‘community’, including Romain, a member of the leadership team at the Kabiria Community Centre, and Pastor Alain, the lead pastor of a Kabiria-based ‘refugee church’.

Localized support systems, as operationalized by social brokers, are often born from conditions of exclusion (Gold 2005, 262). The increase in restrictive migration policies around the world has created the grounds for the creation of more nonconventional migration service providers, both formal and informal, legal, and illegal (Engbersen and Broeders 2009). In Ronald S. Burt’s (2005) exploration of brokerage and social capital, he writes,

> The formal organization deals with accountability; Everything else flows through the informal: advice, coordination, cooperation friendship, gossip, knowledge, trust. Informal relations have always been with us, they have always mattered. What is new is the range of activities in which they now matter, and the emerging clarity we have about how they create advantage for certain people at the expense of others.

Chapter Four explored how informal economic processes and interactions with public officials enable circumvention of restrictive labour laws. In Nairobi, such restrictive immigration policies that prevent migrants from accessing livelihoods and social services lead to increased engagement of civil society actors, including churches, associations, and community-based organizations. Many of those that are oriented towards migrants are also led and/or supported by migrants. In continuation with the preceding chapter’s investigation of extralegality, this chapter explores the role of intermediaries in settlement processes which are also situated within a ‘decentered approach to regulation’ (Black, 2002; Fernandez, 2013), a framework that considers how the realities of migrants are shaped not only by governments, but also by other social actors. As an illustration of this, one day Romain, a manager at the KCC, introduced me to John, a community-outreach staff member at the Kenyan office of the Centre for Victims of Torture, an international non-profit that provides direct care for victims of torture and advocates for human rights. John tells me he can only access migrants through the referrals of community leaders, such as Romain, and after community consultations he speaks on the behalf of migrants in his monthly communications with the UNHCR.
My examination of the role of intermediaries within the lives of Congolese in Nairobi is also an example of ‘counter-mapping’ (Peluso, 1995), or the questioning and reconceptualizing of power and resource allocation (Hodgson and Shroeder 2002, 80). Though typically a cartography practice where physical boundaries and resources are re-examined from the ‘bottom-up’, lessons can be drawn from Tazzioli and Garelli’s (2019) application to migrants, whereby they use counter-mapping to challenge the ‘state-gaze on migration’. Beyond “seeing differently...seeing more” (italics in original text) (398), they posit, it is about knowledge production surrounding non-linear, temporal, or static forms of mobility and governance not represented in geopolitical maps (Ibid.).

KCC, in a physical sense, has made efforts to put itself on the map, both in the figurative and in the literal sense. It is not segregated from the street by one of the tall barbed-wire topped walls that hide so many of the other buildings around Nairobi. It sits open and exposed to the flow of buses, tuk tuks, motorbikes and foot traffic that choke the dusty street in front of it. From their balcony hangs a long vinyl poster advertising its name and services offered: “in partnership with Federation of Congolese Abroad, training in Lingala, French languages and various skills, youth talents harnessing & Promotion, Community and Social Sensitisation, Awareness & Support, Welcome!” The organization’s address is also written out in full, along with a website URL, phone number, and email address. The organization’s visibility expands far beyond the neighbourhood perimeters; the organisation has its own social media presence, complete with a Facebook and Instagram page, and, as George, one of the managers, told me proudly, their name on Google Maps. I asked him why this was important to him. “Because now anyone can find us,” he said, matter-of-factly. Out of curiosity, after our conversation I Google’d the organisation. There it was. I was surprised; few organizations and businesses in Nairobi’s informal settlements found themselves literally mapped out, swallowed up instead into the grey digital expanses of uncharted spaces.38 At the KCC office I asked a young man behind the front desk about the process of being mapped. He told me it came about from a partnership two years back between Google and a Nairobi-based company called OkHi. OkHi’s website describes their mission as simply “Be included”. The website fails to describe how, exactly, they go about charting people and places; the site’s minimalism hinting at a millennial start-up likely sporting bean bag chairs in the lobby.

38 Despite the physical and digital visibility of the KCC, I made the personal decision to change the name of the organization to ensure the privacy of the members I spoke with, many of whom live in Nairobi with a ‘grey’ legal status.
A sentence under their mission statement resonates with me, however; “without a physical address”, it says simply, “you are not included in the world”.39

In addition to putting KCC on a map, the management team at KCC, three Congolese refugees (self-identified), have created an organization that widens humanitarian resource allocation and access to services for migrants who may otherwise be beyond the humanitarian or state ‘gaze’. As well as offering services for members which include tailoring workshops for single mothers, free English and Swahili classes, dance class, and mixed-media training (sound and video recording), the KCC also plays a pivotal role in arranging for members to be linked with wider systems of support and representation. KCC is an example of a community ‘hub’ that provides a centralized receiving point for information that needs to be disseminated among the migrant community (Easton-Calabria 201, 72) by aligning them with international organizations. The door to the office of KCC is covered in notices from refugee-serving organizations such as the UNHCR, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and International Rescue Committee (IRC). The free WiFi the centre provides also enables access to transnational human connection and information; a row of youth would perennially sit in coloured plastic lawn chairs lining a balcony, all on their mobile phones using the free Internet connection to communicate with family and friends, both back in DRC and those resettled abroad.

Dependencies are often viewed by scholars and the refugee regime through a binary lens, as in one is either independent or dependent, but never both. Hart (1988) posits that dependency is reliance (implying a ‘total confidence’) in the absence of choice (187). Regardless of the degree of choice at play, this does not negate agency, and dependencies should be viewed as an individual’s abilities for resourcefulness and resiliency. ‘Coping’ with trying circumstances may be seen as the capacity at which individuals “can purchase or leverage care for themselves through their set of dependencies—both formal and informal” (Easton-Calabria and Herson 2019, 15). Dependencies go both ways, interdependencies between broker and brokered fueled by trust in mutual benefits

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39 This is not the first mapping exercise to take place in an informal settlement in Nairobi, perhaps the most publicized being the ‘Map Kibera’ project. Starting in 2009, the community-based initiative was aimed to use mapping as a tool to remedy the omission of its inhabitants from mass communications and political representation. Utilizing the free, open-platform OpenStreetMap and open-source GIS software to permit citizens themselves to place general features and specialty services on an accessible map, the Map Kibera model has since expanded to two other Nairobi informal settlements, Mathare and Mukuru.
created by the relationship. Within the context of Nairobi’s migrant community, benefits for brokers include both material and immaterial payoffs.

These individuals and organizations provide numerous services to the migrant community include linking them with opportunities (most notably jobs and accommodation), services (i.e. language classes, free Wifi) and resources, both material (i.e. food and clothing) and immaterial (i.e. spiritual guidance, knowledge of documentation needed and where to acquire it). These brokers can be both nationals and migrants; this chapter will focus on the latter, as the general focus of the thesis is Congolese in Nairobi. Their motivations are pluralistic and complex; they engage with migrants for both moral and economic reasons, though the line between the two is not always clear. While there is material gain from being a broker (e.g. acquiring membership fees or tithing for a salary), this study also wants to emphasize that the motivations are not as simple as assuring monetary stability. Romain, and many of the other social brokers I met, spoke of a genuine desire to help the migrant community because they themselves had been through similar trials, and saw a responsibility to aid others derived from their experience and knowledge. Their narratives also demonstrate how social brokers are part of wider systems of support.

Their spheres of influence are also complicated; their services often occur outside of the legal parameters of the state, though they are not always autonomous of formal mechanisms and players. Vogt (2016) attempts to round out narratives surrounding a certain type of social broker- human smugglers. She explores how migrants, in addition to processes of smuggling and crime, also navigate ‘intimate economies of exchange, kinship and care’ (367). Like Vogt, this chapter is to be taken in combination with other discussions in this thesis to paint a broader picture of the ‘migrant reality’ in Nairobi- in the last chapter, for example, I discussed practices of bribery and informality. This chapter applies a different lens, that within those aforementioned practices, there are practices and mindsets of empathy, solidarity and affection that drive trust and social brokerage. This, I propose, is all part and parcel of what makes life ‘good’ in contexts which are often ‘not good’.

Romain referenced his ‘political background’ frequently to me, as if his former clout in DRC instilled in him the confidence and political savviness needed to become a prominent community leader. In the short time Romain has been at the helm of KCC he has clearly made a name for himself, despite his refugee status. Now, he tells me, “the big players organizations- UNHCR,
Refugee Consortium of Kenya (RCK), IRC - all know me”. He has also organized meetings with AIESEC, an international nongovernmental organization that facilitates global volunteerism, and had already received a number of expat volunteers to help with KCC programs. He eagerly shared with me his strategy of increasing KCC’s organizational capacity by leveraging his many connections with these international organizations. Romain also links KCC members with representatives of international, regional and local organizations and associations who come to Kabiria meet with them in person. The sense of fulfilment through his work with the KCC and the community status that came with it suggests another aspect of ‘the good life’ as understood among Congolese in Nairobi. Though the UNHCR sees the ability of a refugee to generate an income as the determination of a ‘good life’ (Omata 2017, 2), the responses from my participants would suggest this is an oversimplified view. I had heard from refugees, for example, of the importance they placed upon not just any work, but meaningful work that makes use of past experience, skills, and interests. Romain gets to utilize his political know-how to make meaningful contributions within his local community, while tapping into global networks of support that may prove useful down the road for his longstanding resettlement application. This is one illustration of the ways that strategies of meaning-making and fulfilment are not always temporally or geographically-constrained, but longstanding and forward-thinking.

Romain also linked me with a number of other ‘social brokers’. One day he arranged a meeting between me and Moses, the Disabilities Chairperson of the Refugee Community Representatives, Vice President of the Dagoretti LGBTI Association and a Congolese refugee. He wore a knit cap over shoulder-length dread locks, and a t-shirt with a rainbow flag that read, “Do not erase us”. Living in Nairobi since November 2018, and originally from Kisangani, DRC, he spoke in Swahili with Romain offering translation. Explaining what his job entails, he told me “I intervene on behalf of them [refugees] for documentation, book appointments for them, link the sick with organizations, and refer them to the UNHC,” even though “the UNHCR does not support many of them”.

Another social broker linking migrants to humanitarian organizations that Romain put me in touch with was “Sammy”, a Refugee Community Leader Chairperson representing the Kawangware district. This role, along with a Vice Chairperson, Youth Chair, and Disabilities Representative, are established by the Kenyan Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS), and a vote is taken in each
district of Nairobi where refugees live every two years. Once a month or so Sammy, who is a Burundian refugee, comes to KCC to meet with other refugees who have grievances. Their issues and complaints, most commonly regarding “documentation, medical needs, and requests for scholarships for education”, he takes to relevant organizations, including the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), IRC, Refugee Point, UNHCR, and RAS. I asked him if these institutions actually help settle the grievances. “40 per cent of the time,” he laughed.

Romain, Sammy and Moses’ role in connecting the members of KCC with wider systems of support position them as intermediaries for an otherwise underrepresented community (Leroux 2007, 411). The material and immaterial pay-off from such connections, however, is left uncertain. Moses and Sammy’s doubt of the effectiveness of the UNHCR and other refugee-serving organizations is shared by Romain and many of the members of KCC I spoke with. Despite the ineffectiveness of formal, upper-level organizations, whether real or perceived, Romain’s role as an advocate and intermediary shows the crucial role of migrant social brokers in resource allocation and distribution from other, less formalized, sources.

The equity in distribution of these resources, however, was debated by some. Romain, as a key figure at KCC, has a place around the table, both in the head office and in the workshop in the back courtyard, where money received from the craft sales as well as from membership fees pays for his salary. The spots at the workshop table are highly coveted, providing paid employment to a small number of members, which Romain and the other managers have a decisive role in deciding who is around the table and who is not. Romain insists that KCC is inclusive of all migrants as well as Kenyans, though it is evident that equal engagement across ethnicities is perhaps more of an aspiration and less of a reality; I ask a member if he sees Kenyans interacting with migrants on a regular basis at KCC, and he gives a short shake of his head, “Not really, no.” Another Congolese member complains that because Sammy, the Refugee Community Representative, is Burundian, he doubts the Congolese community is as well-represented as the Burundians.

Another individual I met through the management at KCC was ‘Pastor Alain’, as he called himself. Pastor Alain is a Congolese refugee who leads the congregation of a ‘refugee church’ (which he refers to it as) in Kabiria. The role of religiosity and church membership as the basis of group membership, belonging, and support will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six. Here, however, I want to focus here on the role of a pastor as the spiritual leader and community-builder
within a ‘refugee church’ in Nairobi, and the intricacies between dependency, reliance, trust, and faith between pastors as both spiritual and social brokers and their congregants.

A stone walled one-room building with a *mabati* (Swahili for corrugated metal) roof, the church sits just off of the main Kabiria road. Should you visit on a Sunday, you hear it before you see it; the loud voices from within reverberate off the ceiling and float out over the winding dirt roads. According to Pastor Alain the congregation is made up of 108 members, “mostly Congolese, and we have Burundians, Rwandans, one Somalian, and two Kenyans.” Brightly hued congregants fill three columns of red and blue plastic lawn chairs on a bare concrete floor, belting out raucous songs that switch between Swahili to Burundian to Kibembe back to Swahili. Under Pastor Alain’s leadership, the church provides services every Sunday morning from 9:30 to 12:00, women’s fellowship on Mondays, men’s fellowship on Tuesdays, choir practice on Fridays, and children’s ministry on Saturdays. As well as providing for the spiritual needs of the congregants, Pastor Alain organizes milk and porridge to be distributed to the children attendees on Saturdays for free, paid for through congregant tithes.

One day, in the hallway leading to the main office at KCC, Pastor Alain told me his personal story over *mandazi* and sweet milky *chai*. With a soft voice I had to lean in to hear, he told me that he left Fizi in South Kivu in 1996 to travel to a Tanzanian refugee camp “for some years”. He was able to return to Fizi, then depart again for Nairobi due to further instability in the region. His sister remains behind in DRC with seven kids, living “in the bush”, and has been the victim of rape by militia soldiers. He talks about how he is saving up to bring her and her children to Nairobi. Just as Romain at the KCC draws on his life experience to position himself as a valuable resource for other migrants navigating with tensions and exclusion in Nairobi, Pastor Alain referred to his spiritual knowledge and formal training as forging the platform for his leadership role. He tells me that his father, a reverend in DRC, oversaw 300 Free Methodist churches across the country. Pastor Alain attended seminary and ministerial training in Nairobi for several years, then entered into various leadership roles at two churches before becoming head pastor of the “refugee church” in Kabiria, five years prior. He prides himself in also being the lead coordinator for the three other “sister churches” (“attended by Kenyans only”) across Nairobi; “I am the only Congolese coordinator”, he tells me with a smile.
Churches in Nairobi and their leaders, like Pastor Alain, are important social brokers to provide an access point for many forced migrants for immediate support, such as employment and food, and link them to wider networks of congregants. Cazarin and Cossa (2017) position pastors among migrant communities in South Africa as ‘spiritual brokers’, offering undocumented migrants “spiritual guidance and...an environment in which they did not feel different or discriminated because of their legal status” (Bloch et al. 2014, 110). Pastor Alain’s reference to his church as a “refugee church” and the sister churches as “attended by Kenyans only” highlights the uniqueness of this space as inclusive for migrants among predominantly Kenyan places of worship. This links back to the chapter’s earlier discussion of ‘communities of trust’ (Jabareen and Carmon 2010; Lytinnen 2017), by which shared migrant status provides a sense of lower risk of being persecuted (447-448).

Yet, in the same way with Romain and the other managers at KCC, these spaces and brokers like Pastor Alain also have the capacity to reinforce social hierarchies and inequalities (Faist, 2014). In her study of human trafficking networks, Vogt (2016) describes how, within the contexts of human smugglers ‘relationships of mobility of care’ are both generated by and generate social inequalities around class, ethnicity and gender (372). While many told me that a pastor was among the first to consult for material assistance and social connections upon arrival in the country, not everyone shared the sentiment that churches could be depended upon. In a focus group discussion held in Kabiria, with the topic of the role of the church and attended predominantly by self-identified Congolese refugees, one man said, “I get no help from the church. Maybe in the future I will join another church that may help me, but I have never received any help from my pastor”. A female participant loudly disagreed with this, suggesting that benefits are dependent on contributions; “I say we get spiritual support from the church and the church supports us according to what input we give. So you can’t say the church doesn’t help you.” A male participant agreed, saying, “To be honest, the church cannot help you if you don’t have any input. They never just come to help anyone. You must be involved in their ministry or helping out at church. Like, I am only helped out at my church because I play instruments”. Seemingly contradicting himself, however, he added, “yesterday I went to church to ask for food but they did not give me anything, yet they have large stores of ugali flour that are rotting away and only give it to their close friends.” This suggests a hierarchy within the congregation, whereby not all congregants, even regardless of the level or
nature of their contribution, are treated equally. According to this man, those who had closer personal relationships with the individuals in control of food donations received support first.

I asked the group, “Who benefits most from the church?”, and the room responded loudly in near unison, “THE PASTOR!”, followed by laughter. One female participant, shaking her head, suggested that the pastor, as the leader of the church, has “the right to benefit.” “Besides,” she added, “he prays for us.” This resulted in a Burundian male participant emphatically stating “No! NO! I disagree! I pray for myself so I believe we must all benefit the same.” This attitude reveals a belief that by belonging to a church, there is a reasonable expectation to benefit- and benefit equitably. For the Burundian, clearly spiritual mediation offered by the pastor does not suffice. Financial gain was often cited by both congregants and pastors as a benefit of engagement with the church, and the way one is treated by the church was sometimes defined by my participants in a financial sense.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the etymology of the noun ‘advocate’, which grounds this study’s understanding of the role of the broker, stems from the old French meaning lawyer, implying an offering of aid in exchange for financial gain. This aligns with Boissevain’s (1969) definition of social brokers, which includes the characteristic that they perform the role for profit (380). His discussion is heavily framed in business and economic terms, with social brokerage defined as an enterprise. Yet his usage of the term profit in a ‘social transaction’ is not limited to financial capital; it “can consist of services, information, status, good will, even psychological satisfaction,” and, in fact, “Only rarely does it consist of money” (383). In stark contrast to the infamous Kenyan pastors of ‘megachurches’ or prosperity churches that live in mansions and drive Audis, the refugee pastors I met lead small congregations that struggle to make ends meet and tithe very little. Several pastors admitted they were not paid weekly or monthly salaries and received only bus fare for getting to-and-from the church. Demonstrating the often-inextricable relationship between spirituality and survival, one pastor, a Rwandan refugee who has been preaching at a Pentecostal church in Kabiria for four months, mentioned that although he does not receive a salary, if he prays for a congregant and their prayers are answered, they may “bless him” with a monetary gift or food.

Social networks thus demand trust between both broker and member- not only because both parties must trust that their trust will not be betrayed, but also because in social exchanges there is the
chance of service not being reciprocated (Yamagishi, Cook and Watanabe 1998), and should the expected pay-off not be immediate, both sides must have trust that it will come in time (Blau 1964). Pastor Alain, for example, facilitates social exchanges, sometimes with material benefits (i.e. free food), yet there is no guarantee or timeline of favour-return in the form of tithes. This pastor, as well as others I spoke with from different churches, spoke of trust that God would provide, though with a belief that this provision largely comes through the financial contributions of their congregants.

The theme of trust within the context of a faith-based institution, such as a church, requires further consideration to the differences between ‘trust’ and faith’. Hart (1988) distinguishes the two by suggesting that while ‘faith’ is a form of trust, it is ‘emotionally charged’ and not reliant on evidence (187). Though modern English tends to combine trust in person and things so that the word can be used freely across contexts (Ibid., 186), Hart emphasizes that this amalgamation is not always shared across languages or cultures. Within my own research, ‘faith’ was very rarely included in my lexicon during interviews, and I initially used the term ‘trust’ and ‘depend on’ somewhat interchangeably (as in, the assumption that one must have a certain degree of trust to depend upon someone). This assumption was quickly challenged; Divine, for example, shared how while she was dependent upon her coworkers for advice, she only trusts her husband. Where Hart’s note about the English language’s usage of trust for both people, things, and the more abstract, whereas different languages and cultural contexts may differentiate by using a term closer to ‘faith’ when describing “trust” in God, for example.

The lack of distinction on my part thus likely limited participant’s understanding of what I meant when I asked “Who do you trust”- in the case of this section of the chapter, ‘trust’ may have evoked strong feelings towards particular individuals as opposed to the abstract or divine (e.g., God). As Divine told me, when I would eventually ask her to explain to me how she understood differences in terminology, trust, or kuamini in Swahili “is based on people”, whereas ‘faith’ (kutegemea) “is hopeful of what will happen.” For her, faith is defined by its hopefulness of the immaterial, of what has not yet occurred, and her understanding aligns with Hart’s (1988) distinction between trust and faith. Spiritual leaders like Pastor Alain find themselves at the interstices of trust and faith; by virtue of their position of spiritual authority and access to congregant tithes they demand trust from their congregants, yet they themselves operate on the currency of faith and can temper
expectations of reciprocity with a spirit of waithood. As the one focus group member referenced in his story of how he was paid less than a Kenyan musician because the church leaders told him his pay was dependent upon when “God decides to give you more”.

