A Life Lived Otherwise: Contingency and Necessity in an Interconnected World

Andrew Irving *University of Manchester*

Abstract: This article focuses on how people experience and understand their life and history in relation to the many other possible lives they could have ended up living. It argues that the alternative, imagined or virtual life courses that someone might have lived are an important moral framework for understanding and interpreting one's social and material situation. Drawing on long-term fieldwork with a Ugandan family, the article considers how unfolding events continuously recast people's existential life circumstances and their imagined alternatives. Using film and collaborative methods, it aims to offer an ethnographically grounded account of how people's thoughts, dreams and imaginaries of a life lived *otherwise* are not immaterial fantasies or abstractions but are directly constitutive of people's embodied experiences and responses to contingency in an interconnected world.

Keywords: contingency, imagination, visual ethnography, HIV/AIDS, Uganda, global interconnections

Résumé : Cet article porte sur la façon dont les gens vivent et comprennent leur situation de vie actuelle au regard des nombreuses autres vies qu'ils auraient pu mener. Il soutient que les parcours de vie alternatifs, imaginés ou virtuels, qu'un individu aurait pu vivre offrent à celui-ci un cadre moral constant et important pour comprendre et interpréter son environnement social et sa situation matérielle. S'appuyant sur un long travail de terrain auprès d'une famille ougandaise, l'article montre que le déroulement d'événements contingents refonde sans cesse les circonstances existentielles des individus ainsi que leurs alternatives imaginées. Il mobilise des films et des méthodes collaboratives pour expliquer, dans une perspective ethnographique, que la pensée, le rêve et l'imaginaire d'une vie vécue autrement ne sont pas que des fantasmes immatériels ou des abstractions, mais sont directement constitutifs des expériences incarnées, des représentations et des actions des individus dans un monde interconnecté.

Mots clés : contingence, imagination, ethnographie visuelle, VIH/SIDA, Ouganda, interconnexions mondiales

Introduction

"One of the most significant facts about us," Clifford Geertz (1973, 45) declared, "is that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end up in the end having only lived one." Beyond the idea of shared phylogeny, Geertz's statement can be extended to consider how the lives people live are shaped, on one hand, by the specific social, historical and material circumstances into which they are born, raised and dwell, and, on the other, by contingency, necessity and the capacity for prospective and remedial action. Here, contingency might encompass such things as one's land of birth, nationality, ethnicity and the economic status of one's parents – as well as chance, luck and happenstance – all of which are understood and negotiated in relation to people's unfolding social activities and the wider global political economy.

"Life is not stasis, a fixed set of natural laws, set in advance and the same for all, to which one must adhere in order to survive" (Rabinow 1994, 17) but necessitates "a certain latitude" in the norms of life and behaviour (Canguilhem 2008, 132). Throughout life, persons inhabit a range of social, cultural and economic environments in which they learn to understand themselves and others as particular kinds of moral agents who have the capacity for action; or, to paraphrase Marx, people do not create personal histories or futures from circumstances of their own choosing but within the material conditions of daily life and its imagined alternatives. As such, life encompasses creative modes of *poesis* (Nehamas 1998) and history making (Toren 1993) through which individual and collective events, familial commitments and potential futures are negotiated. In the process, many different lives are rendered possible or, alternatively, are closed off. The actual life a person "ends up living" is subject to negotiating different levels of risk (Beck 1992), structural inequality (Farmer 2001) and precarity and contingency (Das 1996; Das and Han 2016), which combine to establish a broad range of different possible presents and futures, only some of which are lived and realised.

Beyond the structural and material conditions of being that shape existence, ideas about contingency – and its correlate necessity – have a long history in theological and philosophical thought, which attempt to understand the limits of human influence and ascribe various social, divine, natural and supernatural causes and explanations to events. Often seen in terms of panvitalistic or celestial forces, Leucippus was one of the earliest thinkers who attempted to systematically replace religious and supernatural causes and explanations with an understanding of natural and materialist processes, with the only surviving fragment of his writing arguing that "nothing occurs at random but everything for a reason and by necessity."