I cannot speak to the accuracy of this young man’s or other participant’s grievances with the church. His account, and that of others, does exhibit expectations of benefiting in both spiritual and material ways from their engagement in the church. Their belief in God and interaction with spiritual leaders in the community demonstrates both reliance in humans and faith in a higher power. Despite the complaints from congregants of inequitable benefit from church membership, most Congolese I spoke to shared that they are dedicated attendees on Sunday morning, and pastors were those they went to first upon arrival in the city when they needed help. Why might this be? One key reason may be empathy, which broker scholars identify as a common characteristic among these influential individuals, born from a personal and shared knowledge of social barriers faced by other network members (Cranefield and Yoong, 2007; Long et. al 2013). Both Romain and Pastor Alain self-identified as refugees, forced from their homes and split from their families. Both endured arduous journeys and life trajectories full of uncertainty. Like Romain, I sensed a deep care for the people Pastor Alain spoke on behalf for. He spoke about how he wished the church could do more but was limited by the small number of congregants and the financial collections they were able to make each week. He told me once about how a child of the congregation had recently fallen into a fire and had extreme burns on her face and needed medical care, but as her family could not afford the mounting medical costs, he was taking a special collection to help pay the bill.

Just as the earthly needs and spiritual aspirations for his congregants are tightly bound, Pastor Alain’s role as a spiritual broker is thus closely enmeshed with his positioning as a social and economic broker. During our last interview he listed the material and spiritual needs of his congregants with an intimate knowledge, things that they had told him during one-on-one counselling sessions. The struggles he mentioned were serious-depression, trauma, divorce, and poverty- and must have required a great deal of trust in the Pastor that he would not betray their confidentiality. While all of these struggles interfere with achieving the good life, Pastor Alain is able to fulfil his spiritual calling while maintaining a position of authority in the community,
sustained by his congregants ongoing trust and support, and he is able to provide them with spiritual guidance, comfort, and material support.

**Conclusions**

This chapter has challenged individualism within complex processes of ‘self-reliance’ among forcibly displaced Congolese in Nairobi by exploring the necessity and role of trust, dependencies, and faith between diverse actors, systems, and sites in the city. It considered how subjectivities within and beyond identity groups shape patterns of trust, interdependence, and obligation, with particular attention to how ‘intimate labour’ between Congolese and Kenyan citizens both produce and rely upon mutual trust. It introduced examples of Congolese ‘social brokers’ to ground discussion in empirical evidence of how these influential actors increase access to material and immaterial support for migrants in contexts of informality and extralegality. Despite the Government of Kenya’s attempts to hinder self-settlement of refugees and asylum seekers within its cities, social brokers within civil society nonetheless play a vital role in assisting the migrant community to overcome everyday challenges. Indeed, the absence of rights for forced migrants in Kenya and the inhospitable climate is precisely what creates the need for migrant social brokers. These individuals also have the capacity to benefit themselves and reinforce social hierarchies; Romain and Pastor Alain’s roles in the community as spiritual, social, and material brokers among their wide migrant networks are reflective of Vogt’s (2016), framing of migration intermediaries as both beneficiaries and empathetic actors.

These intermediaries, advocates, and representatives have different motivations, and while material and immaterial benefit is often associated with their role, this study has revealed a deep sense of empathy and moral obligation driving many of them, often among ethnic, spatial, and legal status lines. The relationship between social brokers and the organizations they are part of are tightly connected and mutually dependent. As well, rather than separate or autonomous from legal channels, the lines between formal and informal are blurred. Many social brokers interact regularly with local and regional governments and humanitarian organizations to expand their capacity and social network. It is often these wide networks, spanning legal and spatial boundaries, that empower social brokers to provide or link migrants with much-needed services and resources.
required for the good life. In the next chapter I will continue with discussions of the role of the church, looking more closely at the significance of belonging and inclusion in the pursuit of the good life among Congolese in Nairobi.
Chapter 6: Church Membership, Religiosity, and the Good Life

The ‘refugee church’ in Kabiria I described in the previous chapter was attended by several of the members of the Kabiria Community Centre, as it was located not far away in the same neighbourhood. On the Sunday morning I attended service the women’s worship team led singing from the front of the room, all wearing ‘traditional’ outfits from their country of origin. The group was predominantly Congolese, but also included some Burundians and Rwandans, and the women wore the brightly colored and loudly patterned head wraps, dresses or matching tops and long skirts (see Fig. 15). The group danced to the music, swaying to the beat in tandem. Occasionally the lead singer would hold a microphone and belt into it in a high voice while the others sang the chorus. After a period, they called the rest of the congregation to join them at the front to dance and clap to the music as a collective. Someone brought out drums and a homemade tambourine made of a petrol can with dried beans inside, and voices joined in with the keyboard, instruments, clapping, and stomping for a crescendo of sound that reverberated through the small room and left my ears ringing long after the service ended.

Figure 15: Women sing and dance in 'traditional' outfits at the "refugee church". Source: Author’s photo.
During this period of energetic worship within this church attended by migrants from many nations, many voices blended into one loud anthem. Yet distinctiveness was still evident in the script of the bibles scattered around the room in multiple languages, the individual prayers shouted intermittently by congregants in their mother tongue, and in the different ‘traditional’ clothing worn by the women. This church, as well as others throughout the city, play an important role for migrants who lack support from the government or humanitarian agencies. Similar to the *kinyozi*, it is a microspace and a ‘cultural enclave’ (Lyytinen 2017) within the city- full of symbols, rituals, and customs that grants one membership within a wider collective while enabling the maintenance of distinctive ethnocultural subjectivities. It is also a place where social engagement is interconnected with material benefits to help ease the challenges born from the precarity and uncertainty experienced by so many of its congregants.

This chapter focuses on the role of the Church as an agent of wellbeing and the good life, and religiosity as an important subjectivity among Congolese in Nairobi. I explore here various mechanisms for how material and immaterial needs are met, the role of religion within the context of forced displacement, and what the church does for migrants that the State and humanitarian apparatus does not. I join other works which have taken interest in the role of churches beyond the fulfilling of spiritual needs (Kim 1987; Fenggang, 2001). By drawing from interviews and observations, I explore the ways in which church membership and religiosity among migrants play a key role in the pursuit of the good life by building and sustaining meaningful communities, accessing material support, and securing work opportunities.

**Context: Christianity in the DRC and Kenya**

Christianity is widely practiced among Congolese in the DRC. A 2018 report by the U.S. Department of State estimated that 95.8 percent of the country’s population was Christian, of which 48.1 percent were Protestant (including evangelical Christians and Kimbanguists- followers of the religious leader Simon Kimbangu’s Church of Jesus Christ on Earth), and 47.3 percent Catholic (U.S. Department of State 2018, 2). The remainder represents Jehovah’s Witnesses,  

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40 Though this report was published in 2018, it cites statistics collected from the Pew Research Centre in 2010. A more recent comprehensive overview of religious practices in the DRC is not available.
followers of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and the Greek Orthodox Church, while a “significant portion” of the nation practice African traditional beliefs (Ibid.) The accuracy of these statistics is challenged by the prevalence of hybrid religious associations, with many individuals identifying with either multiple or hybridized affiliations (Whetho & Uzodike 2008, 61).

Christianity is also pervasive among Congolese migrants in Nairobi. In my own research, I do not recall meeting a single Congolese who did not identify as religious when asked, and of these, the majority as either Protestant or Catholic. This is a visible association; it is heard in the loud singing emanating from the many churches throughout the city on Sunday and seen in the gilded crucifixes worn around necks (the sartorial demonstration of Christian religiosity will be explored further later in this chapter). Congolese names are often scriptural in nature, including Emmanuel, Charity, Paradise, and Moïse (the French version of ‘Moses’).

It is relevant to note that the pervasiveness of Christianity among Congolese in Nairobi occurs within the context of Kenya itself having a high percentage of Christian adherents, with 85.5 per cent of the country’s population identifying as such (Protestants, Catholics and Evangelicals representing 33.4, 20.6, and 20.4 per cent, respectively) (Kenyan Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Public displays of religiosity among Congolese therefore does not stand out as strange in a city where many of its matatus are painted with giant murals of crosses, bible verses, or the faces of spiritual figures like Mother Theresa and American evangelist Joel Osteen. Christian gospel music plays from shopping mall speakers, and banners hang over highways advertising upcoming revival meetings.

There is a growing body of literature attuned to the importance of religiosity and membership in religious institutions for forcibly displaced peoples, among both migration scholars (Godziak & Shandy 2002; Nzayabino 2005; Sommers 2001) and humanitarian organizations (IOM 2008; UNHCR 2015). Specifically, religion has been studied as a coping mechanism among forced migrants in Africa (Nyzabino 2005), a way to make sense of an often confusing and alienating experience (Burwell et al., 1986, 357; Menjivar 2003, 25), and a source of comfort and resources to individuals suffering from traumatic experiences (Magezi and Manda, 2016). Some studies have

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41 No further denominational breakdown is offered in the country census.
found that refugees become more religious in their host countries (Sommers 2001; Warner 2000); one reason for this may be that migration is a “theologizing experience” (Smith, 1978) whereby spirituality provides comfort and resources to individuals suffering from traumatic experiences (Magezi and Manda, 2016). There may also be a strategic element to this as well; Burwell et al. (1986), for example, suggest that refugees with a higher level of religiosity in their host country are also more likely to be better integrated. The explanation for this is that “refugees who have developed religious attributions are more likely to cope with a trauma associated with the resettlement experience successfully, because religion provides the opportunity to make sense out of a disorderly world (356). Though religiosity has a significant influence in many people’s emotional and psychological wellbeing (Chamberlain & Zika, 1992; Pollner, 1989), it has long been underexplored in studies pertaining to quality of life (Poloma & Pendleton 1990, 271).

This chapter makes use of the term ‘religiosity’ rather than ‘religiousness’ or ‘spirituality’: religiosity does not necessarily imply membership in a religious organization (i.e. church), nor does it assume religiousness. Capturing the nuances of beliefs and affiliation, Campbell and Coles (1973) devised a basic typology of religiosity; the religious member (one who is both religious and belongs to a religious organization); the “a-religious member”, or one who belongs to a religious organization but does not adhere to a particular faith; the “religious independents”, or those who are religious but not members of religious organizations; and fourthly, those who are neither religious nor belong to a religious organization (152). When my participants told me they were “Christian” or just simply “religious”, the determination of where they might fall within the above listed categories was beyond the scope of my study. The point of discussing this typology here is thus not to apply it with any rigour to my own research participants, but simply to highlight some of the complexities that the term ‘religiosity’ affords.

When it comes to the social outcomes of religiosity, the depth/sincerity/understanding one’s religious beliefs is not always relevant; religion ‘as identity’, as suggested by Gunn (2002), “is less a matter of theological beliefs than it is an issue of family, culture, ethnicity, and nationality” (16). In the case of my research, I found ‘being Christian’ to often be just as much (if not more) about being Congolese and being from a predominantly Christian country than personally adhering to a particular set of beliefs. This became particularly evident when I would hear Congolese remark upon the Christian religion in comparative terms; for example, when I would ask for opinions on
the nature of Kenyan-Congolese relationships as co-habitants in the city, I would repeatedly hear the response that it was positive overall because ‘Congolese are Christians’ (along with the largely Christian population of Kenya). The comparison would also frequently be made between Congolese and Somalis—‘Somalis are Muslim. Congolese are Christian.’ The implications of the role of religiosity in fostering ‘sameness’ among Congolese and Kenyans will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

As discussions of the ‘good life’ should be situated within particular cultural and temporal contexts (Sarot 2004, 191), it cannot be explored within this thesis without consideration of ways in which religiosity shapes understandings of it among Congolese. Accordingly, I attempted to determine how religiosity is manifested and its outcomes, as they pertain to wellbeing, are interpreted. I spent time asking migrants (predominantly Congolese, though also several Burundians) about the nature of their involvement in church in Nairobi and how they might describe the material and immaterial benefits of membership. Upon invitation of my participants, I visited three churches during my fieldwork, two Protestant and one Catholic, in the Kabiria, Kilimani and Dandora neighborhoods of Nairobi.

The following sections draw from my observations and participant narratives of Congolese attending these churches and explore in greater detail the emergent themes surrounding the interconnected outcomes of membership, community, and material assistance.

**Religious Membership**

For those lacking social networks in the city prior to arrival, many of my participants listed the church as one of the first places they visited seeking guidance and material support, such as food, money, and work opportunities. As a young Congolese man told me, “All of my family members are still in Goma, except for one sister in Arusha. I don’t talk to them very often, only once or twice a month, because Internet is so expensive and unreliable where they are. When I need help, I go to my pastor.” Another young man told me, “When I first arrived in Nairobi, I was overwhelmed. The church was the first place I went. I get spiritual guidance and hope from the church. Also, non-spiritual things too. The leadership bought me groceries, helped me get settled,
told me about the city and what I needed to know.” These responses are indicative of accessing ‘religious social capital,’ defined as “the social resources available to individuals and groups through their social connections with a religious community” (Maselko et al., 2011, 1).

I heard accounts among Congolese of a certain expectation of giving something to the church in return for such support, or the quality or extent of benefits to correlate with the level of ones’ engagement with the church. The level of reciprocity, whereby members are expected to contribute something back to the church (i.e., regular attendance, giving financial offerings) means that to become a member of a church is a serious matter, and requires a fair degree of commitment to a particular institution. In return, members receive social and economic benefits. This transactional process was described by a focus group discussion participant; in response to another participant who complained about not receiving any assistance from his church, “I must say we get spiritual support from the church and the church supports us according to what input we give. So you can’t say the church doesn’t help you”. This sentiment was shared by a third participant, who said that “the church cannot help you if you don’t have any input…You must be involved in their ministry or helping out at church”.

This is not to ignore the potential and reality of church membership creating conditions for new or sustained alienation (Freemantle 2010). Even if one is to be recognized as a member within a church, this does not guarantee instant or total inclusion, but rather exists as a spectrum, and in addition to enhancing social capital for some, they also have the capacity to reinforce social hierarchies and inequalities for others (Faist, 2014). Though caring for its congregants in spiritual and material ways was widely perceived among my participants as a core duty of the Church, not all shared the sentiment of their church doing a sufficient job in this respect. Romain, at the Kabiria Community Centre, shook his head and tsked his tongue when I asked about how he perceived the role of the Church among the forcibly displaced. “There,” he responded, “the church has failed. There are no programs aimed at refugees- nothing meaningful, even though refugees are often members of the congregation!” When I asked why this was, he suggest that “The first thing that comes into the minds of these people (church congregants) is that once they start giving money and things to refugees, where will it end? Just an endless flow of poor looking for handouts.”
I also heard accounts that implied that the scarcity of financial assistance was not always due to a
lack of funds, but may be related to discrimination of nationality. As one participant of a focus
group discussion told me,

“…when you’re performing with a Kenyan artist in church they will pay him more than they pay you, yet you are the better performer. So the church just gives you a little help, just for them to feel like they have helped you as a church but its not a full intentional kind of help. They tell you ‘We will give you this little until God decides to give you more than we can.’ The church uses us badly and sometimes also talks to us in a bad way so they can gain from whatever input we give them but don’t treat us well.”

Though I cannot attest to the truth or extent of this beyond the church in Kabiria that I visited, the Pastor, Pastor Alain, who was introduced in greater detail in Chapter Five, told me that refugees have begun resorting to starting their own churches in response to the lack of churches in Nairobi that can support migrants and appeal to them linguistically, spiritually and materially. Though the larger churches in Nairobi have greater capacity to offer livelihood opportunities and financial and material supports to forcibly displaced peoples, there are oftentimes significant barriers to membership. While physical distance did not seem to be the biggest factor in choosing a church for many of those I interviewed\(^{42}\), social class is apparently an important determinant. To see evidence of the affinity by certain classes for churches in Nairobi, one need only look at church parking lots; typically, lower and lower-middle class congregants arrive by foot or matatu, pouring out of the small public minibuses in their brightly coloured Sunday best, while upper middle and upper classes drive their imported cars in through gated parking lots manned by armed security guards.

Language and class are closely intertwined, and both factor into the decision and ability to become a member of a particular church. The larger, wealthier churches tend to conduct service almost exclusively in English, whereas the smaller churches in the informal settlements attended by lower income individuals (and oftentimes refugees) are often conducted either totally in Swahili or a mix of English and Swahili. I was told by one Kenyan that the growing middle and upper classes of

\(^{42}\) One Congolese participant, despite having several places of worship a stone’s throw from his apartment, travels 15 kilometers by matatu every Sunday morning to get to his church. He says he chooses to go there because they offer sermons in French.
Kenya see fluency in English as a matter of pride; even if they are not entirely fluent, attending an English-speaking church on Sunday is one more identity marker that contributes to their public image. Very few Congolese refugees I met, most hailing from North or South Kivu, were fluent in English. Not surprisingly, the language barrier leads many Congolese to attend a church that holds service in a language they can understand. Language is also important for accessing meaningful opportunities for engaging with the church body in meaningful ways, which can lead to important manifestations of social capital, as will be explored further. One male Congolese refugee, in explaining to me how he was able to join a Kenyan church’s workshop team, stated that “Language is key. It’s huge. The fact that I can speak Swahili- also, I play guitar, so POP! I’m their guy!”

‘Refugee churches’ and or local churches that are linguistically, geographically and class-wise more appealing to forcibly-displaced migrants tend to be smaller and financially-restrained by its poorer congregants. The is a unique space, defined by cultural inclusiveness within a wider social and political context of exclusion. Such ‘migrant-initiated churches’ provide spaces where congregants exercise ‘self-exclusion’ to contribute to the formation of stability amongst contexts of uncertainty (Landau and Freemantle, 2010) and enable a degree of cultural recognition and participation through which migrants can express their own dress, language and dance from their country of origin, preserving “ethnocultural integrity” (Valtonen, 1999). This speaks to Chapter Five’s discussion of ‘micro-spaces’ or ‘cultural enclaves’ (Lyytinen 2017) as playing a significant role for fostering trust and community among migrants.

Though I heard several participants express a sense of unity that transcends borders or racial divides, (“They are my brothers and sisters,” one Congolese individual said, referring to Kenyan Christians, and “I feel closer to a Kenyan Christian than I do to a Congolese non-Christian”), such a sentiment of unity among religious lines over national identity does not mean that ethnocultural differentiators are erased. The church is a space where membership is manifested in different ways and simultaneously expresses inclusion and exclusion. For example, though the aforementioned quote highlights one individual’s sentiment that shared religious identity transcends differences of ethnicity/nationality, another Congolese man, a self-identified refugee and pastor, suggests that such an ideal is not actually realized in practice.
49-years-old from Walikale in North Kivu, DRC, David told me that when he first arrived in Nairobi in 2006, he “survived with the church’s assistance”, as they gave him “food and money”. He found this church through a Congolese friend he was living with after arriving in the city, and he was asked to play guitar in the church’s worship band. The pastor of the church introduced him to his wife, also Congolese, who was a congregant there. Today, David is the senior pastor at a different, fairly prominent evangelical church on the outskirts of the Karen suburb in Nairobi. He told me that this church “is full of refugees”. It is not clear if this is as a result of premeditated and strategic efforts to attract refugees and other migrants, or if it was the unintended result of having a ‘refugee’ as a pastor. In his opinion, he told me, “People here [Kenyans] like to go to a church where the pastor is from their tribe,” and “as a refugee, it is difficult to get Kenyans to come to a church led by foreigners”. As a result, he says, “we have many foreigners in our church”. According to him, the reason why there are so few Kenyans, in a predominantly Kenyan area of the city, is due not so much to the proportion of refugees or migrants in the congregation, but because of the fact that the senior pastor is a “foreigner”.

**Bonding, Bridging, and Differentiating**

The many churches I visited throughout my time in Nairobi, including those I attended as part of my research and those I visited with friends and family, represented a diversity of denominations, locations, and socio-economic classes. They included the Kabiria Community Church, the student chapel at AIU, a Catholic church on the edge of the city dump in Dandora, and the Protestant One Tribe Church in the more affluent area of Runda. I witnessed how these institutions provided a space within the city where linguistic, cultural and sartorial differences are encouraged by the diversity of congregants and organization of the service. This is often determined by the church leadership (i.e., pastor, elders, deacons, worship team) at the local level, or in the case of the bigger churches part of a federation or network, determined in the organizational mandate. This would take many different forms, from guest pastors being invited from different countries, congregants wearing clothing from their home country, and special ‘multicultural Sundays’ whereby a particular nationality would lead the worship, with songs in their own languages.

Lowe (2015), in her study of Somali migrants in Nairobi, explores the intersection of religion and national identity as manifested in the concept of “Soomaalinimo”, or ‘Somaliness’. She posits that
this categorization is instrumental in forming ‘invisible boundaries’ between Somalis and Kenyans, manifested in spatial, religious, linguistic, and sartorial differences (51). I would argue here that the ‘Congoleseness’, as exhibited through the interwoven fibres of cultural, national and religious identity, creates both boundaries and bridges between Congolese and Kenyans. Chapter Seven will give illustration of this, examining how Christian identity among Congolese serves as ‘bridging capital’ between themselves and Kenyan citizens while simultaneously distinguishing themselves from other migrant groups. Bridging capital describes the porousness between group delineations and the ability of group members to move between networks, regardless of variances in nationality and socioeconomic standing (Madhavan & Landau 2011, 475-476; Cheong et al. 2007; Gericke et al. 2018; Woolcock 2001).

Though I would hear comments from Congolese and Kenyans remarking on cultural compatibility due to a shared religion, this is not to overlook the vast heterogeneity of denominations and sects within the wide umbrella of “Christianity” or how it is viewed between and among its diverse adherents. While I heard many Congolese say that a shared faith was what bonded them with others, other participants rejected this generalized basis of compatibility. This was perhaps most poignantly stressed during my interviews with Congolese theological students at Africa International University (AIU) in the Karen/Dagoretti suburb of Nairobi.

The university has a diverse student body, with students coming from across the continent (and beyond), including Congolese. None of the students I interviewed told me they came to Nairobi because of persecution or violence, though for some, particularly from eastern DRC, regional instability did factor in their decision to study out of country. In recognition of the variety of origins, classes, backstories, and intent for migration among Congolese in Nairobi, featuring university students’ stories here is valuable for adding different Congolese perspectives to my study. I had mentioned in my methods discussion in Chapter Three that I wanted to capture diverse experiences of Congolese in the city, and that though most of my participants would likely be classified as lower-income and forcibly displaced, these university students present different subjectivities than are often represented within African urban migrant studies. These are individuals, most of whom originated from eastern DRC, whose mobility pasts and futures diverge from the others I interviewed in that they all ‘willingly’ departed DRC and arrived in Nairobi with
the objective of completing a degree. These men and women further complicate the trope of the wayward Congolese migrant seeking refuge. In terms of future trajectories, many told me they desired to return to DRC upon graduation. The reason for this, I heard multiple times, was because of a perceived ‘lesser Christianity’ in DRC than in Kenya.

A young Congolese man named Fabrice, from Goma in eastern DRC and doing a masters’ degree in Biblical Studies, told me that in DRC, “Most people profess to be Christian, but they don’t live like Christians…. There is a lot of prosperity gospel being preached, so many people pursue God with the wrong intentions. Very few could actually explain why they are Christian and what it means. I only really understood the Gospel when I came to Kenya, and that’s why I want to go back- to help others understand.” For Fabrice, achieving ‘the good’ is tied to spiritual comprehension in the immediate sense, as well as future evangelical aims. It is also geographical in scope; like the female salon assistant mentioned earlier in the thesis who expressed her desire to return home to show off her nice things purchased in Nairobi, Fabrice’s sense of fulfilment is tied to transnational aspirations ‘to help others understand’ in eastern DRC.

Another young man studying theology at the university, Michel from Goma, had a similar missional dream of return. Michel is 25 years old and has been studying a Master of Theology at AIU for four years. He tells me he wants to return to Goma after his graduation to serve in an academic role at a seminary there because of his belief that Christianity in DRC is “mostly superficial,” and the country, as a result, “needs more theologians.” The missionary zeal these young men expressed in returning home to ‘educate’ their fellow Congolese on ‘true’ Christianity is a poignant illustration of the way in which histories of religion in Africa continue to shape transnational trajectories and understandings of the good life.

The university at which Fabrice and Michel are receiving their degrees in Biblical Studies and Theology is one of many faith-based higher education institutions across the country, indicative of a long-standing presence of churches in Kenya, notably Anglican and Presbyterian, which were particularly embedded within the colonial project (Gifford 2009). AIU, formerly Nairobi

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43 Illustrating how wide the spectrum of ‘forced’ migration is, these individuals were not forced to leave their homes in the traditional sense (i.e. violence, fear of persecution, etc.) yet receiving a high quality education in eastern DRC is extremely difficult, resulting in many expressing to me the ‘need’ to seek an education elsewhere.

44 One estimation put nearly 65 per cent of all the country’s educational institutions as administered by faith-based organizations (Gifford 2009, 46).
Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST), was founded by the Association of Evangelicals in Africa (AEA) as part of a North American evangelical missions project in 1966.

The religious context in which students of these institutions like AIU find themselves in is a particularly Evangelical brand of Protestantism that exists in Kenya today (Balcomb 2017, 303). Christianity in the region was, and continues to be, heavily influenced by the East African Revival of the 1930s, a spiritual movement originating in colonial Northern Rwanda and Southern Uganda in the 1930s and holding momentum until the 1980s (Peterson 2017, 230). The Revival also held a vision of a unified yet transnational community of like-minded Christians, and this would later fuel the migration of Evangelical Africans across the continent and beyond (Wild-Wood 2021).

Revivalists, or ‘Balokole’ as they called themselves (Luganda for ‘the Saved People’), also emphasized a version of the good life that aligned with the values of modernity, including upward mobility, health, and prosperity (Ward and Wild-Wood 2013, 5). Such notions of ‘the good’ and ‘the good life’ within Evangelicalism- with God’s desire for the individual to achieve health, wellness, and status- have continued to this day (Balcomb 2017, 303; Gifford 2009, 117). In this way, the values of Evangelical Christianity that persist since the East African Revival mirrors those of Anthropology of the Good; both seek to frame experiences of wellbeing and flourishing, not apart from suffering, but in spite of it. The optimistic lens of Christianity in Nairobi could be seen in the banners of (mostly Pentecostal) churches hanging from overpasses emphasizing visions of wellbeing and material success at an upcoming “victory rally” or “healing rally”. The names of churches, as well, highlight themes of success, with names like “Winners Chapel International”, “Destiny Chapel”, and “Victory Faith Church”.

The missional objectives of the university students I interviewed should be viewed not only through a historical lens of religion in the country in which they study, but also in contrast to religious trends in their home country. The history of Christianity in central Africa varies from that of East Africa in some significant ways. Historically, and largely to present day, the Catholic church has had a greater prominence- both in terms of physical presence and political influence- than Protestantism in DRC largely because of the support it received from the Belgian state during the colonial period and as so many higher educational institutions from which political elites graduated from were founded and administered by the Catholic church (Mutumbo 2017, 164-7).
The sense I received from the students of theology at AIU, as well as from other Protestant Congolese throughout my time in Nairobi, was a tension with the ‘more Catholic’ nature of Christianity that prevailed within DRC. The AIU students implied that the Protestant education they received in Kenya was far closer to ‘true’ Christianity, and that students of this teaching were needed to return to DRC to impart this knowledge and educate their fellow Catholic countrymen and women on what they had learned. In this way, Congolese students in Nairobi are mimicking the mandates and trajectories of the Revivalists from decades past, heeding a call to ‘spread the message far and wide’ (Ward & Wild-Wood 2013, 4).

Yet aside from these interviews with theological students at AIU, I found that generally, among Congolese in Nairobi theological divides are seemingly transcended by a general sentiment of cultural and religious compatibility that overlooks doctrinal nuances in favour of the shared label of ‘Christian’. This is often a comparative tool between migrant ‘communities’ categorized simply as ‘Christian’ or ‘not Christian’; several Kenyans, for example, when asked how they felt about Congolese migrants living in Nairobi, cited their lack of concern over the fact that Congolese could often speak Swahili and were “also Christians”. Often made in the context of comparison between Congolese and other migrant nationalities, this sentiment would frequently be followed with a critique of other migrant groups- many of those I spoke with referenced Somalis, specifically, as a migrant group they did have issue with, citing their Islamic identity as a contributing factor in this unease.

Sharing a group identity as a member of a Christian church thus serves an important purpose- just as importantly as it signifies what one is (Christian, Congolese), it differentiates from what one is not (i.e., Muslim, Somali). In Nairobi this can have serious implications; in Lowe’s (2015) study of Somali migrants in Nairobi, she writes that the stereotypical ‘ethnic identity’ markers, including language, physical traits, and religion, have contributed to normalizing the abuse of Somalis in Kenya (117-118). As previously discussed throughout this study, notably Chapter Four’s study of the Congolese hair salon and Chapter Seven’s examination of satirical expressions of identity, ‘Congoleseness’ can be a strategy for self-settlement. Freemantle and Landau (2010) state that collective identity based on nationality is often ‘instrumental’ and not with the purpose of collective ethnocultural identity itself (386), and Götz and Simone (2003) suggest this is a tactical effort “aimed at maximizing economic opportunities through transversal engagements across
territories and separate arrangements of powers” (125). While Freemantle and Landau (2010) suggest that these arrangements of power leveraged include ‘combinations of national, ethnic and political affiliations’ (386), this chapter would add religious affiliation to the mix. The porousness and flexibility of Congolese nature will be returned to in Chapter Seven where I will provide more empirical evidence of the ways that Congolese embrace or diminish their ethnocultural identity.

“Native is for Sunday”: Bonding and Boundary-making through Fashion

At the churches I attended in Nairobi which featured a mix of nationalities within their congregations, clothing was the most obvious differentiator between the members, with the Congolese women wearing their colourful maputa (Lingala for the distinctive long dresses worn in Congo). Men, too, would find ways to incorporate vitenge into their dark suits- a dash of the brightly coloured fabric in a pocket square or necktie.

Religiosity and fashion among the Congolese are often tightly entangled: the body becomes a stage for where the secular meets the sacred, the materialistic meets the spiritual. For one of my meetings with Emmanuel, the former Sapeur and manager of the hair salon in downtown Nairobi where I “apprenticed”, I found him wearing a Versace t-shirt and a crucifix necklace. The cross and the Medusa logo are powerful symbols on their own, thought together are emblematic of the intersection of faith and fashion found within the Congolese diaspora in Nairobi, two powerful belief systems instrumental in community and identity formation in the contexts of displacement.

La Sape, the Congolese-born fashion sub-culture that will be further explored in Chapter Seven, is laden with religious tradition and vocabulary. Sapologie has its own ‘followers’, many of whom see it as a religion, the French and Italian designers of Louis Vuitton and Gianni Versace are referred to as the movement’s “high priests”, and one of the movement’s pioneers, Papa Wemba, was nicknamed “la pape de La Sape” (the Pope of La Sape) (Wrong 1999, 22). There is something sacrificial about La Sape as well, the fashion-before-food mindset (“Even if I’m hungry, give me five dollars and I’ll buy a pair of shoes instead of food”, Maurice once told me). In Lingala, the movement is referred to as Kitendi, or the ‘religion of cloth’. This word was used by non-Sapeurs as well; one man referred to himself as a ‘kitendiest’, or a disciple of style.
Even among non-Sapeur Congolese, the association of dressing well with dressing ‘presentable’ or modestly is more evidence of a dress code where what is worn externally reflects inner moral propriety. The matter of fashion as a symbolizer of respect was brought up by a Congolese university student: “The way people dress leaves the biggest first impression. Everyone deserves to dress well. You feel better when you dress better. It reflects your character- it shows you’re organized, prepared, and respectful. It’s something I learned since I was young- show respect by dressing well.” This sentiment was shared by Blessing, who told me, “The biggest form of respect is dressing differently, dressing well. Like a Congolese”. When I asked Ziggy, a 25-year-old from Goma and the third member of Maurice’s Sape group, why he became a Sapeur, he responded that he wanted “to be a role model for others.”

I was told by several individuals that they would dress differently on Sundays than they would for the remainder of the week as a way to demonstrate respect. “Native is for Sunday” Dinah told me, an expression meaning that one typically dresses in their ‘traditional’ clothing just to attend church once a week. This contrasted somewhat with what I had learned from my conversations with Congolese over the notion of ‘dressing Congolese’ on a day-to-day basis, with most people telling me that they do so on a regular basis. The difference may lie in the degree of sartorial ‘Congoleseness’. For the women, for example, on Monday to Friday I would see them pairing a simple t-shirt or blouse with a kitenge skirt, whereas on Sunday it seemed like more of a head-to-toe in vitenge affair.

To dress ‘like a Congolese’ on Sundays differentiates these men and women from their Kenyan counterparts, and by doing so, maintain membership in a socio-cultural grouping. A church on Sunday morning is one of the best places to see this in practice, particularly among women. In fact, the way in which Kenyan men and women dress to attend Sunday services was one of the major criticisms of nationals from Congolese I interviewed; tongues were tsk-ed that Kenyan women would wear trousers, of all things, to the house of God, whereas the Congolese women would wear the long pagne skirts. Fashion within the walls of the church, perhaps more than anywhere, is seen as an external manifestation of the internal, the length of the skirt (never trousers, which are deemed masculine) signifies reverence and respect. This was not the only reason for dressing differently on Sundays, however; two men told me that they wear suits and “dress smartly” to impress the women in the congregation. Not every female I spoke to wore skirts or
dresses to church; one 18-year-old girl told me that she wears baggy trousers on Sundays, though she does so because “I don’t go to a church where other Congolese go, so I feel like I can dress however I want”.

**Material Support**

As has already been demonstrated through my interviews, membership within a church community goes beyond the symbolic value of entrenching belonging to a particular socio-cultural group to enable access to real material benefits for the good life. In the absence of material support, like food and money, from the government or humanitarian organizations, for several Congolese I spoke with, a church was one of the first places they visited upon arrival in the city. For many others, they continued to access material support long after their arrival. I must stress here that it is not my intention to overlook or downplay the spiritual significance of religiosity and church membership. I do not wish to conceptualize these institutions merely through a utilitarian framework, nor do I want to position their congregants as attending church on Sundays and throughout the week with the main objective of reaping the material benefits of such membership. Lastly, I do not want to imply some sort of binary distinction between spiritual vs material benefits; I do not believe that many of my participants would see the two as clear-cut, as will be discussed further shortly. Yet while a great deal has been written on the spiritual significance of ones’ faith, including within forced migration studies (Hasan, Mitschke, & Ravi 2018; Mayer, 2007), I choose to consider what the Church does for migrants that the State and humanitarian regimes does not, not apart from fulfilling their spiritual needs, but in addition to it.

In the sections that follow I will look at the role of the church in offering meaningful livelihood opportunities to migrant congregants, including pastoral roles, and providing food and money for its more vulnerable members. In considering the significance of financial contributions, I will offer the example of monetary assistance for a refugee funeral, demonstrating how financial stability in this life is seen as having wider repercussions for the spiritual realm.
Access to Livelihoods

One of the benefits of belonging to a church is access to paid work opportunities. Several Congolese told me that they are paid to preach, sing, or play musical instruments in a church. Aligning with this study’s previous analysis of *kinyozi* livelihoods in Chapter Four, employment is not merely about making money, but oftentimes is also about allowing people to feel fulfilled, creative, and less isolated. Though the musical positions offered to the Congolese I interviewed were not always paid, the new social network that came with being part of a church ‘team’ held value to them, as it brought a greater closeness with the community than merely being another congregant visiting only on Sunday. One participant shared a story of how working as an unpaid guitarist in his church’s worship team ‘paid off’ when the church eventually supported him and his family financially through weekly tithes.

One day one of my students from the Kabiria Community Centre’s language class where I volunteered, a young Burundian refugee, invited me to his church. Daniel was one of the few among my contacts at the Centre that did not attend the nearby ‘refugee church’ lead by Pastor Alain. Daniel’s English competency was quite low, and so I was surprised to learn that his church delivered services in English in the upscale Kilimani neighbourhood. Though predominantly Kenyan, the two pastors— one male, one female— were Caucasian from North Carolina, and co-delivered the service with Southern twangs. A large building with a paved parking lot and around 200 seats under a peaked ceiling, I found out from speaking with a Nigerian member that the church was very multicultural, and offered services in Amharic, Mandarin and Kirundi. I was told by another congregant that most non-Kenyan members preferred to attend services in their own language. Daniel, however, chose to attend the English service. The reason for this, he told me, was because a friend of his who had a contact at the church helped him to get a place in the English service worship team. Though he was not paid for this, he told me it helped him to improve his English skills and develop personal connections with North Americans. He said he believed both of these things would improve to better his chances of resettlement elsewhere, preferably North

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45 All of the Congolese pastors and church musicians I met in Nairobi were men. Though not a focus of this study, it is important to signal gendered divisions of labor within the Church, and the need for further research on this, particularly within the context of forced migration and self-settlement.
America, signifying the relationship between religiosity, membership, and transnational aspirations for this young man.

I also met several Congolese men who worked as pastors at local churches, many of whom had led a church in the DRC before arriving in Nairobi. One man, originally from Baraka, South Kivu, he told me he was a Pentecostal pastor in DRC before coming to Nairobi and spent one year in a refugee camp in Tanzania. “Life was not good there,” he told me. “I suffered. There was no work.” There he learned from a friend, another Congolese, how to make artwork to sell. When he arrived in Nairobi with his wife and five children, he was able to register with the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS) to remain in the city rather than having to move to Kakuma refugee camp as he could prove his children were all enrolled in school in Nairobi. Soon after arrival he met a Kenyan who invited him to be a pastor of a church in Kabiria, attended by a small congregation of about 50, made up of a mix of Congolese and Kenyans.

Pastors’ salaries are typically paid through congregant donations. The accessing and controlling of finances among pastors in Nairobi has contributed to widely held sentiment that pastors often benefit disproportionately. It is not uncommon to find articles in local newspapers highlighting misuses of funds, corruption, and opulent lifestyles among the leaders of churches, though typically the ones that are publicized are those with larger, richer, congregations. In stark contrast to the pastors of ‘megachurches’, or ‘prosperity churches’ that live in mansions and drive Audis, the Congolese pastors I met lead small congregations whose collective financial contributions could only cover a minimal pastor’s salary- and sometimes not even that. Several pastors admitted they were not paid weekly or monthly salaries and received only bus fare for getting to-and-from the church. Pastor Alain, for example, told me that they do not pay him a salary, because the congregation is too poor. Instead, they give him his bus fare to get to and from church, about 500 Ksh- 1000 Ksh a month (approx. 5-10 USD). There are other ways for pastors to benefit beyond a regular salary; generally respected as important community leaders, these individuals are asked to reside over important events like weddings and funerals and will receive a monetary donation for their time. Some pastors- though usually those who were formally trained within a seminary and are part of a registered church- are also part of regional and/or global sister churches or denominational federations that can connect churches with global networks of training and financial support.
Food and Money

Another way in which membership in a church assists migrants is through its provision of material support, such as donations of food. One man, a Rwandan refugee who simply goes by the name ‘Pastor’, answered how his church assists refugees. “The congregation combines tithes to buy flour to give to those who need it—all vulnerable congregants, not just refugees. But the church is not financially strong, but they give the little they have. Money comes from private donations, love offerings [a special offering taken specifically for the needs of congregants], tithes. We want to do more but we don’t have the capacity.”

As well as leading service every Sunday, for example, Pastor Alain told me that as churches have a mandate to write letters to the UNHCR, he has written recommendations on behalf of his forcibly displaced congregants so they may stay in Nairobi so that they do not need to relocate to the refugee camps. He also oversees the distribution of milk and porridge to the children of the church members on Saturdays for free, paid for through congregant tithes. There is thus a correlation between the financial stability of a church and their level of material supports for the congregation and the wider community. Pastor Alain told me that his church was severely limited in its capacity to provide for its members, and thus had ‘failed’ them. “We get four hundred, maybe five hundred shillings (approx. $4-5 USD) a week from the tithes. The church cannot afford to pay me anything more than bus fare, and certainly not to buy food for refugees.”

Special offerings are sometimes taken for specific needs among the congregants. Community-based fundraising is common in Kenya and throughout east Africa; the tradition of harambee (Swahili for ‘all pull together’) brings together community members to fundraise for individuals in need—these events vary in duration, size and formality. Harambees are common for raising funds to help pay for hospital bills, which are often prohibitively high for Kenyans and must be paid before the patient is released. Churches are common settings for harambees, and congregants are key donors. I myself have been to several churches in Nairobi where, in addition to the weekly tithe, the pastor passed around a plate or bucket for donations to go to a particular member of the congregation to assist with a medical bill or funeral costs.
The Good (After) Life

When finances are available, churches can provide migrant members with a source of financial assistance for extraordinary costs for life events such as weddings, hospitalization, and funerals, which can be costly. One day, when I was visiting the ‘refugee church’ in Kabiria, the pastor announced that one of their members, a 33-year-old Burundian woman, had passed during childbirth. The child, who would have been her fifth, also died in the process. Within many African societies, ancestors are believed to play an integral part in the management of prosperity, safety, and health (Ashforth 2005, 197). Ensuring that they have a proper burial so that they are at peace has implications not just for this life, but the next. Just as ancestors can impart fortune upon the living, so too can they bring misfortune. Misfortune at the hands of an ancestor is generally believed to be punishment for the living when they do not fulfil their commitments to the deceased (Ibid, 203).

One of these commitments is providing the dead with a ‘proper’ funeral. The burial and ceremonies before and after must be done ‘right’ so as to appease the spirits (Harrell-Bond & Wilson 1990, 230). Displacement makes this difficult, however; not only is it harder, if not impossible, to gather all of the living family members and friends, and the associated costs can be prohibitively expensive for low-income migrants. It is expensive business to die in Nairobi. Undocumented migrants, such as the Burundian woman who passed, may not enjoy the rights and privileges of citizenships, but they are not exempt from hospital and funeral fees. Costs include the burial site (in this case, 5000 Ksh), a casket (5000-8000 Ksh), transportation for the casket from the mortuary to the burial site (by hearse, up to 15,000 Ksh), and food (up to 8000 Ksh) for the visitation following the burial. These costs are prohibitive for many refugees, who must rely on the assistance of others. In Kabiria, the two biggest sources of assistance for help with covering funeral costs are the Church and the refugee Community Representatives (who request financial support from the UNHCR). I was informed by a Congolese contact that the UNHCR provides funerary services for UNHCR-registered refugees with permission to live in Nairobi, but not for those who are living in Nairobi unregistered, or those with a ‘movement pass’ (instructions to report to one of Kenya’s refugee camps). Many of the refugees in Kabiria fall into the two latter categories, including the Burundian woman who had died. The church serves as an important resource for both the living and the dead, therefore, providing both mourners to pay their respects and finances to cover the
costs. Not only does the attendance of such a large network provide comfort and solace for the grieving family members, but it also assists with costs.