For Michael Jackson (2014), understandings of contingency and necessity are grounded in the ongoing adjustments of lived experience rather than philosophical argument. In his ethnography among the Kuranko, the life one ends up with is seen as shaped by the actions of oneself, significant others and the ancestral spirits. It is thus "an existential issue before it is a philosophical one, and it should not surprise us to find that West African worldviews are also preoccupied with the dilemma of reconciling a sense of personal freedom with an equally strong sense of being conditioned and contingent." (39)

Here, there is no radical separation of person and community, the living and the dead, health and illness: they are all necessary conditions of life that a person has to negotiate on an ongoing basis, recalling how contingency and uncertainty are central to "the subjective experience of life in contemporary African societies" (Cooper and Pratten 2015, 1). Likewise, as Stoller (2009) notes, among the neighbouring Songhay, life involves continually responding to and anticipating events in an uncertain world. Existence is perilous, and things such as sickness, death, misfortune and bad luck are unavoidable and inevitable. However, the forces of fate are not all-encompassing, and, as such, invocations and divination enable anticipatory or remedial actions that allow persons to adjust their life course (Stoller 2009). This reinforces the idea of life as an ongoing process of adaptation and transformation in which a person's embodied responses to events, while grounded in habitual ways of being, cannot always be specified beforehand in the way "that the scale of the human body or the range of the human voice cannot be determined in advance but must be found in each case" (Das and Han 2016, 17).

When approached ethnographically, a broad range of dominant and ancillary understandings are expressed with regard to the relationship between human agency and the various non-human forces that are understood to shape life, such as providence, destiny, luck, nature or divinity. These vary across different linguistic and historical settings, often coalescing around an existential and experiential tension between fate and free will (Crapanzano 2015; Malik 2015). Depending on one's perspective, the sources of fate might be differently ascribed – for example, to smaller and more powerful gods; biology, phylogeny and genetics; or social structure, class and habitus – while free will might take the guise of such things as creativity, inspiration and agency or resistance, opposition and independence. Rather than assigning such concepts an essential or universal character, they are perhaps best understood as broad polythetic categories (Needham 1975) that share a general *Familienähnlichkeit* or "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein 2009 [1953]). Broadly speaking, those realms of experience and action whereby a person has little choice or control pertain to fate, whereas those areas where the person has some movement and latitude relate to free will.

At any given moment, life incorporates numerous unlived possibilities and as such simultaneously encompasses multiple potential presents and futures whose character remains open and undetermined. Although such potentialities have been extensively theorised in philosophy, notably by Sartre (1996 [1943]), Merleau-Ponty (1968), and Deleuze (1994), my intention in this article is to offer an empirical and ethnographically grounded, rather than speculative or abstract, account of how people negotiate and understand the relationship between the life they could have lived and the one they end up living. I argue that the alternative, imagined lives that a person, family or social group might otherwise have lived offers an ongoing and necessary comparative moral framework for action, for making decisions and for reflecting on events and interpreting one's current social and existential circumstances. As such, people's thoughts, dreams and imaginaries of a life lived *otherwise* are not simply wishful fantasies or immaterial abstractions but are directly constitutive of their experiences, understandings and actions in the world. Drawing on long-term fieldwork with a Ugandan family, I attempt to show that it is simply not possible to understand the life someone lives in terms of an essential, factual or historical biography – unless one also takes account of many other possible lives they could have lived – so as to better understand the continuities and discontinuities "between who we are and what we might become" (Jackson 2011, ix).

A Portrait of a Ugandan Family

In "Time and Contingency in the Anthropology of Borders: On Border as Event in Rural Central Asia," Madeleine Reeves (2016) draws on extended research with a single family to explore the effects of contingency

on the family's daily life, including the intersections between political transformation and the dynamics of family sociality. This allows her to witness the revisions and transformations that occur in relation to unfolding events and how these reconfigure people's social lives, experiences of home and future life plans. Deploying Veena Das's (1996) notion of critical events – only on the scale of a family rather than a *communitas* or nation – Reeves's work with a single family provides the necessary longitudinal and ethnographic depth to understand how local and global events affect family life over time.

In my case, I first came to know Yudaya Nassiswa and her four young children, Diana, Victoria, Dennis and Jeremiah, while carrying out my PhD research in the 1990s. Yudaya's husband was a well-respected man who worked for Uganda's ministry of finance and, being of sufficient financial means, had three wives, all of whom lived with him in a large rented house in Nakasero, a wealthy part of Kampala. His income meant the family had a good standard of living, wore nice clothes, ate well, owned a car and were part of the well-to-do middle class. Yudaya was the "second wife," and aside from her domestic responsibilities, she had her own stall in Owino Market selling second-hand clothes to generate a small income independent of her husband.

The family, like many wealthy Ugandan families, worked toward setting up a particular kind of future life for the children based on educational achievement, with the expectation that the children would go on to university and perhaps study abroad like their father. However, this future never arrived. By 1994, Yudaya's husband and both her co-wives had died from AIDS. In countries with high infection rates, such as Uganda, AIDS is simultaneously a disease of poverty and affluence. Wealthy men can afford to support multiple wives and girlfriends, and thus, they risk catching and transmitting the HIV virus. After her husband and co-wives died, Yudaya went for an HIV test and found out that she too had the virus.