After the passing of the Burundian woman and her child, Pastor Alain invited the whole congregation to her funeral. I was extended an invitation as well. The woman and infant’s death was a sad illustration of the risks facing the undocumented and poor in the city, where prohibitively expensive hospital medical bills cause many to seek other (often informal and unregulated) healthcare options. In this woman’s case, George explained to me as we waited in the cemetery for the truck to arrive that carried the casket, she went to a Congolese doctor who practiced informally in the area. He was a trained professional in DRC, but unable to obtain certification and a work permit in Kenya, he had his own unregistered and unregulated private practice. Though he would charge much less for customers, many of them Congolese migrants, he did not have access to much of the equipment or support that he would have within a formal hospital setting. The woman, George continued, had had caesarean sections for all her other children, and as such, should not have had a vaginal birth for this pregnancy. The doctor, for reasons unknown, assured her that she would be fine to do so. During the delivery, the woman experienced complications and began bleeding profusely. Her doctor called an ambulance, but by the time she arrived at the hospital, she had died from blood loss and the infant passed away, still inside her womb.

Many of the attendees that gathered at the small graveyard in Kabiria were members of the church, a mix of Congolese, Burundians, and Kenyans. Women retreated into the nearby trees to console the weeping female family members and cry with them. Death and dying has received relatively little attention among scholars and practitioners dealing with forced migration, the latter more fixated on the prevention of death, and when the dying are considered, it is for updating population statistics (Harrell-Bond & Wilson 1990, 240). Yet for the large gathering at the graveyard, this was a profoundly important occasion. The woman was well known among these people, and the church and shared religious identity served as a key linkage between and among them.
Eastmond (1988) describes a Chilean refugee’s funeral as the “reaffirmation of group solidarity, the need for unity and continuity—both individual…and collective…despite great changes and disruptions”. While this observation is of Chileans reinforcing solidarity with other Chileans, the funeral of the Burundian woman and her child, attended by a diverse group of forcibly-displaced peoples, is symbolic of a much broader exilic solidarity, despite ritualistic and cultural variances in response to death and mourning.

The simple wooden coffin was set atop a platform, a photograph of the woman perched on the lid. We stood in a long line and walked one-by-one past the open casket to pay our respects. A man held out a green aerosol can—some sort of floral air freshener—to each person as they walked by the deceased. People took the can and sprayed it directly onto the woman and baby’s foreheads. Every now and then someone would accidentally take the can backwards and send a plume of mist into their own face. It would have been almost comical, if not for the tragic circumstances. I asked Dennis, another manager of the KCC who I had travelled to the funeral with, the reason for the aerosol can. He explained that, as well as keeping the bodies smelling fresh, the floral-scented spray served in the place of flowers, which the departed’s family could not afford to provide. When it came my turn to walk by the casket, I saw that the woman’s pale forehead glistened with beads from dozens of sprays. The baby, wrapped in a pink baby blanket and placed at her mother’s feet, looked as if she was sleeping. The air was thick with the scent of artificial roses. Afterwards, four young men in casual attire took turns digging, standing waist-deep in the bright red earth, wiping
rusty streaks across their foreheads under the hot sun. Someone explained to me that City Council had instructed the men to only dig three metres deep, as at four metres lay another body. The dead were stacked, just inches of soil between them, to conserve precious land. One man told me that bodies were removed every six months to make room for another. George, Dennis’s brother and another manager of the KCC, was distressed. He told me that within his tribe, the Bembe, for spirits to be satiated and extend their blessing on their children for their continued health, wellbeing, and success, the dead must be buried in their own land. “Spirits are not at peace if not home,” he said. “It’s in the Bible- it says where your body lies, so your spirit lies as well.”

I asked Dennis where the bodies were taken. He shrugged and shook his head sadly. “It is a very bad thing,” he said, “to be buried like this,” motioning to the pitted red earth around us, scattered with leaves and bits of waste. “The ochi (‘ancestors’ in Kibembe) will never be at peace.”

Inquiring as to how people who could not return home to bury their loved ones- like the family members of the Burundian woman and her child, George told me,

“My grandfather died and was buried in a refugee camp in Tanzania. He appeared to three male relatives, and said he was not in peace. He told one relative that his spirit was in a stone at his gravesite- we took that stone and brought it home [to eastern DRC]. He is at peace now.”

I do not know the deceased family’s beliefs surrounding burial and spiritual appeasement. They were likely Christian, as her grave was marked with a simple wooden cross and the pastor read from the bible during her service. Yet they may not have been as bothered by the spiritual implications of being unable to bury their loved ones in Burundi. Even other Congolese, confessed George, particularly those not from the Bembe tribe, “are less concerned with their ancestors”. I had noticed that there was a general lack of concern over where to stand in the graveyard in relation to the dead buried below. A stone’s throw away, a group of young mothers breast-fed their babies while sitting atop a freshly dug grave. I initially had thought that perhaps these were people who believed that their placement was inconsequential because the spirits lived beyond the grave. I pointed with my chin towards the nursing mothers and quietly asked George what he thought of this. He clicked his tongue. “No respect! The church tells us that these are just bones, so they don’t care.” For many of those in attendance at the funeral, in that case, many of whom George confirmed were “refugees”, their understandings of the significance of where one is buried is of
far less consequence to both the dead and the living than compared to those like George who both attended church yet still held to his ethnic group’s beliefs in ancestral spirits.

Yet amidst the tumultuousness, pain, and uncertainty of losing loved ones far from home, the living are surrounded and supported by community. Regardless of geographical positioning, neither death nor displacement severs social connectedness; Harrell-Bond and Wilson (1990) state, “Death does not signify an ending to the relationship between an individual and society” (234). The burial and ceremonies surrounding it are complex, dynamic, and draw in a myriad of family members, friends, and community members, requiring emotional, material, and financial commitments and/or redistribution (Ibid). As Romain said, as we joined in with a long throng of people snaking their way back through the tall grasses of the fields surrounding the graveyard following the funeral, “death forces communion…with the dead, and with the living.”

For some, financial stability and wellbeing in their present lives is intricately connected with the spirit lives of their ancestors; this presents a new conceptualization of the good life to extend from the individual to the collective, and across temporal and geographical boundaries, where the wellbeing of the living is enmeshed with the peace of the dead. For others, the physical location of ones’ burial is less consequential. Yet whatever ones’ beliefs, for the living who grieve, the tightly bound financial and community assistance that can come from church membership provides much-needed infrastructures of support within the death and mourning process.

Conclusions

This chapter explored how church membership and religiosity is an important component in migrant wellbeing and social inclusion within contexts of displacement in Nairobi. I examined the benefits, beyond those of a spiritual nature, that arise from being part of a church community. I argue that, for many, membership at a church affords an extended social network, particularly important for those who are recently arrived and lack a kinship network. The church is presented as a unique ‘cultural enclave’ within the city that enables meaningful interaction with other migrant groups and Kenyan citizens. Within these spaces, though shared religious identity and knowledge of religious symbols, norms, and practices can serve as a basis for trust and bridging capital between diverse groups, ethno-cultural distinctiveness is simultaneously maintained, and, in some cases, encouraged. Churches that promote multiculturalism, for example, provide the time and
place for Congolese migrants to exhibit individual and collective conceptualizations of ‘Congoleseness’ and gender identities through bodily and fashion performances on Sunday morning. These arguments contribute to the study’s wider exploration of what elements, specifically, within the city enable migrant wellbeing and inclusion within contexts of displacement; as I’ve demonstrated here, the church is a vital space for many Congolese in their efforts to curate community.

I have also demonstrated in this chapter how the church plays a key role in providing important livelihood opportunities and material resources in the absence of state or humanitarian assistance. The case study of the Burundian funeral provided one example of where such support is needed, to cover burial costs, as well as illustrating the role religiosity and church membership plays in creating and sustaining social and spiritual connectedness among both the living and the dead. Deaths and burials are key points where cultural practices are performed and spiritual beliefs are engaged. This has particular salience for the displaced, particularly for those who believe in the correlation of how and where family members are buried with the appeasement of the dead, and, by extension, their own personal wellbeing. This chapter has stretched the study’s framing of the good life to take into consideration the influence of wellbeing in a trans-temporal sense, respecting my participants’ belief that a good life now requires a good afterlife for others.

The chapter that follows will continue analysis of how leveraging subjectivities and membership is a strategy of pursuing the good life, as I look at the role of fashion and consumerism among Congolese in Nairobi. Just as Christianity was thought by many Congolese (and Kenyans) as a defining feature of what it means to be Congolese and a powerful basis for community-building, the next chapter will continue to apply a sartorial lens to ‘Congoleseness’, considering how ‘dressing well’ is a mechanism for inclusion within a context marked by political exclusion.
Chapter 7: Looking Good, Feeling Good: Fashion and Consumerism

Le mythe Afrique-misere, nous ne le voulons plus. Nous sommes en train de forger d'autres mythes. La Sape c’est une ideology; c’est contredire les forces de la misere.

The myth of African misery - we no longer want it. We are forging other myths. La Sape is an ideology; it contradicts the forces of misery.
(Adrien Ngudi, as seen in Gondola 1999, 23).

Fashion is another important practice of identity and community-curation for Congolese in Nairobi. Like religiosity, fashion has its own vocabularies, symbols, and norms, and also serves as a basis for membership and ethno-cultural distinctiveness in the city. Fashion is perhaps one of the more visible elements of identity and community curation among Congolese in Nairobi, justifying its emphasis within this study; as will be elaborated upon later in this chapter, fashion-based distinctiveness is often one of the first things cited by both Kenyans and Congolese in the city when you ask what makes them ‘stand out’ from other migrant groups. This thesis opened with a description of Maurice, a member of the Congolese fashion sub-culture La Sape. One day, in an effort to get the young Sapeurs together in one place, I organized a photoshoot for Maurice and two other Sapeurs at a small photography studio in downtown Nairobi. Dinah and I met him outside the studio, finding him in ‘civilian’ clothes, his Sape outfits in a small carry-on suitcase pulled behind him. Two others arrived- Esther, with caramel-coloured eyes and a long brown weave, and Ziggy, a lanky young man with a cheeky smile. Once in the studio, each unzipped their suitcases and began pulling out all manner of fabrics and accessories, holding them up in the light, slapping out wrinkles, laying them out on a sofa to examine colour coordination. I changed into the outfit that Maurice had helped me pick out at Toi Market, and all of us strutted like peacocks around the room, flashing thumbs up and clapping. This was a micro version of the defile (the French word for catwalk), the traditional Sape performative walk to exhibit ones’ ensemble, with slow and elongated strides to show off designer labels with flourish. Maurice wore an outfit nearly completely comprised of a red tartan, complete with matching trousers, a kilt, jacket and suspenders. He carefully slid a gold watch over a red gloved hand and arranged a large pair of aviators.
Like Ngudi’s quote, Maurice and his fellow Sapeurs, and many other Congolese in Nairobi, are dismantling one-dimensional myths of misery and suffering among the Congolese diaspora. In a place marked by social, political and economic exclusion, fashion consumerism and performance are acts of defiance and vehicles for agency. Their purchases and priorities defy what, to many outsiders looking in, would deem to contradict the limitations imposed by their material realities. Just as Sapologie has its roots in political resistance, as will be explored further, it will be argued here that in Nairobi today, Congolese Sapeurs are rebelling against a uniform and ideological system of a different sort and feeling good about themselves while they do it. I should say here that sapeurs in Nairobi are likely a rather extreme case, given their relatively limited presence in the city (particularly in comparison with La Sape in other cities like Kinshasa, Brazzaville, or Paris), and are not representative of the wider Congolese ‘community’ in Nairobi. Yet I feel that their mindset and fashion choices are reflective, in some ways, of wider trends among other Congolese I met. Like the Sapeurs of Nairobi, other Congolese who dare step from their houses in the vibrant colours and styles that would shout ‘I am Congolese!’ in a place where to be a foreigner is fraught with both real and imagined perils, combat both the suggestive authority of the state and the refugee regime narrative of what it means to be a migrant in cities in the Global South.

This chapter opens with a brief historical overview of the Sape movement, then discusses it within the context of the Congolese diaspora in Nairobi. Continuing this study’s wider analysis of ‘Congoleseness’, this chapter will apply a critical lens to the sartorial aspect of ethno-cultural identity, challenging notions of ‘authenticity’ within a globalized world, and how clothing is used to both perpetuate and challenge gender-based identities. The chapter then discusses how individual and collective aspirations and identities are intricately tied with consumer culture, followed by an analysis of fashion as a rejection of restrictive state immigration policies and narrow development regime refugee narratives, and how sartorial expression challenges literature on the (in)visibility of migrants in Nairobi. Within this chapter, I argue that sartorial distinctiveness and ‘dressing well’ among Congolese in Nairobi is both a rejection of oppressive state policies and a strategy for individual and collective identity expression within contexts of socioeconomic and political exclusion. This, for many, is an important element of the good life; looking good is intricately tied to feeling good, and the ability to purchase and wear stylish clothing in the city is crucial for this process.
La Sape

The group of Sapeurs I met in Nairobi was small, with only three members out of the 15 coming out to the photoshoot. I did, however, spend an extensive amount of time with the ‘leader’ of the group, Maurice. We shared many cups of coffee and tea, rode matatus together, shopping together at mitumba markets, and even sharing dinner that he cooked for me at his apartment in Kasarani, a neighbourhood off the highway thick with tall grey apartment buildings. This is not a chapter about La Sape, and my discussion of the fashion subculture to follow is by no means meant to be exhaustive. Nonetheless, it is worth touching upon some salient points of the historical function of textiles and adornments of La Sape to set the stage for the themes of resistance, consumerism, migration and identity relevant to the wider Congolese population in Nairobi. Another reason why discussion of La Sape can be applied to the wider Congolese community in Nairobi is because of its porousness and adoption among non-Sapes from across the DRC. A young male Congolese student originally from Beni in eastern DRC, for example, told me that even though he does not consider himself a Sapeur, he admires the sub-culture’s values and has adopted some of their stylistic attributes to his own wardrobe.

La Sape: A Brief History

Describing La Sape is challenging; is it a sub-culture, a movement, a religion, a cult, or a community? Even the president of the Congolese Association Culture et SAPE (ACS) struggled to explain the movement; “La Sape is like a giraffe. It’s difficult to describe what it is, but you recognise it immediately” (Michalon 2015, italics in original). As Congolese musician and Sape icon Papa Wemba described it in a 1979 interview, “The Sapeur cult promotes high standards of

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46 Other authors that explore the history of La Sape in greater detail include Gandoulou (1989), Gondola (1997, 1999, 2010), Martin (2004), and Thomas (2003).
47 Within the world of La Sape, music and fashion have a long-interconnected history, with the rumba scene in Brazzaville and Kinshasa often being the platform for Sapeurs to flaunt their fashions to the world (Gondola 2010, 164). The Congolese rumba musician Papa Wemba was instrumental in popularizing sapologie among the Congolese diaspora from his Parisian residence from the 1970s up to the early 2000s with many of his lyrics including references to high fashion designers (Gondola 2010, 164).
personal cleanliness, hygiene and smart dress, to a whole generation of youth across Zaire… well groomed, well shaven, well perfumed” (as cited in Gondola 2010, 164).

While the exact origins of La Sape are contested, it is generally believed to have had its beginnings in the early 1900s in the capitals of then-Congo Free State and Moyen Congo. During this time of colonization, growing urbanization, driven by new jobs available in urban centres and the stripping of land from locals, led to greater availability of foreign textiles and clothing (Martin 1994, 405), and pre-existing symbolic associations with fashion continued with the colonial linkages between clothing and social hierarchies. Second-hand clothing was often given by colonial employers to their Congolese house staff, and the staff in turn appropriated these fashions to their own tastes (Gondola 1999, 27). Another theory of the birth of La Sape is that Congolese admired the fashions of the white-collar migrant workers from West Africa who traveled to work in Brazzaville and Kinshasa in the 1920s and 1930s (Gondola 2010, 159). Revealing the way that history and politics threads through fashion, these “Bapopo” (or Coastmen) were dressed in the fashions of the European colonizers, with silk shirts and suits, their outfits emblematic of globalization, modernity, class and cosmopolitanism (Ibid., 159-60). Regardless of how La Sape got its start, clothing, though European in origin and style, was worn as a method of “autonomous differentiation” (Thomas 2003, 953-54), subverted by the wearer as expressions of personal taste and social status (Gondola 1999, 27).

Following the country’s independence in 1960, the movement would continue to thrive in defiance; not of its colonial masters, but in resistance to then-Zaire’s President Mobutu’s period of l’authenticité, or ‘Zaïrianisation’. This state ideology was designed to erase remaining vestiges of Belgian colonialism in the country and replace them with social, cultural, and political initiatives ‘more Congolese’ in nature. Fashion, too, was targeted, and Mobutu banished European fashions in favour of the abacost (a contraction of à bas le costume, or ‘down with the suit’) for men and pagne for women. During the period of l’authenticité, Kinshasa’s Sapeurs not only defied Mobutu by wearing suits, but by wearing incredibly exaggerated suits, sometimes resembling the zoot suits of the 1940s in America with the wide lapels, padded shoulders and high waists. In a place and time where outspoken political defiance could be met with severe penalties from the government, La Sape became banned under Mobutu’s administration for being “too Western” between 1965 and 1997 (Michalon, 2015). This ban would not erase the movement from within the country’s
borders, nor slow its transnational spread. By now, *La Sape* had long existed beyond Kinshasa and Brazzaville, and appeared in major capitals around the world, fueled by the Congolese diaspora. Inspiring a sort of circular influence, the *Sape* styles, originally inspired by European fashions, appropriated and made it to be its own style, to be re-appropriated by the fashion houses of Europe, North America, and East Asia. British designer Paul Smith, for example, created a line for his Spring 2010 ready-to-wear collection inspired by *La Sape*. Though *Sapeurs* have traditionally been predominantly male, female American musician and fashion icons Janelle Monáe and Solange Knowles are said to be inspired by *La Sape*, demonstrating how the styles have transcended not only geographical and ethnic boundaries, but those of gender as well.

**La Sape in Nairobi**

Though *La Sape* has a presence in Nairobi, the city is not a major outpost of the movement compared to Kinshasa, Brazzaville, Paris and Brussels, considered to be the primary centres in the movement’s geographical network (Jorgensen 2014, 2). While there is a reasonable quantity of literature on the *Sapeurs* of Congo (Bazenguissa-Ganga 1992; Gandoulou 1989, 1989b; Gondola 1999, 2010; Martin, 1995) and within the European diaspora (MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Newell 2016; Thomas 2003, 2014) there is little dedicated to the movement in Nairobi other than some Kenyan media articles (Odidi 2017, 2017b) and academic references which largely aggregate ‘Congolese’ fashion (Campbell, D’Arc Kakusu, and Iddi Musyemi 2006, 97,99; Pavanello, Elhawary, & Pantuliano 2010, 24).

Though *Sapeurs* have a celebrity-like status in DRC, in Nairobi they seem to be met more with confusion or bemusement than awe. I cannot recall a single Kenyan I asked that was familiar with the movement. To them, *Sapeurs* were aggregated in with the wider Congolese ‘community’ in the city. Showing images of the well-dressed men and women to my Kenyan friends would elicit a response around the lines of, “Ah yes, that’s a Congolese for you. So extravagant.” Many Congolese I spoke to, as well, though familiar with the *Sape* movement, were unaware that there was a presence of them in Nairobi. Unlike in certain neighborhoods in Kinshasa, Brazzaville or Paris, one is unlikely to come across a *Sapeur* strutting down the street- in Nairobi, you must actively track them down, and to do so requires knowing someone with a personal connection.
I met Maurice through Dinah, who had a Congolese friend who knew him personally. Maurice’s group of Sapeurs consists of fifteen individuals, fourteen men and one woman. According to him, there are more than 20 different Sape clubs based in Nairobi, mainly comprised of Congolese and a few Nigerians and Ghanaians. Within his group, I only met him and two other members—Ziggy, a lanky 20-something man, and Esther, a statuesque woman, also in her mid-twenties. All three of them originate from Kinshasa. Maurice’s group, and each of the others, he tells me, has a hierarchy and before a new member is accepted, they must prove their sense of fashion to the ‘seniors’. “The members of the group have to approve your taste in clothes, the choice and mix of colours, and the fitting of the attire relative to your body size,” explains Maurice. Emmanuel, the manager at the hair salon where I spent much of my time researching, was a former Sapeur of a different group. He tells me that Sapologie in Nairobi is the result of “a blending of Sapeur identities- musicians, models, salon workers who dress up in their spare time for special occasions”. It is worth mentioning that Sapeurs in Kinshasa and Brazzaville do the same, as only those who have reached celebrity status can afford to do it full time. Otherwise, most Sapeurs have full-time jobs, braiding hair, fixing cars, or selling vegetables during the day, and donning the zoot suits at night, on weekends, or for special occasions (Stone 2020). Esther told me she does hair styling and models occasionally in Nairobi for money, and Maurice was trying to start his own radio station where he would talk about pop culture and music. Ziggy chose not to disclose how he makes a living in Nairobi, telling me simply that he “hustles”.

48 While this chapter does not take a specifically gendered approach to its study of La Sape, it is worth mentioning that the movement, traditionally, has typically been male dominated (Gondola, 1999). The members of the group I found in Nairobi had one female in its membership of seven, Esther. “I am a Sapeuse”, she told me. She explained that it is easier to be “a female Sapeur” in Nairobi than in Congo, “because they don’t know what Sapeurs are- they are much more serious in Congo. They [Congolese in Congo] think your not serious if you’re a woman dressing up like that.” Authors that have more closely examined gender aspects of La Sape include Gondola (1999), Maclean (2017) and Martin (1994:413,418).
While it is useful to reference the Congolese origins of La Sape to offer scaffolding to its contemporary form in Nairobi, it is a very different context and takes an alternative form. The physical distance between the Congolese and Kenyan capitals seems to have built a chasm of difference between interpretations of what it means to be part of La Sape among Nairobi’s small collection of Sapeurs. Though to those unaccustomed to the Sapeur style outfits may appear haphazard, many Sapeurs dress according to a strict dress code. Conventionally unconventional, one might say. Suit jacket vents, for example, should be at 32 centimetres, bottom cuff buttons should be left undone, and no more than three colours must be used (Odidi, 2014). Sapeurs of Kinshasa are known to be less strict about the ‘rules’ than their contemporaries across the river in Brazzaville (Michalon, 2015), and in Nairobi, perhaps even less so. I could certainly position them according to the definition carved out by DRC’s Sape ‘spokesperson’, and indeed, much of what the Sapes I met told me about how they dressed and behaved mirrored what I had read about the Sape ‘code of conduct’ (e.g. cleanliness, distance from political activity, abstaining from drugs,
chivalry). It was not clear, however, if this was because they were abiding by the rules set decades ago and thousands of miles away, or if it was a pattern of behaviour developed on its own in an attempt to cleave out a unique position in a new society unfamiliar with their existence. If that is the case, then the birth and development of the *Sape* movement in Nairobi mirrors the evolution of the movement in Kinshasa and Brazzaville, over half a Century ago.

*La Sape* is about more than just the clothing; as Maurice told me, “There is fashion, and then there is *Sapologie*. *Sapologie* is a movement.” Thinking of *La Sape* as a cohesive and defined ‘movement’ in Nairobi may be misleading, however; rather than a single collective, *La Sape* is composed of multiple smaller groups, each with their own membership criteria and leadership. Emmanuel, a former Nairobi *Sapeur* who has since left a Lingala-speaking group, told me, “In Nairobi, it’s not a movement. We wanted to unite with the Francophones, but it became a business. It ultimately failed because of bad leadership.” Emmanuel explained why he was no longer a *Sapeur* in Nairobi. The *Sape* collective he was part of was offered the opportunity from a private sponsor to travel to Japan as part of a cultural-exchange program. “Because of bad leadership,” however, “the contract went to the Francophone group. We had contacts with the Belgian and French embassy, but our chairman’s friends stole the idea and the contract. We were the first to bring *Sapologie* here- they took it from us.” The fragmentation within the *Sape* ‘movement’ is not unique to Nairobi; Emmanuel told me that in in Congo, as well, *La Sape* is made up of many separate collectives, “not just single group. Every district has its own *Sapeur* group, but they often come together for competitions.”

I asked Maurice how the movement in Nairobi is different from that in DRC. “The Congolese understand the *Sapeur* movement better than Kenyans. They [Kenyans] don’t get what the fashion is all about… In Congo we wear bright colours, like yellows, greens, and pinks. In Kenya, *Sapeurs* have reduced our brightness. Kenyans identify different colours with tribes; they don’t understand why we wear bright colours or the way we wear them, so we play it down. We also infuse a little bit of Kenyan style into our own. Step at a time, step at a time. Maybe one day they’ll understand.” He adds, “There is so much more involvement in *Sapologie* in Congo. Here, so little. In Congo, you don’t need to do a fashion show to draw attention to it- it’s a culture.” Maurice was referring to a *Sapeur*-themed fashion show, the “*Sapeur* Ball”, hosted by the popular Nairobi restaurant Carnivore in 2017, in partnership with the Nairobi chapter of *Alliance Française*. The invitation
put out to the general public announced the prime attraction of “Nairobi dandies” and invited attendees to come “dressed like a Sapeur”. According to Emmanuel, it was at this event that the Francophone Sape group saw them perform, “liked the idea, organized themselves, and invited us to do Carnivore the next year with them”, then beat them at the chance to go to Japan. This anecdote illustrates the transnational element of fashion, whereby some Congolese can receive opportunities to travel abroad based on a sort of sartorial tourism. There is also an interesting transnationalism of style between Japan and DRC; the Japanese fashion brand Yoji Yamamoto has long been one of the top labels among sapeurs in Kinshasa and Brazzaville, and in return, Japanese fashion houses have integrated sapeur style into their own designs (N’tary-Calaffard 2012).

**Consumerism, ‘the Right to be Fashionable’, and the Good Life**

A growing body of academic literature on fashion and migration has emerged over the past several years, with anthropologists, specifically, taking special interest in the body and clothing since the late 20th Century (Hansen 2004, 370). Prior to this, fashion was largely left underexamined, or outright overlooked across Western academic disciplines (Lemire 2010, 1). Fashion scholarship growth coincided with the emergence of feminist studies and gender history from the 1970s onwards, driven largely by female scholars, who brought a critical eye to material conditions and consumptions of the ‘every day’ (Ibid., 8). Other scholars across disciplines would follow in these footsteps to engage with material culture, including anthropologist Mary Douglas’s study of ritual and lifestyle (1966) and theorists like Roland Barthe and Pierre Bourdieu considering contemporary material engagement (Lemire 2010, 8). French historian Fernand Braudel’s pivotal work *Civilization and Capitalism* (1979) had a significant influence on future studies of what he called the ‘material economy’ and would inspire future studies on fashion, in particular, as he challenged still-ingrained sentiments of the frivolity of fashion studies. ‘Is fashion in fact such a trifling thing?’ he asked. ‘Or is it, as I prefer to think, rather an indication of deeper phenomena - of the energies, possibilities, demands and *joie de vivre* of a given society, economy and civilization?’ (Braudel 1985, as cited in Lemire 2010, 11).

According to many Congolese I asked, fashion is far from a trifling matter. In fact, several expressed how dressing well, in the ways they see fit, is crucial for achieving the good life. Hannah,
a 23-year-old from Goma who operates a clothing company in CBD and did not want to share her migration status, said this is because “it gives you respect and admiration from people around you.” Sarah, a 21-year-old status refugee living in the Kawangware settlement who works at a cosmetic shop, agreed. “Personally,” she said, “my life comes to a standstill if I don’t dress well. I always need to look good.” Hannah and Sarah’s responses emphasize their firm belief in the importance of fashion, dressing the way they want, and beyond mere want, according to Sarah- the need to look good.

I join a growing number of scholars across disciplines who consider how migrant identity, specifically, is expressed through commodity culture (Mills 1997), including expressions of hybrid transnational identities (Ghosh and Wang 2003; 272); “aesthetic nationalism” (Edmonds 2010, 41); high fashion as a ‘refuge’ for the Congolese diaspora (Gondola 2010, 165); and enabling belonging and bridges across national and cultural boundaries (Somerville 2008). Increasing scholarly attention to “fusion fashion” transcends a Eurocentric view of fashion and sees the making and wearing of fashion as evolutionary and constantly changing based on the movement of people, ideas, and materials across geographical and temporal boundaries (Mentges 2013, as seen in Kaiser 2020). Furthermore, I join other authors who have considered the role of fashion in forging an ethnocultural “ness”; Lowe (2013) examines sartorial expressions of ‘Somaliness’ as a means to retain cultural identity (93) among Somali migrants in Nairobi; Somerville (2008) looks at efforts towards ‘Canadianness’ as a strategy for ‘belonging’ among the general population among second-generation Indian youth, whereas on the flip side Nagel (1994) looks at ‘Indianness’ as a means to ‘construct ethnicity’ and strengthen group bonds among Indigenous peoples in Canada. My own study adds to these localized conceptualizations of collective identity and the role it plays within how migrants construct and maintain subjectivities and wellbeing in relation to wider society, with a particular focus on the role of fashion and fashion consumption in this process.

Within this analysis, given the context of non-citizens in Nairobi where ones’ rights are often heavily contested, I draw heavily from anthropologist Alexander Edmonds’ (2007) conceptualization of the poor’s ‘right to be beautiful’ within his research on plastic surgery culture in Brazil. Edmonds considers global and regional trends around the shrinking of the state and the ensuing blurring of citizen with consumer, whereby rights became expressed in new ways,
including every-day consumption and aesthetic expressions (2010, 112). His conceptualizations of ‘aesthetic nationalism’ gives rise to the notion of ‘aesthetic citizens’; within the context of neoliberalism and privatization, paired with rising public aspirations for social and economic mobility, beauty becomes a new realm for self-governance (Ibid., 104), as individuals use beauty technologies and services as tools to wield new forms of ‘self-governance’ to become healthier, more socially active, and more economically competitive (Ibid., 113-14).

Applying this to my own research’s contexts, I would agree that ‘migrant’ becomes blurred with ‘consumer’, and the ‘right to be fashionable’ is expressed in new ways through fashion consumption and performance. I continue to draw parallels to Edmonds’ work on notions of beauty, modernity, and wellbeing in applying the lens of ‘aesthetic nationalism’ (2009, 30). In the same way, I apply a broader conceptualization of health and wellbeing, arguing that to look good via fashions is to feel good, and to feel good is a vital part of wellbeing.

The city plays a significant role in enabling these processes. Urban centres have always been a key setting for Congolese fashion movements, with Kinshasa and Brazzaville being the birthplaces of La Sape and European urban centres like Paris, London, and Brussels offering space for transnational reception and growth among the fashion-minded Congolese diaspora. Likewise, Nairobi plays an important part in the movement of people, goods, and trends from across Africa and the globe. Nairobi is both shaped by and shapes the converging and entangling of bodies, ideas, things, and practices that are simultaneously driven by and drive global consumerism. In this context of class disparities in the neoliberal city, consumerism is political in that it signifies class mobility where shopping behaviours of the middle class is equated with the “good life”, and copying these practices are an attempt to achieve membership in this ‘mythic’ group (DeMott 1990, as seen in Edmonds 2006, 110).

Drive through Nairobi and you will see countless colourful billboards hanging over the highways or affixed to the side of buildings featuring middle-class bliss, young (mostly lighter-skinned) families with wide, white smiles. The good life, or at least according to these billboards, is in the form of a middle-class, light-skinned nuclear family in perpetual laughter with sparkling teeth and an abundant supply of sweating Coca-Cola bottles in their refrigerator. It is often the young or the middle-aged woman who is featured most prominently selling every-day objects; she is the mother,
the wife, and the one wielding the spatula over her new electric stove. Her body is the most common vehicle for capitalist production and consumption (Edmonds 2010, 28).

If Nairobi strives to generate demand through its many advertisements of the good life via material consumption, it also offers the supply. Many of my participants from a diversity of backgrounds and income levels, both Kenyan and Congolese, told me that they like to shop at mitumba markets. These spaces offer the urban poor and migrants the ability to shop in the same place and purchase the same items (though not necessarily new or in perfect form) as citizens and middle class.

In addition to mitumba markets, several Congolese told me that they like to visit the city’s many shopping malls - not for shopping, necessarily, but for seeing what others were wearing and to get style inspiration. One 18-year-old girl, for example, told me that in addition to buying her clothes from the Kawangware mitumba market, she will occasionally buy her clothes from the Two Rivers Mall “to check the new styles and see what other teenagers are wearing”. Though the often-prohibitive prices here may be one of the main reasons why few of my participants told me they shopped at malls, these places do seem to be popular locations for social media selfies and viewing/displaying the latest fashions. With the permission of some of my younger Congolese contacts, I followed them on Instagram and was able to see what kind of content they were posting. I could tell from the distinctive water fountains and murals that some of their photos were taken in malls around the city. Sometimes, they would be posing in front of a high-end car in a mall parking lot. Many of these gleaming multi-floor glass and steel structures have popped up around the capital over the past two decades, complete with food courts, arcades, cinemas, and at Two Rivers Mall, “Africa’s largest Ferris wheel”. These places afford guests an escape from the heat, dust, and boisterous traffic just steps away. No tickets or entry fees are needed at the doors, and no status documents need to be shown.

Having foregrounded the role of the city in enabling commodity culture, fashion, and the good life, the next section will dive deeper into the relationship between sartorial expression and identity curation among Congolese in Nairobi. I will continue this thesis’s earlier discussion of ‘Congoleseness’, as represented through fashion, specifically, interrogate notions of ‘authenticity’ amidst globalized markets, and consider the interplay between fashion, gender, and sexuality. Lastly, I will consider the role of sartorial expression in challenging myths of suffering among migrants in the city, and its relevancy to the good life.
Fashion and Identity

“Clothing”, according to Willmott (2010), “is always about identity” (176). Upon arriving in Nairobi, I had initially expected it to be more difficult to identify Congolese just by looking at them, considering the literature I had read on preferences for ‘blending in’ and maintaining some semblance of ‘invisibility’ among migrants in a context where to stand out carries risk of discrimination and abuse. Indeed, as one young woman residing in the Kabiria settlement told me, “In town during a crack-down (on illegal immigrants), I’ll do my best to blend in.” Yet her response was not widely shared among the many other Congolese I spoke to on the matter of how they dress and the risk of ‘standing out’. Responses reflected a belief in the inherent connection between fashion and national identity. A man in his early fifties from Uvira in eastern DRC, for example, told me that “To dress Congolese in Nairobi is to show our identity.” Similarly, a male university student told me “Dressing different is one way I maintain my Congolese identity in Kenya”. A female focus group participant, when I asked if she had changed her ‘online style’ since arriving in Kenya, told me she had not changed the way she dressed in the photos she posts on social media, in which she dresses in her “cultural attire”, which was vitenge (plural for kitenge) outfits, because “it makes people more curious to know me and ask about Congolese culture. So I can’t change because it partly defines me”.

Neil Carrier (2016) explores the complexities of how Somali immigrants and citizens navigate national and globalized identities within Eastleigh. Despite diversity in ethnicity and class in Eastleigh, like most of the Congolese I spoke to, Carrier speaks of a self-identification as simply ‘Somali’, and a pan-Somali ideal (Soomalinimo) creates a sense of solidarity along the lines of Somali vs. non-Somali (101). Carrier points out that lineage-based solidarity is socially reproduced not because of “some primordial instinct”, but because of its social usefulness for protection, support, and promoting financial investments (102). In the same way, the ease at which my participants spoke of “Congolese standards” and “Congolese identity” in terms of fashion is not indicative of an inherent binding to their fellow Congolese, but rather because fuelling the stereotype of sartorial superiority and its insinuations of elegance and class enables pride in being
distinguished from the general population and fuels a positive narrative amidst the difficult conditions that led them to leave their homeland.

The Congolese I spoke to illustrate a desire to maintain a sartorial distinctiveness, even despite the risks of being ‘outed’ as a foreigner, as was discussed in Chapter Four in my discussion of the risks of being bribed or extorted. These men and women cited above reference maintaining an ethno-cultural identity in the way they dress; I will now build upon previous discussions of ‘Congoleseness’ by exploring what it means to ‘dress Congolese’, drawing on empirical evidence. I will then interrogate some of the notions around ‘authenticity’ within Congolese fashions and styles, and then consider how clothing can perpetuate or challenge gender stereotypes.

‘Dressing Congolese’

When I first arrived in Nairobi, I asked a Kenyan friend if he could tell Congolese just by looking at them. “Ethiopians and Somalians, I can tell,” he said. “They look different, they have soft hair. But Congolese, Rwandans, Nigerians,” he told me, “You can’t tell unless they open their mouths to speak. Then you hear their accent.” But fashion is its own ‘visual language’, complete with its own accents and vocabulary (Laurie 1981, as seen in Davis 2013, 3). Time after time I was told by both Kenyans and Congolese that you could pick a Congolese out of a crowd simply by looking at what he or she wore. This belief would be shared with me by Congolese with an edge of pride beneath it; they do not just dress different than Kenyans or other nationalities, they dress better. Having been told by so many Congolese that they distinguish themselves by ‘dressing Congolese’, I asked Jonathan, a university student at AIU, what it meant to ‘dress Kenyan’. 21 years old from Beni, in North Kivu, DRC, Jonathan has been in Nairobi for a little over a year for his studies in theology at a local university. He laughed and sent an exaggerated furtive glance over his shoulder, as if to make sure no Kenyans were within earshot. “It’s to dress without putting effort or thought into it- whatever is available, you’ll put on. When I first arrived [in Kenya], I judged Kenyans for how they dressed. Back home, especially on a university campus, you’d think it was a fashion show every day! Me, I was looking at them [Kenyans], and thinking, ‘who would wear slippers to class?’, and they were looking at me, and saying, ‘What, do you have a date or something?’ At first, it would make me feel bad…but I asked myself, why feel guilty for how I look?”
Another young man from Kisali, when I asked how Kenyans dressed compared to Congolese, blew air out of his mouth in humorous distaste. “Go into the slums, or into the CBD. Look how the men dress, with suit jackets two sizes too big.” For him, there was no distinction between fashion in the poorer or richer parts of the city; all Kenyans lacked style and taste.

But what does it mean, exactly, to dress “Congolese”? While there is no homogenous understanding, there were some reoccurring themes brought up by those I asked. To Jonathan, who was wearing a finely tailored burgundy collared shirt, cigarette trousers, and Louis Vuitton shoes when I met him at the campus café, it meant “dressing official, so smart.” This concept of dressing stylishly and well-put together was reiterated several times by others. To an 18-year-old female born in Kenya, “cladi (‘fashionable clothing’ in Sheng), means to wear good clothes, something that is so presentable, so that teenagers look at you and think, ‘yeah, that girl knows how to dress’.

There does seem to be a je ne sais quoi about ‘Congolese style’- like La Sape, it may be difficult to describe, but you know it when you see it. “It’s ‘stylish’ and ‘fashionable’ (etoka in Kibembe and kitoka in Lingala), one man in his 40s told me. “It means dressing in an orderly manner”.

Among the women I interviewed, dressing ‘Congolese’ meant dressing modestly, or “kuva vizuri” in Swahili. A woman in her early thirties from the Fizi district in DRC told me, “We dress fashionably to cover up our bodies (“kujisitili” in Swahili) to be presentable, unlike Kenyan women who wear short skirts and dresses exposing off their bodies to the public.” She told me that the ‘decency’ of clothing is one of the ways she can tell a Congolese woman from a Kenyan woman. “Kenyan teenagers dress in short clothing and appear like prostitutes in the eye of the public, most especially the Congolese elders”. This view was shared by another Congolese woman, also in her thirties from Fizi district, how said that “wearing short skirts and dresses popular among Kenyans is not allowed in the Congolese culture”. This is likely a sentiment that varies depending on age, time spent outside of DRC, context, and origin. While most of the participants I spoke to were from eastern DRC, for example, and expressed dislike for the skin-showing fashions of Kenyan women, I remember on one occasion I went to a club with Esther, the female member of Maurice’s Sapeur group in her early twenties from Kinshasa, and she was wearing an extremely short and revealing cocktail dress.

An 18-year-old female who was born in Nairobi to a Congolese father and a Kenyan mother told me that rather than kitenge dresses and skirts during the week, she prefers to wear jeans and “cool
“attire”. She also told me that she is accustomed to wearing shorter clothes because of Kenyan mother, but that “sometimes I feel uncomfortable when I am around Congolese women.” She was told that “back in Congo when a lady wears short clothes that show her body she is laughed at”. According to her, among her friends her age this has less to do with where they were born and more to do with who their parents are and what they value. “If they are more into decency and tradition the girl will wear long dresses”. Further discussion on the gendered aspects of clothing among Congolese in Nairobi will be provided later in the chapter.

In addition to the longer modest styles, another signifier of ‘Congolese’ style is the way clothing is worn. One woman told me “For Congolese women, the way they fold the lesos49 when dressing with the vitenges is very different from other people. We put one leso at the top, that is from the neck to the waist and the other at the bottom.” For the men, one man told me that Congolese men dress differently than others in the city by wearing trousers that are slightly bigger than their size, though I observed this trend among many Kenyan men as well. The same participant did admit that it is harder to tell Congolese men in the city from other nationalities, but that women are easier to differentiate because of their preference for vitenge. Ornamentation was given as another marker of Congolese style; “Men love wearing shirts with glitter and chains”, as one man told me. From my own observations, it did seem that many Congolese men did indeed have an affinity for ‘bling’, whether shiny gold watches, diamond-studded crucifix necklaces, or sequinned t-shirts.