Yudaya's small savings from her market stall quickly diminished, and with her children, she had to leave the large rented house. She used her remaining money to build a simple house made from bricks of mud. The home had no water or electricity, and consisted of two small rooms that Yudaya and her four children shared. Cooking was done outside on the bare earth over a charcoal fire. When the family could not afford to eat, they would stave off their collective hunger by "eating stories": this consisted of a nightly ritual where they laid in shared beds and distracted themselves by sharing stories of the day's events and filling the room with laughter to nourish their empty bellies.

Over the next few years, Yudaya struggled with serious, and at times life-threatening, episodes of HIV-related illness; but unlike her husband and co-wives, she lived to see the millennium. Throughout this time, I kept in contact with the family and regularly sent money for school fees. When I visited Uganda in December 2004, I had not seen the family for around five years. Her two sons, Dennis and Jeremiah, had grown tall, were attending secondary school and were venturing out into the world, which necessitated a very different type of relationship, not just with their mother and the local community but also with me: the returning anthropologist who had known them since they were small.

The relationship that emerged between Dennis and Jeremiah – as young men in 2004, as opposed to boys – and myself became more political and more analytic, and they were more aware of social inequality and their own poverty. They told me how life had been a constant struggle for their mother to raise four children alone with no husband and little money amid frequent episodes of illness, and about how they often had little or nothing to eat or wear and endured a cramped life – the family of five shared just three beds in a single small bedroom. We discussed the place of Africa in the global economy; the social challenges facing Uganda; their dreams and aspirations; music and urban life; the enormous gap between the rich and the poor; how the backbone of Africa consists of strong women like their mother; and the lack of prospects for young people like themselves, who have no family contacts due to their father's death.

Dennis and Jeremiah were too young when their father died to remember much about him; nor did they remember the large house they lived in as young infants. Instead, they had spent most of their remembered life in the unfinished mud-brick home. Despite barely remembering or knowing their father, he remained an enduring and dominant figure in their lives, whose absence was frequently made explicit by the lack of shoes and food to eat, and by his not being there to give advice, to teach them football and to drive, and to pass on other skills. Growing up, the boys were very aware of the struggle their mother faced as a single parent and would compare their lives to other families who had a father. With no money or sense of what the future would bring, Dennis and Jeremiah would continually imagine their impoverished life against the stable, comfortable existence they would have otherwise lived were it not for their father's death.

A Question of Method

In considering how Geertz's statement might be elaborated ethnographically in the field, it is necessary to ask what kind of ethnographic or ontological status we accord to the "thousand kinds of life" that were possible but never lived. Where, when and in which contexts

do individual persons, families or groups think about alternative or imagined life courses? How do these lives inform their moral actions and understandings? Concomitantly, what fieldwork methods and techniques might be employed to research and represent the many different possible lives that were never actually lived?

I suggest that the responses to such questions are best worked out alongside the persons we work with in order to identify mutually defined research aims that are of relevance and interest to the participants themselves. In this case, I used collaborative film-making to explore the lived and unlived worlds people inhabit in relation to the contingencies and necessities of existence. By attempting to do ethnographic justice not only to the material facts of life but the other possible lives against which someone's current circumstances are interpreted and understood, I seek to understand the sometimes radical disjuncture between the life people end up living and the different past, present and futures they could have lived.

This raises a series of epistemological, methodological and ethical challenges. By thinking through these collaboratively, Dennis, Jeremiah and I identified areas of mutual interest whereby they actively contributed to the research as subjects of their own existential inquiry rather than as objects of study. This offers a practical, ethically empowering way of researching and representing people's experiences that generates shared ethnographic content in pursuit of new knowledge and understanding.

Dennis and Jeremiah were the ones who suggested making a film, since they knew I was making a public health film, and they were keen on learning the skills for themselves. I bought them a cheap video camera and conveyed the essential techniques, framings, narrative devices and so forth. The two boys practised by filming their family and friends and by making music videos, with the idea of afterwards making a film about their life. Most ethnographic film-making is collaborative in that the documentary imperative that underlies anthropological research extends out to informants actively participating in and helping establish the film's ethnographic and aesthetic content (Cox, Irving and Wright 2016). Collaborative film-making stretches back to the 1920s, including Robert Flaherty's work, and has become a standard practice subject to its own specific limitations and criticisms (Dietrich 2015). My own recent work includes *The Man Who Almost Killed Himself* (2015), a collaboration with theatre director Josh Azouz and producer Don Boyd that was shown on the BBC, at national cinema chains and at the Edinburgh Festival. Based on two of my anthropological articles (Irving 2007, 2014), the creative and collaborative process involved in developing the work displaced the anthropologist's power for representation and introduced different themes, ideas and voices into the final piece that I would never have conceived of, let alone been able to identify, articulate or develop.