For others, aesthetic ‘Congolese’ness’ was about extreme dedication to fashion. Rose, a 25-year-old girl from Beni in North Kivu, DRC, who was a recent graduate of AIU, told me, “We can go over mountains and go down valleys to get the right fashion”. That she spoke in collective terms, ‘we’, signifies her identifying with the wider “Congolese” persona, and described the national distinctiveness in terms of fashion as extreme dedication to clothing that may lack among other nationalities. The ‘mountains and valleys’ in Nairobi might be the tall stacks of clothing piled atop tables in the sea of clothing vendors in the city’s mitumba markets, where one must have both a sharp eye, patience, and a great deal of dedication. Prior to the Sapeur photoshoot I organized, I had the opportunity to accompany Maurice to ‘Toi Market’, one of the city’s largest mtumba markets, to pick out a Sape-worthy outfit. We twisted and turned our way through narrow

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49 Leso, also commonly known as ‘kanga’ in Kenya, is a rectangular piece of cotton fabric typically printed with brightly coloured design, a decorative border, and a proverb written in Kiswahili.
walkways between stalls, eyeing cardboard signs perched up against stacks of clothes advertising jeans for 200 Ksh and men’s blazers for Ksh 500 (roughly USD 2.00 and USD 5.00, respectively). Maurice shopped quickly and deftly, his fingers flitting between the stacks of trousers to peer at the labels sewn in and eyes scanning the walls for the jackets hanging from the ceiling. The lack of designer labels did not stop him. At one point he handed me a pair of thigh-high rainbow stockings. “These?” I asked, pairing them with the neon orange blazer he had given me. He nodded, already on the hunt for a pair of trousers to tie together this otherworldly outfit. The 3-colour rule of the Sapeurs of Kinshasa obviously did not apply here. After hopping my way around a tiny fitting room made of a bedsheet strung between two coatracks in the back of a stall, I anxiously emerged, modelling my ensemble: rainbow socks, tangerine-coloured trousers and matching blazer with a golden lapel pin, a lime green blouse and a black skinny necktie. I did not feel like a Sapeuse, more like a cheapened Halloween version of one. The shopkeeper stared, wide-eyed. Boris cocked his head, examining his creation. Finally, a nod of the head and a smile. “Oui, ça ç'est bon.” The experience of seeing Maurice’s careful and certainly did speak to Rose’s description of extreme dedication to picking out the ‘right’ fashion among Congolese.

For others I spoke to, ‘dressing Congolese’ was less about prescribing to ‘ethnic’ or ‘national’ styles of DRC (as these differ significantly between region, tribe, and class), as much as the cost (real or perceived) and the act of purchasing luxury goods over necessities. As Maurice once told me, “You give $100 dollars to a Kenyan he will buy food. A Congolese will buy a nice pair of shoes.” This is likely an exaggeration, yet the point is that the prioritization of purchasing luxury items over necessities for mere survival is deemed by many Congolese to be a common characteristic of the nationality. As well as style and cost, the origins of the clothing matter; one man told me that Congolese men generally dress better than Kenyans because they “wear clothes made of materials from France, Italy, and England. The men dress in expensive clothing.” He has lived in Kenya for 28 years, and he tells me that although the way he dresses has changed somewhat, “I still have my Congolese standards.” In his perspective, then, to dress ‘Congolese’ is to wear European-designed and made clothing. This irony calls to mind the complicated l’authenticité of Mobutu’s Belgian-made ‘Africanized’ suits, or the Dutch origins of kitenge cloth deemed to be ‘traditional’ garb throughout West and East Africa. The topic of ‘authenticity’ will be discussed further later in this chapter.
Not everyone agreed with the importance of high prices for dressing well. Ziggy, one of the Sapeurs, for example, told me, “In Sapologie the most important thing is to have a style, to know it, and to know how to transform with it. You don’t have to be rich to do that. I would be a Sapeur for a living, but we don’t have the capacity here. In Congo, because it’s so huge, some people can make a living from it, like through getting sponsors and doing shows. In Congo, they’re role models- they teach you that you don’t have to be rich to look good”. This opinion- that how something is worn is more important than the cost of what is worn- was likely shared by his fellow Sapeurs at the photoshoot. Ziggy wore a long vest the colours of the DRC flag hand-made by a local tailor. Esther’s shoes were a cheap shiny yellow plastic, like the ones sold alongside the road for 300 Ksh (approx. USD 3.00). Maurice wore red winter mittens, pilled with age. Understanding and abiding by the Sape rules of aesthetics and dressing in a second-hand or hand-made outfit, takes precedence over wearing runway labels but not knowing how to properly wear them. As Maurice would later tell me, “Sapologie is in here [tapping the side of his head with a gloved finger]. You have to be creative. Someone who spent $100 may look better than someone who spent $1000. The most important thing is to have style, to know how to transform with it. You don’t have to be rich to do that.”
The city enables one to look good without being rich. As previously explored, Nairobi’s many mitumba markets offer one-of-a-kind pieces, sometimes from the fashion houses of Europe, or convincing knock-offs, at affordable prices. The global supply chains that bring the bundles of clothing to these markets from Europe and North America, and the often Chinese-made knock-offs, being sold by Kenyan salesmen and women complicates notions of what it means to dress ‘Congolese’, where it becomes the biproduct of capitalist modernity and global consumerist processes. The chapter will dedicate time to furthering this analysis of what, exactly, ‘authentic’ means within the context of fashion and identity among migrants in a globalised world.

*L’authenticité*

As was discussed briefly earlier in this chapter, La Sape grew partly out of response to rebelling against Mobutu’s so-called period of l’authenticité, between 1972 and 1990 when the government made concerted efforts to do away with all vestiges of colonialism and foster a singular national
identity (Font-Navarrete 2011, 9). There were a number of ironies here; the very name of the period, *l'authenticité*, is French, the language of the country’s Belgian colonizers. The name given to the country, Zaire, was derived from a Portuguese adaptation of a Kikongo word for ‘river’ (Kabwit, 1979). Furthermore, in an effort to rid the country of Western style, Mobutu replaced it with Eastern; in 1973 Mobutu visited the People’s Republic of China to meet with President Mao Zedong in an effort to strengthen political and economic ties (Leslie 1993). It was shortly after that Western-style suits and neckties were banned and the *abacost* was instituted (Kabwit 1979, 390), which closely resembled the high-necked, tunic-style ‘Mau suit’. Though the style may have departed from ‘Western’ influence, Mobutu’s favourite *abacosts* were made by the tailor Arzoni in Belgium (van Reybrouck 2012, 381f). Not only are the origins of ‘authentic’ Congolese fashions ironic, but they illustrate the complicated nature of determining and maintaining ‘authenticity’. The example of Mobutu’s efforts at instituting a globalized version of *l'authenticité* brings up a number of questions relevant to my own research context; namely, what is ‘authentic’? Is it a spectrum? Who decides? Does it matter to Congolese in the city, and what is the connection to the good life?

Fashion consumption patterns among Congolese in Nairobi reveal interesting themes around globalization, urbanization, and “authenticity”. The Congolese community continues to challenge notions of what is ‘authentic’ through their consumption of designer knockoffs, most made in China. Designer wear in Nairobi is prohibitively expensive for most, and label options are limited. Real designer pieces can also come through trade between friends; a Congolese student I asked told me “Friends will trade or buy from each other- maybe one needs the money so he’ll sell off some of his things. Or maybe you know a broker who you know sells real stuff.” One can also source a custom-made outfit from one of the city’s many tailors. Congolese tailors are highly respected for their fine tailoring skills in the city, among both Kenyans and Congolese. *Kitenge* fabric is sold by Congolese merchants who arrange with family and friends to bring it in bulk back to Nairobi when they travel home to visit, and tailors can expertly piece together a bespoke outfit at costs much lower than if purchased out of a shop.

One of the most popular places to purchase designer labels, however, is at one of Nairobi’s many *mitumba* markets. Here vendors display European brands and knock-off Chinese-made designs in varying levels of convincingness, sometimes with humorous brand renditions: Dolce & Banana,
Cucci, and Hugo Boos. The second-hand markets are favoured for their affordability; a man in his fifties told me “At Sarit Centre [a popular shopping mall] a pair of trousers can cost 3000 shillings (approx. USD 30), but in the Gikomba market you can get them for 1000 shillings (approx. USD 10).”

For many of the Congolese I met in Nairobi, theirs was a counterfeit opulence. I never asked the question, “Is it real?”- the question, though undoubtedly relevant to inquiries of consumerism and spending habits, felt tacky. During one interview with the sharply dressed Jonathan on the AIU campus, Dinah began to laugh after something he had said in Swahili to her. “He told me my Chanel bag was fake!” she said, holding up her rhinestone-encrusted pink purse.

Jonathan laughed and held up his hands defensively. “Well, I could tell.”

I asked him if it was generally acceptable to ask about the authenticity of ones’ fashion. “Sometimes,” he said sheepishly.

Dinah objected. “He didn’t even ask! He just pointed and told me it’s not real!” It is worth mentioning here that her and Jonathan had known each other since childhood, and the obvious familiarity between the two likely permitted the friendly banter and slightly blunt observations on her purse than would occur between two strangers or even acquaintances.

I asked others, when it came to European luxury brands like Chanel or Gucci, if it mattered to them if the clothing was ‘real’ or a knockoff. Hannah, who owns a clothing store in downtown Nairobi said that to her, it does matter; the purchase and collection of authentic higher-end pieces is not only tied to personal pride but is also a worthwhile investment. A “fake”, she said, “can’t make you feel good or outstanding. It kills the pride of fashion. An original adds value to your pride and class and so it is better to have a few original pieces than many fakes.” Another woman, Sarah, who lives in the Kawangware settlement, said that while she does own “a few original pieces”, financial limitations restrict her from purchasing authentic high-end fashions. “I would love to have the real deal,” she said, “but at the moment all I can afford are the duplicates so why not fake it till I make it?”

The high volume of counterfeits coming out of China (Lin, 2011; Yang, 2015) has given rise to its own insult; a Congolese friend once pointed out someone on the street as “So China”. “It means you’re fake,” she told me. “Or if you call someone ‘Chinku’ [Sheng for ‘Chinese’]. The fact that
the real or perceived ‘Chineseness’ of a product has become an insult may stem from the flooding of Chinese-made products in Africa that are generally cheaper in price and quality, but it may also be indicative of the rise of anti-Chinese sentiments within the region (Ndijo 2014; Waweru 2020). When I would ask migrants and Kenyans about how they felt about the growing population of Chinese in Nairobi, perhaps most visible in the increase of Chinese-staffed restaurants or Chinese-funded highway construction sites around town, I would receive a roll of the eyes and a tsk of the tongue. This would be followed by complaints about “those Chinese”; their bad manners towards Africans and tendency to only hire other Chinese. It is perhaps ironic, too, that ‘So China’ is an insult when there is such a significant dependency on Chinese-made fashion in the city.

Not all clothing at the mitumba markets are counterfeits, or from China, however, and the process involved in getting the clothing to the stalls is an interesting study in globalized supply chains in and of itself. Charity shops in Europe and North America often keep just a quarter of items donated to them (Miyungu, 2014), selling the remainder to exporters at US 0.90 per kilogram, who pack them into 45-kilogram bales and send them overseas in shipping containers which can hold up to 550 bales (Bett, 2016). The bales are priced according to the condition of the contents, from Grade A (new or near-new condition) to Grade D (major defects) (Ibid). Suppliers import the bales then sell to mitumba vendors. Anyone can buy a bale; a quick Google search finds a list of supplier contact details along with product details including clothing type, country of origin, quantity and price, written out as “sexy shorts, UK, 150+ pieces, Ksh 15,000” and “leather jackets, Canada, 40+ pieces, Ksh 15,000” (The Fashion Parlour, 2018). Some vendors specialize in specific brands, though most will put out on the table whatever assortment of labels they get.

Not only do mitumba markets offer the chance of finding a designer piece at an affordable price, but they also provide unique pieces that will help one débarquer (a French word used by Sapeurs to mean “stand out”) by purchasing something they can be sure no one else will have. Here one can find kilts, fur-trimmed fedoras, and sequined cowboy boots. Sourcing second-hand clothes is not unique for Nairobi’s Sapeurs, nor does this practice only start once they arrive in Kenya; thrift shopping has long been an activity among the La Sape community in DRC (Douniama, 2018).

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50 Many of the critiques I heard from Congolese and Kenyans are reflective of wider criticisms that are not always accurate. Deborah Brautigam (2015), in her book Will Africa Feed China? offers a comprehensive response to many of the common stereotypes and misconceptions held within Africa and the West regarding Chinese engagement within the continent.
Consumerism has driven the ‘migrant impulse’ of Congolese (Thomas 2003), with those that can afford it flying to the fashion capitals of Europe to purchase designer labels, differentiating themselves from other migrants in that this travel is chosen as part of a ‘cyclical mission’, or travel for social status with the intent of returning home (Ibid, 949). Travel to the fashion capitals of Europe is less likely for forcibly displaced Congolese in Nairobi, however, both because of the prohibitive costs associated with travel and the difficulty of flying with migrant status. Yet *mitumba* brings the world to Nairobi; one needs only take a bus to Toi Market to purchase an outfit sold on the streets of Milan or Paris. *Mitumba* thus offers a democratization for fashion— one can be very poor yet find a high-end designer label.

Many Congolese I asked immediately referenced the wearing of kitenge fabric as ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ expressions of ‘dressing Congolese’.\(^\text{51}\) This colourful wax fabric is referenced when Congolese would describe their preference for “traditional” of “cultural” Congolese clothing. As a 40-year-old man originally from Fizi district told me, “To dress Congolese is to wear our Congolese cultural clothes.” According to him, this meant clothing made from *vitenge*. But the concept of ‘traditional’ or “cultural” belies the evolutionary history of this clothing across time and space. At cultural events I attended at churches and a university, when attendees were asked to wear “traditional” garb representing their countries of origin, typically Congolese would wear outfits made with *kitenge* fabric. Yet complicating the national or cultural uniqueness of this fabric, *kitenge* is not worn only by Congolese, but rather is used widely across West and East Africa (Gott et al., 2017). In addition, as explored by Hansen (2020) in her study of *kitenge* outfits in Zambia, what is considered a “traditional” fabric is actually the result of long histories of transnational and global trade. Tying back to this chapter’s earlier discussion around the complexity of “authenticity” and demonstrating once again the globalized nature of fashion, wax prints, though frequently called “African prints” within the fashion industry, are also referred to as ‘Dutch wax prints’ on account of their origin from the Netherlands for West African markets for decades. Complicating this fabric’s history even more, the Dutch found their inspiration for this fabric from the then-Dutch East Indies (or modern Indonesia). During the colonial era, the Dutch witnessed how locals would apply wax to fabric then dying over the wax to create the colourful and elaborate

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\(^\text{51}\) *Vitenge* is not unique to Congolese in Nairobi: Kenyan men and women, as well as other nationalities, love buying and wearing the brightly coloured fabric.
'batik’ patterns. One theory of how this fabric travelled to West Africa is that when the Dutch sent West African slaves to work in the Dutch East Indies, they admired the wax fabric and brought some back with them when they returned to their homes in West Africa, creating a market. The Europeans, meanwhile, were attempting to make their own cheaper wax prints to sell to the Dutch East Indies and West Africa; while those in the former colony were not impressed with the imperfections in the fabric that resulted from European manufacturing, West Africans saw the fine lines and cracks in the colour as beautiful and unique. Today, one of the largest manufacturers of wax fabric sold in West Africa is the Netherlands-based company Vlisco.

I remember how after the La Sape photoshoot we all went to a restaurant in downtown Nairobi and shared big plates of rice and chicken. “Today I felt like a Sapeur,” said Esther. She told me she first became interested in Sapologie because of the mixing of colors and the high-end labels it entailed. It was interesting to me that she said she ‘felt like’ a Sapeur; I had never outright asked her if she identified as a Sapeur (or the female equivalent, Sapeuse), I just assumed as much because of her inclusion in Maurice’s group. But perhaps ‘Sapeure-ness’ is not something that is static or ever-present, but rather a subjectivity that requires regular curating. Esther felt more like a Sapeur when she was dressed in the flamboyant fashions on the photoshoot floor than she did when she arrived in simple clothes pulling her wardrobe in a suitcase behind her. In the same way, among my other participants ‘Congoleness’ is not static, bound to neither time nor place. It is the ever-evolving creation of multiple forces of globalization, migration, and consumerism. As was explored in Chapter Four’s discussion of the leveraging of ‘Congoleness’ in economic activity, with particular focus on the hair salon where ethno-cultural stereotypes encourage Kenyan patronage, clothing is an important mechanism in the fluidity of Congoleness. One can put on or take off distinctive clothing, allowing the wearer to switch back and forth between identities as needed. As the young woman residing in the Kabiria who told me how she does her “best to blend in” during migrant crack-downs, her response highlights how her clothing choices change depending on time (i.e., during migrant ‘crack-downs’) and place (i.e., ‘in town’). On the flip side, others told me how their distinctives of clothing works to their advantage. A female focus group participant told me that she uses Instagram and Facebook to post photos of her wearing kitenge that she sells to her customers- many of whom are Kenyan- because social media “gives me publicity and market for my Congolese fabrics”. For Esther, her ‘Congoleness’ also works in her favour. “I work at a Kenyan [-owned] salon. My colleagues were jealous because I was getting
so talented and getting more clients than them. Clients would see my *Sapeur* clothing and say ‘I want her’. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the belief among Kenyans that Congolese excel at hair styling gives Congolese migrants a competitive advantage and encourages the ‘playing up’ of the stereotypical traits like trendy hair styles and colourful, well-tailored and designer (or convincing knock-off) clothing. The ability to mediate ‘Congoleteness’, to switch between identities- facilitated here via fashion- aligns with Chapter Four’s discussion on Congolese leveraging their ethnocultural identities as it benefits them within the context of earning income. Another example of this would be when Maurice spoke about being invited to perform at the Carnivore restaurant’s ‘*Sape* Ball’ event in full-*Sape* regalia. The difference between Maurice and Esther, in these examples, being that in Maurice’s case the *Sape* Ball was a one-off event, whereas Esther’s ‘playing up’ of her appearance is an everyday occurrence.

‘Congoleteness’ in fashion, then, is many things. It is simultaneously local and global, traditional and modern. ‘Fashion’ and ‘Congoleteness’ are not static but are in a state of constant renegotiation and evolution, and travel with migrants as they move through time and space. Congolese fashion is simultaneously culturally distinctive and a blend of ‘traditional’ and global elements, emblematic of the ‘transcendence of boundaries’ (Friedman 1999, 247). Having discussed some of what it means to ‘dress Congolese’, I will now turn to why one would choose to dress in a distinctive manner within a city where it can be dangerous to stand apart from the crowd, particularly as an undocumented migrant.

**Fashion, Gender, and Sexuality**

Earlier in this chapter I shared how some Congolese woman defined ‘Congolese style’ in relation to the way Kenyan women dressed, describing the longer Congolese skirt and dress hems as more ‘modest’. One female participant in a focus group I held in Kabiria referred to the images of women she saw on social media, telling me, “Congolese have respectful styles and postures in which they take pictures, unlike Kenyans”. Another female participant told me, “We respect ourselves as Congolese and have dignity in our pictures and style. Kenyans pose like they are *malayas*” (Sheng for ‘prostitute’). There is a sacrificial element to this mentality, the choice to be different in loyalty to ones’ cultural identity over fitting in with the host population and potentially
having less risk of persecution or harassment. Gloria, the wife of a theology student at a university, and a woman I never saw out of her long *kitenge* dresses, told me, “I never changed the way I look. If someone looks at me, they know I’m Congolese. The way I dress- I don’t wear trousers. I wear lots of *kitenge*.” I asked her why. “Because I am Congolese! I am not Kenyan! Some people like to change to fit in, but not me. I think it’s good to be different”.

While I noticed typically distinctive patterns of dress and hairstyles between male and female Congolese, not everyone I spoke to stuck to the traditional gendered aesthetics. I never saw Dinah, my assistant, wearing skirts or dresses, for example, with the exception of a ‘Culture Day’ at her university where she was encouraged to “dress traditional”. Another reason for her fashion choices may be that she had been spent much of her youth between Goma, Kampala, and now Nairobi, and confessed to feeling more like a ‘citizen of the world’ versus strictly Congolese. Crossing gender lines sartorially is nothing new to *Sapeurs*, as well, with female *Sapeuses* wearing the traditionally hyper-masculine styles of *Sapologie*. The only female *Sapeuse* I met in Nairobi, Esther, told me that she hybridized her approach somewhat; “I like to dress like a man, but pair it with some feminine fashion.” When we met for the photoshoot, I saw that she did this by wearing a blazer and trousers, but tailored to her body in a form-fitting way, and paired with a ruffled blouse and stiletto heels on her feet. Other female *Sapeurs* choose to dress more masculine; American singer Janelle Monáe has often attributed the fashion subculture as one of her stylistic inspirations, and famously embraces the more masculine elements of the style (i.e., wearing broad shouldered blazers, dress shoes, and neckties).

Just as fashion, identity, and sexuality intersect, for female Congolese ‘dressing male’ can be a fashion statement rebelling against strict traditional gendered dress codes. This applies beyond *La Sape*, as well; though most of the female Congolese I met adhered to the traditionally-feminine dress codes, Jolina, a 25-year-old Congolese woman born and raised in Nairobi, told me, “I love shaving the sides of my head like boys do. I shaved my hair because I don’t like anything touching my neck, it feels awkward to me. Plus, long hair needs a lot of maintenance and I always keep myself busy, so I find no time to keep on making my hair”. This same woman told me, “I love to

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52 There is not a great deal written on female *Sapeurs* (*Sapeuses*); Ruth Maclean’s article in The Guardian (2017) discusses the ‘female dandies’ of Kinshasa. The article is brief, yet touches upon some interesting dynamics within this sub-sub-culture, including stereotypes around cross-dressing and homosexuality.
dress fashionably. I always want to look good.” Her definition of what looked ‘good’ and ‘fashionable’, however, varies significantly from the more traditionally-feminine outfits of other Congolese women. “They [Congolese women] wear long dresses, they wear long clothes. It’s beautiful and presentable, it’s decent, but I prefer my style.” When I asked her to describe her style, she told me, “I love wearing rugged jeans with denim jackets and hoods. I also wear sweatpants a lot, like sometimes I prefer dressing like a guy.” In addition to the convenience and comfort of ‘dressing like a guy’, I eventually found out from her that she identifies as bisexual, though few people know, she admits. I asked her if she felt that dressing in more masculine styles was in any a reflection of her sexuality. “It is connected to my sexuality,” she agreed, but she also added that she dresses the way she does “to avoid men in my life.” This, according to her, was not necessarily a successful tactic because “I have a lot of guys who want to date me.” The cross-section of fashion, gender identity, sexual identity, and community belonging was beyond the scope of my research project. It is, however, a topic that warrants much more academic attention for the further insights it would provide on the complex subjectivities among migrants that are often bypassed in favor of other, more conventional, attributes. The aesthetic domain, says Edmonds (2010), is capable of perpetuating wider structural oppressions (30), potentially, in this case, those determined by gender. Yet, as he also points out, the aesthetic domain is simultaneously indicative of ‘a particular kind of modern subject’ with aspirations for self-determination, -transformation, and socio-political mobility (Ibid.). Again, the breadth of my empirical evidence cannot offer an in-depth analysis of gender-based socio-economic marginalization. It is worth suggesting, however, that in the case of Jolina, subjectivities around age, nationality, gender, and sexuality both shape and are shaped by fashion and clothing is an important element in self-expression and differentiation within the Congolese community.

This theme of individual identity- its formation, reclamation, perpetuation- and its role within navigating new spaces and places is so often lost within the singular story of displaced peoples peddled by the State and humanitarian regime. Jolina’s shifting between gender identities as she changes outfits- “like a guy” during the week reflects the role that fashion has in identity transitions among Congolese. This was expressed by another young person I spoke to, a university student originally from Beni. When he told me about how his Kenyan classmates would make him feel awkward when he would arrive for class in fashionable outfits, he said this caused awkwardness for him. “I don’t like to stand out,” he said. “I thought, ‘what, do I not look nice?’ I didn’t feel
comfortable. Now, I mediate the way I dress. Like a Kenyan some days, like a Congolese other days. It depends on the context.” This sentiment was shared by a 26-year-old female from Beni who recently graduated from a university in Nairobi. To her, a certain freedom of expression comes from living far from the pressures to look and act a certain way, and ‘Kenyan style’ affords a more casual approach and being geographically distanced from DRC relieves the pressure to adhere to the stricter, gendered, dress codes of Congolese. “Life is simpler if I just adapt,” she said. “Like dressing for example-Kenyans dress “free-style”, like anything goes. Congolese have specific ways of dressing, like women aren’t supposed to wear trousers. But I’ve embraced the Kenyan way. I don’t feel as much pressure to dress a certain way here. Who gives a fuck? You do you, I do me.”

**Fashion as Subversion (of Limitations and Stereotypes)**

I will now consider the chapter’s previous exploration of fashion and consumption as an expression of individual and collective identity through a lens of subversion of limiting narratives and stereotypes of urban migrants and pressures to remain invisible. The notion of consumption as resistance is applied in Oka’s (2014) study of purchasing patterns among refugees in Kenya’s Kakuma refugee camp, where he explores the social and psychological role that consumption plays in the lives of the inhabitants. He writes,

“…the purchase and consumption of foods that are desired and familiar, unlike the passively received, largely unpalatable, and culturally and logistically unsuitable relief food, *generate a counter-narrative of the refugee as an agent as opposed to a perpetual recipient of global largesse*” (2014, 24, italics added for emphasis).

Though Oka is talking here about food consumption among camp-based refugees, parallels to clothing purchase among urban Congolese can be made. Oka’s account is significant to my own research due to his attentiveness to the ‘small daily acts’ like buying a fabulous pair of neon yellow shoes or folding ones’ shirt cuffs *just so*, generate feelings of beauty and control in spite of conditions of extreme precarity.
As previously touched upon in this chapter, *La Sape* has its roots in resistance to stereotypes. After the passing of the ‘le Prince de *La Sape*’ musician Papa Wemba, Congolese musician Angelique Kidjo said of him,

"His whole attitude about dressing well was part of the narrative that we Africans have been denied our humanity for so long. People have always had stereotypes about us, and he was saying dressing well is not just a matter of money, not just something for Westerners, but that we Africans also have elegance. It was all about defining ourselves and *refusing to be stripped of our humanity*” (BBC 2016, italics added for emphasis).

Papa Wemba made *La Sape* a pan-African movement challenging negative stereotypes of the continent. In the same way, through fashion and consumerism Congolese in Nairobi are subverting limiting narratives not just of migrants in the city, but of Africans in general. In Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina’s (2005) tongue-in-cheek *‘How to Write about Africa’*, he writes

“Among your characters you must always include The Starving African, who wanders the refugee camp nearly naked, and waits for the benevolence of the West. Her children have flies on their eyelids and pot bellies, and her breasts are flat and empty. She must look utterly helpless”.

Several of those I spoke to challenge such a narrative of hopelessness, either in the inherent or strategic sense. In fact, seemingly paradoxically, theirs was not the desire to blend in or exploit some form of desperation, but rather the wish to be recognized and admired. Fashion plays a crucial role in this. I asked Hannah, the 23-year-old Goma-born woman who owns the fashion store in the CBD, why ‘standing out’ fashion-wise was important to her. Hannah said she did not feel comfortable sharing her immigration status, possibly implying a concern of being ‘outed’. Nevertheless, she said that she likes to dress distinctively and “fashionable” because when she does, “I feel empowered, sexy, and proud. I feel on top of the world and confident”. Likewise, Sarah, the 21-year-old status refugee originally from Beni who owns a makeup studio in Kawangware, says, “I feel free comfortable and confident and admirable.” I asked both woman about the seeming paradox of dressing in a way that may draw attention to themselves in a city where it may be safer or more comfortable to ‘blend in’ with the general population. Hannah tells me, “Being away from home doesn’t mean that I should dim my light. I have nothing to hide or be
afraid of, so I dress to be popular and recognized, and feel my pride as a Congolese who has a high fashion sense.” Similarly, Sarah says she dresses “To be recognized” and is motivated by her role model American singer Solange Knowles, who “inspires me to stand out”. These two women express a desire not only to not blend in with the general population, but to actually be recognized as different.

This links back to this study’s intention to move beyond the ‘anthropology of suffering’ to ‘anthropology of the good’ (Robbins 2013) focusing beyond the poor and plain migrant in hues of sepia that are so often perpetuated by the humanitarian regime. Of course, the risk still remains that I generate another limiting stereotype of ‘Africans’, one of the merry extravagantly-dressed urban migrant. This, too, is emblematic of Wainaina’s warning against the overgeneralized “colourful, exotic, larger than life” African characters so common in literature about the continent.

To the humanitarian regime, this is baffling, and view the purchase of what they consider to be “luxuries and comforts” as “costly, trivial, unreasonable, and nonessential” (Brees 2008, as seen in Oka 2014, 25). Scholars, too, have been critical of consumerist priorities among Congolese. Gondola (2010), for example, explains that the reason why so many of the Congolese diaspora and their families who remain in the DRC are poor is because “they would rather squander their meager wages on griffes [designer labels]…than venture inside a Western Union branch to wire money to despondent relatives” (166). He also states that some dress the way they do out of “sheer egotism and hedonism” (Ibid., 171).

Not only is the consumerist behavior and elegant fashions of Congolese migrants confusing to humanitarians and academics, but it can create new stereotypes that are just as problematic among the ‘host community’. From Kenyans, the Congolese fashion stereotypes were told with bemusement or exasperation; they are not better dressers, necessarily, just more lavish, and a bit absurd considering their humble surroundings. If playing to stereotypes serve economic purposes, they are not entirely harmless, either; a Kenyan driver once told me that the fact that Congolese dress so well hints at criminality. “Congolese love living in big apartments, going to nice places, dressing opulent. And I wonder, how can they afford this? That is why we [Kenyans] think they may be doing dirty business. To afford their lifestyles”.

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I asked some why buying “beautiful” and “stylish” clothing was important to them, when others may criticize their purchase choices as being extravagant. Hannah, the clothing store owner, said that not only does it “please” her, but it is a marketing tactic; “I love fashion and have a fashion line, so it also helps people buy from me.” There are limits, however, to how much she spends on fashion; she says, “I can’t kill myself buying expensive things, but when I have extra money I will spoil myself. It’s not a priority to spend on fashionable stuff, but you can always be fashionable in your own means. You need the basics of life, but I also believe in saving for fashionable stuff.” I asked another Congolese woman, and a status refugee, what she would say to people who criticized purchases of fashionable clothing over the basic “necessities”, like food. Her response illustrates the role that fashion consumption and expression plays in her desire to be distinctive in the city. “I love being smart, and I love to stand out, so it’s beautiful and stylish clothing that will do that for me.” In terms of what she thinks about consumerism priorities, she said, “Everybody has their own interests, so those who say that do not have the spirit of fashion, or have no taste in picking designs would prefer to spend their monies on necessities. For me, fashion is a priority.”

Despite their fashion being confusing to some and suspicious to other, many of the Congolese I met- both documented and undocumented, students, pastors, community leaders- are unswayed from their pursuit of sartorial distinctiveness. Thomas’s (2003) exploration of fashion within the DRC describes how the Congolese push against colonial discourse through “conscious attempts at achieving difference” (954). Fashion, Thomas writes, “provides the occasion for the subversion of established modes and the rejection of the dictates of accepted norms…The adoption of alternative aesthetic codes presents itself as a symbolic gesture aimed at reclaiming power” (954).

I must say here that in the effort to avoid putting words into my participants’ mouths, vocabularies around “resistance”, “subversion”, or “rebellion” were not used explicitly by those I spoke to about why they dress the way they do. The actual words and behaviours of those I researched reflect less an intentional resistance, and more an implicit rejection of stereotypes perpetuated by humanitarian narratives and limitations imposed by their material realities. Just as Sapologie was a political ideology in Congo in the early 20th Century that rebelled against sartorial or ideological freedoms, so too is it today in Nairobi. It represents a rejection of an expected way of life, a reclamation of identity and vitality in the context of incredible difficulties. Invisibility would certainly have its benefits. Maurice, told me about a time that he went shopping with some friends to a local market.
when they were arrested by a policeman simply because “they looked Congolese”. He managed to evade arrest because he ‘looks Luhya’ (a group of Bantu tribes in Kenya). Esther, as well, the sole female of Maurice’s Sape group, told me that she is not easily recognized as a migrant because, “People think I’m a Luya [a Kenyan tribe] because I’m curvy and because of how my Swahili sounds.” Another Congolese woman told me, “It is beneficial to blend in- it keeps you from being viewed differently, as a stranger or a foreigner.”

Other scholars have examined the (in)visibility of urban refugees. The terms ‘invisible’ and ‘hidden’ have been applied to urban refugees by scholars and institutions alike (Crock 2017; Fielden 2008; Pavanello et al. 2010; Human Rights Watch 2002). Pavanello, Elhawary, and Pantuliano’s (2010) study of urban refugees in Nairobi makes the claim that invisibility is a survival mechanism. While it would be just as much of an overgeneralization and misrepresentation to ignore the difficult realities of many refugees in Nairobi, simply describing them as demure victims in hiding presents a partial picture that overlooks their agency. To illustrate the refugee population as not only as “hidden”, but also to imply that ‘hiddenness’ is somehow desirable, is also inaccurate. The way of ‘standing out’ among Congolese refugees in Kabiria contrasts greatly with the themes of ‘blending in’ that I had encountered both in forced-migration literature and in interviews with urban refugees elsewhere.

Conclusions

Just as Fernand Braudel in 1979 challenged the triviality of fashion, pointing to how clothing is indicative of the greater themes of the ‘energies, possibilities, demands and joie de vivre’ of societies (as cited in Lemire 2010, 11), this chapter contributes to the thesis’s wider exploration of the role of material and immaterial realities in the day-to-day lives of Congolese in Nairobi as they pursue happiness and wellbeing in difficult contexts.

The chapter responds to the study’s research question about how Congolese exercise agency within and apart from sovereign categorization by exploring how the body is a vehicle for individual and collective identity expression within contexts of socioeconomic and political exclusion. The fashion subculture La Sape in Nairobi is used to ground discussions of how fashion as a tool to negotiate and navigate marginalizing forces, and how this is a fitting metaphor for the wider
Congolese population in the city as they choose to ‘dress Congolese’ to participate in a deliberately non-migrant culture and challenge state attempts to render them invisible and subverting the myth of refugee misery. I conceptualize Congolese as not just migrants, but also as fashion consumers and style producers. In a society where invisibility is expected, there is a fascination among those who defy the odds to remain conventional, who transcend barriers to social and economic mobility, who boldly demonstrate their agency in a context that demands silence and invisibility. Fashion wielded as is a tool among Congolese migrants to resist dominant power structures which would relegate them to invisibility within the city.

In response to the question of how the city shapes and defines the pursuit of the good life, the chapter explores how Nairobi’s many second-hand markets bring global styles and products to the doorsteps of Congolese to enable them to purchase the latest trends in an affordable manner. Consumerism and fashion expression in the city are intricately tied, and the arrival of clothing items from Europe and China add another transnational linkage between the Congolese diaspora. For some, the desire to be noticed and known as Congolese, either from a sense of national pride or as a strategy of competitive advantage, trumps the desire to live ‘below the radar’. The reverence for fashion and its ability to symbolize systems of moral order and transformation, and the sentiment of ‘dressing Congolese’ creates a notion of community similar to that of the Church among displaced populations in Nairobi. Fashion is used as a tool to ‘Other’ oneself, but it also has the effect of fostering a sense of inclusion within a wider social and cultural grouping.

The chapter also interrogates conceptualizations of what it means to ‘dress Congolese’ and notions of ‘authenticity’, contributing to the study’s wider question of how Congolese constitute social and economic subjectivities. As was demonstrated here, Congolese interpretations of what it means to look ‘Congolese’ are deeply rooted in national identity, yet what actually adorns their bodies is the product of globalized markets. Many of the Congolese I met defy the logic of consumer choices being shaped by material conditions; they face precarious economic realities, yet they prioritize the purchase of ‘non-essentials’, or so they told me, and not without a degree of pride. How much of this ‘food-before-fashion’ mentality is bravado, puffed up boasting perpetuated from stereotypes? It is difficult to say. Regardless of whether or not this sentiment is an exaggeration, and it likely is, it still speaks to the level of dedication to sartorial self-expression and the role of consumption in the construction and maintenance individual and cultural identity.
‘Dressing Congolese’, for many, was synonymous with ‘dressing well’. Of course, Congolese do not have a monopoly on dressing well. Yet the ‘truth’ of the distinctiveness of Congolese fashion is perhaps less important than the collective belief in cultural/sartorial uniqueness and, in some cases, superiority.
Chapter 8: Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, I have examined the day-to-day lives of Congolese in Nairobi as they pursue a good life in difficult contexts. Over the course of nine months, I spent long periods of time observing and learning about the daily habits and rhythms of my participants, their relationships, work, and forms of self-expression, their priorities and what is important to them. I studied the acts of the everyday, the ‘normal’, and the mundane. These acts are worth considering through a critical lens because despite their regularity in the lives of so many, they are often overlooked within relevant literature, policy, and practice. This analytical omission hinders a fuller and more dynamic understanding of the realities of many and justifies a continuation of migrant-focused policies and programmes that lack nuance or complexity in their formation and delivery.

In the Introduction I explored how humanitarian imagery often relegates migrants to the ‘suffering slot’ (Robbins 2013), and mobility regimes simplify complex and fluid identities. My thesis thus presents a reframing of such conceptualizations, conveying a fuller spectrum of migrant experience and values, beyond the ‘suffering refugee’ to agentic persons. I contributed to narratives of how migrant lives operate both within and beyond the barriers imposed by poverty, policy restraints, and discrimination, generating a greater understanding of the dynamism of forced migration and the aspirations of urban migrants on the margins of society.

Though the entry points for each chapter varies, a common theme which links them is how Congolese migrants in Nairobi appropriate space, material objects, and human connections to forge processes of inclusion and wellbeing within conditions marked by social, political, and economic exclusion. Chapters One and Two offered a macro level analysis of the historical, political, and geographical contexts shaping migration patterns and the unique characteristics of Nairobi’s informal settlements that make them home for so many Congolese migrants. After describing the methodologies and ethical considerations exercised within this study in Chapter Three, Chapter Four looked at what the concepts of ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ actually mean and resemble to Congolese in Nairobi, and the various ways in which they navigate contexts of legal restrictions, social exclusions, and widespread cultures of petty crime. I used a Congolese-owned and operated kinyozi as a case study to illustrate the ways in which engaging in the informal economy, in the context of restrictive labour laws, is a way of exercising agency while pursuing the good life. The chapter contributed to my thesis’s wider examination of strategies for achieving the good life by
demonstrating how, for many, engaging in the informal economy is an important way of circumventing legal barriers to earning an income. Furthermore, I argue that within the moral economy of informality and extralegality, Congolese often operate within their own sets of norms and values that best suit their own conceptualization of wellbeing and strategies for socio-economic inclusion.

Chapter Five looked at how Congolese and refugee identities enable membership in and access to vital community-based systems of support. I explored how the good life of many Congolese in the city is made possible through the linkages and membership to local, grassroots social infrastructures in the absence of state or humanitarian assistance. The issue of trust and dependency among migrants, and their role in promoting the good life, was discussed in relation to the ability to build relationships and broker access to key goods and services. These intermediaries, advocates, and representatives have different motivations, and while material and immaterial benefit is often associated with their role, I revealed a deep sense of empathy and spiritual and/or moral obligation driving many of them. I argue that such values and networks of support play a vital role in extending information and material goods to migrants that lack formal support through humanitarian or state channels, contributing to my wider examination of the various ways in which Congolese meet their daily needs within contexts of displacement.

Chapter Six narrows in on a specific form of membership through its study of religiosity and the church. I argue that church membership provides important material and immaterial resources through the convergence of material, cultural and spiritual economies in the absence of formal support. I also show how the interconnectedness of religion and cultural identity enables Congolese migrants to maintain ethnocultural subjectivities and differentiate themselves from other migrant groups while forming important bonds with local citizens within a faith-based setting. I present the church as a unique ‘micro space’ within the city that enables meaningful interaction with other migrant groups and Kenyan citizens. These arguments contribute to the study’s wider exploration of what elements, specifically, within the city enable migrant wellbeing and inclusion within contexts of displacement; as I’ve demonstrated here, the church is a vital space for many Congolese in their efforts to curate meaningful and sustainable community. I also examined the benefits, beyond those of a spiritual nature, that arise from being part of such a community, including access to livelihood opportunities, food, and money.
In Chapter Seven I looked at the theme of self-expression and agency through sartorial and cosmetic performances and consumption. I interrogated conceptualizations of what it means to ‘dress Congolese’ and notions of ‘authenticity’, contributing to the study’s wider question of how Congolese constitute social and economic subjectivities in the city. With my usage of the term “Congoleseness”, I argue that despite, and sometimes directly as a result of, the social, political and economic conditions that impede integration in Nairobi, fashion subculture is a critical means of expression, subjectivity and self-determination among many Congolese. Drawing from interviews and participant observation with a small group of Congolese Sapeurs, I demonstrated how reverence for fashion and the sentiment of ‘dressing Congolese’ creates a notion of community, used simultaneously as a tool to ‘Other’ oneself and foster a sense of inclusion within a wider social and cultural grouping.

**Contributions to ‘Anthropology of The Good’**

This thesis reframes understandings of migrants, rooting its approach in the ‘anthropology of the good’ to conceptualize them beyond the ‘suffering slot’ (Robbins 2013). As was reiterated in the chapter summaries above, it is a study not just of structural restrictions and resulting socio-economic oppression, but also of notions of happiness, hope, and wellbeing within difficult contexts. My research on how Congolese migrants conceptualize the good and how they pursue it contributes to the field of anthropological investigation that has been moving towards investigations of holistic well-being over the last decade, focusing on imaginations and hopes, meaning-making, and individual and collective values of care and morality (Ibid., 448). I build on the anthropology of the good by applying it to the real-life contexts of Congolese in Nairobi, and argue that studying the priorities, values, and everyday activities of these migrants is imperative for generating a better understanding how they curate socio-economic inclusion and wellbeing within conditions of exclusion. I demonstrate how the actual priorities, values, imaginations, and practices of individual and collective care take shape to transform circumstances beyond what is immediately presented. Applying such a framework to ‘the everyday’, I contribute valuable empirical evidence and broader, conceptual contextualized analysis of the ways in which behaviours in the present and strategies for positive futures manifest among Congolese in Nairobi.
I do so by offering participant perspectives on the value of fashion and beauty and its relevancy to a good life; entanglements between spiritual beliefs, social connectedness and material stability; the role of trust in curating good social relationships; and the importance of identity fluidity in navigating ambiguous and restrictive legal parameters.

In challenging the tropes of the suffering refugee, however, I do not want to contribute to a new one: that of the happy and thriving refugee in the city, replacing “The Starving African”, with characters “colourful, exotic, larger than life” (Wainaina, 2005). The dominant themes throughout my thesis of meaning making, belonging, and agency do not negate the presence of severe systemic oppressions for many Congolese living in Nairobi. Just as there is risk in generalizing the struggle of refugees, there is also risk in glamorizing the extent of Congolese agency, self-determination, and wellbeing. I heard from many of my participants, and witnessed, evidence of limitations to their agency. Politically, for example, both documented and undocumented migrants in Nairobi have relatively little power, and this has a multitude of ripple effects across other spheres of life in the city, from constraining one’s ability to register a formal business to being able to rent an apartment. The severe impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are another solemn reminder of the consequences of structural barriers facing migrants and the urban poor in Nairobi and beyond, adding new urgency to the efficacy and limitations of migrant- and community-based strategies for socio-economic resiliency, as well as public health implications for governments that systemically marginalize particular communities. This will be addressed in greater detail further on in this chapter. Despite these limitations to political and economic power, however, I argue that refugee initiative can be viewed as power and the exercise of individual and collective freedoms, and that processes of informality, transnationalism, and network-building construct bridges that cross power divides and socio-economic hierarchies generated/perpetuated by humanitarian regimes. Shifting the way refugees are viewed, from weakness to strength, from passive victims to agentic, and from uncertain to proactive, can generate a greater understanding of the dynamism of forced migration and the aspirations of forcibly displaced peoples on the margins of society. My research thus strives not to ignore or cancel hardships and suffering experienced by Congolese migrants in Nairobi, but rather to work towards balancing the scales of perspective. It is not a binary existence between the two perspectives, as if the ‘good’ exists separately from ‘the bad’. The full spectrum of human experience exists, and I hope that my thesis captured a range of participant attitudes, experiences, and commentary that is reflective of this reality, without being
pollyannish. Those I spoke to were all too aware of the structural challenges they faced on a daily basis— the legal restrictions that made it so difficult and expensive to obtain a work permit; the xenophobic attitudes of police and matatu drivers; the prohibitively high costs of healthcare. Yet among individuals like Maurice, George, Romain, Pastor Alain, and Esther, and so many other Congolese I spoke with, I did not sense an attitude of despair or defeat. Not in the way they spoke of their lives in Nairobi, nor in the ways they live their lives and plan for the future. In fact, I add nuance to Robbins’ (2013) framing by exploring linkages between hardships and ‘the good’; for individuals like Pastor Alain and George in Kabiria, Moses, the leader of the Dagoretti LGBT Association, and the missions-minded university students, it is the hardships they faced, both in Nairobi and back in DRC, that serves as the impetus for their commitment to social and spiritual development for others.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that though scholars like De Vries (2016) positions migrant lives as ‘resistance to official non-existence’ (893), for the most part my thesis did not feature a similar discourse. Vocabularies of resistance—rebellion, rejection, dismissal—were never used by those I spoke to about why they live the way they do. It is easy to suggest that migrants in the city—particularly undocumented migrants— are indeed resisting pressures to be invisible from xenophobic public sentiments and restrictive government policies in an implicit sense, or perhaps it being more the outcome than the intent. Yet I do not want to generate nor perpetuate a narrative around individual or community resistance, peddling some trope of the defiant migrant. The sense that I have looking back at my time in Nairobi is far less glamourous; the Congolese I got to know live their lives in a way to both survive in difficult contexts, and strive to be adaptive and find meaning, despite the difficulties. There is hardly anything unique about this; the same could likely be said for anyone elsewhere in the world (with levels and forms of hardship varying, of course). The actual words and behaviours of those I researched reflect less an intentional resistance, and more a rejection of sovereign categorization, manifesting in the mundane activities of everyday life.

Having reiterated my justification and interpretation of the framework of the good life, I will now summarize the central themes that emerged over the course of the thesis, each of them playing a pivotal role in pursuit of wellbeing and success.
On Making “Meaningful” Contributions

The current restrictions to formal employment and mobility put in place by the Kenyan government present significant barriers to both registered refugees and undocumented migrants. The country’s ongoing encampment policy and strict regulations around who can and cannot remain in the city means that many individuals arriving in Nairobi, either from the camps or via other countries, are often less likely to seek formal registration through the RAS or UNHCR for fear of being rejected or because of confusion around protocols. Though policy advice put forth by the IIED and others suggests that “Kenyan restrictions on refugees’ engagement in formal work have meant that many cannot meaningfully contribute to the local economy, nor can they foster their households’ health and well-being” (Muindi and Mberu 2019, 32), my research findings challenge such a binary view. The chapters in this thesis have shown how migrants—including refugees—can, and do, live fulfilled lives beyond the restraints imposed by poverty, discrimination, and policy restraints. Restrictions on informal work do not negate ones’ ability to still make ‘meaningful’ contributions to local economies nor one’s capacity to promote individual and collective wellbeing. Yet I do find that government restrictions on employment and mobility among forcibly displaced migrants add significant challenges and stresses to living and working in the city. This finding has very practical implications for policy and practice. Being able to legally work and travel throughout the country, irrespective of one’s legal status, would certainly ease anxieties and risks around abuse at the hands of police officers, for example. Ending the encampment policy and lifting employment and mobility restrictions would not likely end economic, health, or housing disparities among migrants, as these challenges also exist for many Kenyan nationals in the city; as such, a potentially promising avenue for positive change would be the GoK, in tandem with the UNHCR and other relevant organisations, engaging with key migrant ‘social brokers’ within the city to collaboratively create effective and sustainable policy measures and interventions.

The Fluidity and Leveraging of Identity

I challenge the notion of undocumented migrants in Nairobi living wholly ‘invisible’ or ‘off the radar’, showing how being clandestine is a spectrum and how ‘refugeeness’ and/or
‘Congoleness’ can be moved back and forth between less visible and more visible, generating bonding capital or establishing ones’ ‘otherness’ as a strategy of navigating challenging environments. I do not contest the practices of invisibility or clandestinity of undocumented migrants that some other scholars highlight (Crock et al., 2017; Parker 2002; Pavanello et al. 2010) yet my findings challenged the absoluteness of it within this context; migrants in Nairobi occupy both spaces of invisibility and visibility, simultaneously, or in shifting patterns, a spectrum that ebbs and flows. Degrees of visibility fluctuate depending on who is looking- other migrants, Kenyan citizens, local authorities, UNHCR, or the federal government. Visibility is enmeshed in governance, control, agency, and self-expression. There is the ‘making visible’ by the State and UNHCR by creating top-down, manageable and traceable, refugee subjectivities (de Vries 2016, 891), yet my research was far more interested in the subjectivities that migrants generate for themselves, both within and apart from sovereign categorizations. I have portrayed the ability to slide on spectrum of visibility as a valuable strategy for the good life among Congolese in Nairobi; in Chapter Six, for example, enhancing one’s ‘otherness’ (i.e. migrant, refugee) is shown as a strategy for obtaining membership within a faith community, constructed of others that share similar ‘othering’ traits within the city. Yet just as Esther, the female Sapeuse in Chapter Seven demonstrates, while sartorial distinctiveness and ‘hyper visibility’ grants her membership within Sapeurs and affords opportunity to showcase her fashion identity, as simply as changing out of her Sape outfit, she is able to meld into the general population because she “looks like a Luya” [a Kenyan tribe]. The risks and benefits of visibility- standing out as a non-Kenyan in Nairobi- may both present themselves multiple times within the span of a day; from church, to matatu, to market, and back, for example, each scenario presenting new opportunities and pitfalls for standing apart from the crowd. My argument that the necessity- and more importantly, the ability- to be agile on the spectrum of visibility plays a vital role in Congolese safety, ability to earn income, and social inclusion in Nairobi. This contributes not only to my wider study, but also to other scholars and humanitarian sources who place emphasis on the ability to maintain invisibility versus the capacity to navigate a spectrum of visibility as it serves the individual.

Subjectivities, Memberships, & Interdependencies
Another reoccurring theme throughout my research was the crucial role of social networks in promoting well-being. In Chapters Five and Six, particularly, I demonstrate how the ‘success’ of many Congolese in the city is a product of subjectivities like ‘Congoleseeness’ and ‘refugeeness’ which enable membership in and access to systems of support, namely social infrastructures at the grassroots level, in the absence of state or humanitarian assistance. Chapter Five emphasized that quality of networks varies, and that trust in individuals is important for building and sustaining new networks of support. Chapter Six provided the examples of missions-minded students and faith and community leaders as trusted intermediaries and advocates among Congolese. I argue that, while there is often material benefit associated with being such a beneficiary, often these individuals express empathy born from shared experience and moral and/or spiritual obligation as their motivation in supporting other Congolese. For these individuals, the ability to act in a role of leadership and advocacy for other migrants is deeply fulfilling and associated with their own general wellbeing.

The concept of ‘self-reliance’, heralded within humanitarian discourse as one of the solutions to dwindling state and aid-funded support, is at risk of overlooking the widespread and complex networks of dependencies or interdependencies between diverse networks and relationships. I argue that much of ‘self-reliance’ is, in fact, heavy reliance on informal social and economic networks. My thesis challenged the ‘myth’ of self-reliance, considering the complex networks of interdependencies that are at play among Congolese in the city. Civil society organizations, local citizens, government officials, police officers, and refugee community leaders often transcend legal categorization to interact at multiple levels in complex systems of interdependencies. In responding to one of my research’s guiding questions of the role that the city plays in such processes, my thesis demonstrates how Nairobi appeals to many Congolese because of the large Congolese population and the existence of established social networks, which play a key role in connecting newcomer migrants to job opportunities. The higher population density in Nairobi and large population of Congolese also means a wider variety of kinship and friendship networks, faith-based institutions, and community-based organizations that all play an important role in promoting a greater quality of life for those who cannot rely on the government or humanitarian regime upon arriving in the city for the first time. Today, the magnitude of the role of local and migrant-led efforts at supporting other migrants, whether it be through places of worship, community-based organizations, or key community ‘brokers’, remains relatively under
acknowledged by policy makers and practitioners surveying support mechanisms (Easton-Calabria and Herson 2019, 9; International Refugee Congress, 2018). Learning more about the efficacy of these ‘bottom-up’ systems of support is now more important than ever, as the negative socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to disproportionately affect migrant communities who are ineligible or inaccessible for government or humanitarian support.

Another key system of complex interdependency is presented in the form of legal and economic informality. Contributing to my investigation of the socio-economic opportunities that Nairobi affords to Congolese, I presented evidence of the significance of informality- in terms of settlements and economies- in their pursuit of the good life. With so many Congolese highlighting the connection between their ability to earn an income and achieve individual and collective wellbeing, the informal economy- and the network of actors and practices that are used to navigate it- is a key element to wellbeing strategies. I argue that the ability to live, work, be healthy, and feel fulfilled in the wide grey area of extralegality and formality is a vital strategy for Congolese who are relegated to legal ambiguities by restrictive labour and mobility policies. In keeping with the optimistic framing of this thesis, beyond mere coping, I argue that ‘hustling’ in the informal economy in Nairobi goes beyond a mere survival strategy to not just ‘make do’, but to add flavour, beauty, meaning, and purpose to life in the city.

I also considered the unique characteristics of informal settlements and the key role they play in the lives of so many Congolese in Nairobi. These spaces are often illustrated by the GoK and media in a way that overlooks the perspectives of the inhabitants (particularly when the language of ‘slums’ is used) and assign negative characteristics to them, driving ‘apocalyptic and dystopian narratives of the slum’ (Roy 2011: 224). Contrasting this, I examined how (in)formal urban settings offer important social and economic opportunities for migrants to a degree that encampments or rural areas do not. The informalized support offered to migrants in these spaces have created systems of support that are many things at once, oftentimes contradictory: safe yet insecure, dependable and volatile, visible and unseen.

**Spaces of Belonging**

Intimately connected to the prevalence of interdependences and structures of membership are the various ‘micro-spaces’ throughout the city, spatially defined spaces that are occupied by those with
shared traits, such as religious identity, ethnicity, and migrant status. I demonstrate how, rather than occupy a singular geographical territory within the city, Congolese in Nairobi often occupy multiple distinct places, such as churches, community centres, and hair salons. I argue that these spaces of work, learning, consumerism, and worship, are vital for the negotiation of membership and inclusion in a city characterized by economic and political exclusions.

Such a discussion contributes to this study’s wider question of how the city of Nairobi shapes strategies of pursuing the good life, and despite all the social, economic, and political challenges presented by living as a migrant in a city in a country that enforces an encampment policy, also presents numerous opportunities for meaning-making, community, and self-expression via holding intentional space with likeminded individuals. Chapter Six considered how the church is one such space within the city that enables meaningful interaction with other migrant groups and Kenyan citizens. It is within these spaces that shared norms and practices around religiosity serves as a basis for trust and bridging capital between different nationalities and ethno-cultural groups. Simultaneously, distinctiveness is encouraged and maintained through the promotion of different linguistic and sartorial expressions. I also presented the city’s many mitumba markets as key spaces for creating the conditions for intricate linkages between global consumerism and fashion expression. Transnational trade processes resulting in the provision of affordable designer or knock-off designer European fashions at these mitumba markets enable Congolese to ‘dress Congolese’ and simultaneously ‘Other’ oneself and foster inclusion within a particular ethno-cultural community. Lastly, I offered the kinyozi as another example of a particular micro-space within the city where migrants and citizens engage in both physically and emotionally close interactions. Not only do these enable economic sustainability for migrants, but it also serves as a conduit for inter-group trust building. In the barber chair and at the hair washing sink, perhaps more than anywhere else in the city, the ‘intimate labour’ of hair styling blurs the lines between physical and social.

After fieldwork

I left Nairobi in December 2019, to return to -30 Celsius weather in Ottawa, Canada, and the many memories and friendships made over the nine months I spent in Kenya clung to me like the cold
Canadian air. I kept in touch with several of my Congolese contacts, and had fully intended on returning in the summer of 2020, eager to reconnect.

Then in March 2020 the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Over Facebook messages and emails, I heard about my Congolese friends’ fear for loved ones and concerns over vaccination schedules. I would wake up to read in the news reports of police brutality in the streets of Nairobi, attacking those who had emerged from their homes to go to their place of work, needing to make money without the government safety nets and subsidies that I was enjoying in Canada.

At the time I write this conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic has been active for nearly two years. In Kenya, as of August 31, 2021, there have been a reported 235,298 confirmed cases, with a reported 4,720 deaths (WHO, 2021). Kenyan citizens, tired of waiting for accurate and up-to-date information from the government on when and where to access vaccines, are taking to Twitter to share real-time information as they procure it. While the country has received around 2,693,039 million doses of vaccines (as of August 26, 2021) (WHO, 2021), this amounts to only 2.6 per cent of the country being fully vaccinated (Reuters, 2021). In March 2021 the GoK declared that privately-run hospitals will be able to set prices and charge for vaccinations with no price caps, further generating barriers to access for the poor (Reuters, 2021). Though Kenya has included refugees in their national vaccination plan (Paun, 2021), this only includes those who are registered as such, and excludes the many undocumented asylum-seekers living in the country.

Multiple forces are at play at a global and regional level, putting into sharper focus inequitable mentalities and practices that have long plagued undocumented migrants. At the global level, ongoing struggles with the ‘COVAX’ scheme, an initiative where governments and manufacturers collaborate to ensure COVID-19 vaccinations are distributed to both higher-income and lower-income nations, is struggling to rollout supplies to poorer nations, including Kenya. Reasons include ‘vaccine nationalism’ and competition for limited resources as wealthier countries do direct deals with pharmaceutical companies (UN News, 2021). At a national level, politicians around the world are feeling pressure from the public to prioritize vaccinations for citizens over immigrants, refugees, and asylum-seekers (Paun, 2021). Among global, regional, and national public health and humanitarian agencies, however, there is recognition that equitable access to information, health care, and vaccinations is crucial for individuals regardless of their status, a principle of heightened importance during a pandemic where collective and individual health are
so closely interlinked (Walker, Maple, and Veary 2021, 13). It is amidst the tensions of burden sharing, nationalism, globalism, and strategies for indiscriminate ‘herd immunity’ that the many Congolese living in Nairobi find themselves.

The latest report offered by UNHCR on the Covid-19 situation in Kenya was released on July 3, 2020 (UNHCR, 2020). At the time of publishing, it references 16 confirmed cases among refugees in Dadaab and Kakuma but does not offer information about urban refugees. The report cites the Kenyan Ministry of Health as the source of data, so it is likely that the Kenyan Government does not have data collection measures in place to collect Covid-related updates from Nairobi-based registered refugees. In terms of what measures are being undertaken by the UNHCR for refugees in urban areas, the report outlines an ongoing ‘community monitoring exercise’ to gather information on the healthcare situation, operating a UNHCR Helpline to provide information on available healthcare services, and donating healthcare supplies such as masks, gloves, sanitizer, and mobile airtime to 35 ‘community leaders’ in Nairobi to distribute to their refugee networks (2020, 3). I asked one of my contacts at the Kabiria Community Centre if they were one of the recipients of these supplies, considering their wide network of refugees in the Kabiria settlement, and they said they were not. They were, however, receiving mask and sanitizer supplies through a partnership with an international organization called Field Ready.

Government policies in response to the pandemic has negatively impacted income-generating strategies across the city. The evening curfew and lockdowns, for example, limit mobility within and outside of Nairobi, restricting the ability of so many migrants to engage in income-generating activities. Omata’s (2020b) study of the impacts of the pandemic on livelihood opportunities of Nairobi’s refugees illustrates how the evening curfew, which starts at 7 PM, coincides with the time when city council workers are finished their shift and undocumented migrant ‘hawkers’ would typically bring their wares out onto the street. As mentioned, to be caught outside during curfew can result in deadly consequences at the hands of police.53 Another study by the Norwegian

53 There have been numerous accounts of police brutality during lockdowns across the country; within the first nine weeks of the dusk-to-dawn curfew in the spring of 2020, a reported 15 people were killed by police violence (Namu and Riley, 2020). Though Amnesty International Kenya has stated that the pandemic offers “the perfect storm for indiscriminate mass violence” by the police (Ibid.), police brutality affects certain portions of the population disproportionately. The urban poor living within informal settlements, for example, has been subjected far more to police abuse than individuals living in other parts of the city (Ibid.). The Congolese, especially those who lack proper or up-to-date documentation, are doubly (or triply) vulnerable to harassment or abuse at the hands.
Refugee Council (NRC, 2020) which surveyed displaced and conflict-affected peoples across 14 countries (including Kenya) shows that more than three quarters of those polled reported losing income since the beginning of the pandemic (Kenya was the highest, with 85 per cent reporting losing a job or income) (7).

The implications of being an undocumented migrant during the pandemic are further heightened because of the added risk of being deported. COVID-19 has seemingly given the Government of Kenya justification to contravene the principle of non-refoulement, with the arrest and deportation of asylum seekers and refugees who have crossed the country’s borders with Somalia and Tanzania after their closure on May 16, 2020 (Amnesty International, 2020). At the border between DRC and Uganda between May and early June 2020, an estimated 10,000 Congolese asylum seekers were awaiting entry into the country (Ibid.). Such blanket border closures deny individuals the opportunity to seek asylum and as such contravenes international refugee law while violating the principle of non-refoulement (Ibid.).

Healthcare was not a topic that I explored in any detail in my thesis, other than the anecdote of the Burundian woman and her unborn child’s death to illustrate the perils of lacking access to regulated healthcare systems for the urban poor. Yet I am now left wondering how my thesis’s themes of localized support and agency apply during the context of COVID-19, or any other public health emergency, where intervention is so top-down and regulated. What is the relevancy of a community center, church, or informal medical practice when the best chance of health is access to a small glass vial in the possession of the government or WHO-mandated health professionals? Now, perhaps, more than ever, there is an opportunity to study localized support systems in play: how are community-based migrant ‘social brokers’ brokering information and access to preventative health measures and vaccinations, for example? Do churches continue to provide food and solace if their congregants are unable to earn an income due to lockdowns or curfews? How have lockdowns, beyond hindering wage-earning, disrupted the other benefits born from micro-spaces in the city, like hair salons, where people would typically gather to share information about life in the city and back home? These are all key questions for future research.
There is perhaps heightened risk of a ‘relapse’ to the ‘suffering slot’ refugee, the passive victim in need of protection and management within a healthcare crisis beyond their control. Once again, migrant voices, values, priorities, and aspirations are silenced in favor of the top-down discourses which strip collectives of identity beyond their bodies as injectable sites. I would argue that it is precisely during moments such as these that a broader consideration for the humanity of people—beyond ‘the refugee’—is interesting and relevant.
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