One of the most complete anthropological realisations of collaborative process is found in Jean Rouch's films both before and subsequent to synchronous sound technology (Henley 2009). Rouch combined collaborative film techniques, performance and improvisation to reveal and generate truths about social life that would otherwise remain unarticulated. People were engaged as active participants in the identification and creation of subject matter and the film-making process to bring out and make publicly observable, and hence filmable, the realms of thought, emotion, memory and imaginative possibility inherent within people's life situations and circumstances (Henley 2009). Rouch's film practice required an existential openness on behalf of the participants and co-creators of the films, who might (perhaps even unknown to themselves) already be searching for something and respond positively to opportunities for expression; this recalls Susanne Langer's (1979 [1941], 8) idea that "most new discoveries are suddenly seen things that were always there."

In *Moi, un noir* (1958), Rouch's classic film about the lives of West African migrant labourers, his main co-creator was Oumarou Ganda, a migrant worker from Niger who travelled to the Ivory Coast to work on Abidjan's docks. When Ganda watched Rouch's earlier film about migrant life, *Jaguar* (1955), he told Rouch that the film was flawed because it was obvious that the main protagonist, Damouré Zika (a traditional healer by trade), "hasn't lived the life of an immigrant." Subsequently, Rouch collaborated with Ganda and his friends in the making of *Moi, un noir* to act out their daily lives: the protagonists were asked to do whatever they wanted to do, and then improvised the film's voice-over in real time as they watched the film (Henley 2009). The result is a mix of everyday life, the verbalisation of dreams and aspirations of a life lived otherwise: as a boxer, a movie star, a landowner or US federal agent Lemmy Caution. In a key scene in which Oumarou Ganda is filmed sleeping on the bare pavement in the street, his own voice narrates about himself: "Look at that! I am dreaming that one day, like other men, like everybody, like all those who are rich, I too will have a wife, a house, a vehicle." Accordingly, rather than being presented as an object of study, suffering or marginalisation, Ganda narrates his own life and shows how the lived experience of a migrant worker routinely incorporates daydreams and imaginings of other possible lives (Sjöberg 2017).

Film, like fieldwork and ethnography, is a particular mode of performative and collaborative activity that creates and establishes contexts for the expression of experience, memory and action, including that which may already be lived in daily life but is not necessarily publicly articulated (Cox, Irving and Wright 2016). The camera does not capture an unmediated reality but creates the conditions for certain kinds of performative expression grounded in the face-to-face encounter. In doing so, the camera establishes a new awareness of and relationship between people, their bodies and their surroundings, in which thoughts, representations and understandings of life are brought into the public domain, enacted and reflected on for a recorded medium. As such, the act of performing for, with and behind the camera creates a specific fieldwork context for the generation of speech, action and knowledge, and can become a catalyst for trajectories of creative and imaginative possibility that would not typically be generated in other fieldwork contexts.

A major problem Dennis, Jeremiah and I faced was finding an effective means to film and represent the life they had *not* lived. As a framing device, I suggested the figure of their father as a Sartrean absent presence (Sartre 1996 [1943]). For Sartre, perception is constituted by various properties of non-being such as lacks, absences and states of incompleteness that are constitutive of experience. In other words, what we do not see is also fundamental to perception. Sartre's most famous example is waiting for his friend Pierre in a café during the Second World War and finding that despite Pierre's usual punctuality, he is not there. Pierre's absence consumes Sartre's thoughts. As Sartre waits for Pierre, his consciousness is not directed toward the surrounding people, conversation or furniture, which he barely registers, but to Pierre's absence, which overshadows the entire café and everything within it. This example opened up a discussion between us about how to frame the film by linking Sartre's idea with a common notion in Uganda – namely, the phenomenon of being "there but not there," for example, in relation to such things as one's ancestors who cannot be seen but are nevertheless part of the social context and who influence and affect people's lives (also see Suhr and Willerslev 2012).

As we did not have a computer with us, I explained to the young men that would need to edit "in camera" rather than using an editing program – that is, they would tell their story using a straightforward linear chronology of events in the same order they were filmed rather than employing a non-linear approach, whereby the story is constructed through the editing process. We spent a few days working out the main ideas, with the aim that the boys would then take charge of the filming and subject matter. I did not want to interfere with or be present during the actual filming, as I was more interested in them deciding on the style and content, telling their story in their own way. This worked insofar as the boys wanted to show their independence and express their own ideas in the film; on a practical level, having me accompany them would change the dynamic significantly and disrupt the filming process.

Having grown up without television or ever using a video camera – and being required to edit in camera, using a real time voice-over on rudimentary equipment – the boys produced an extraordinary hour-long film. The film represents a "Day in the Life" of their family, and offers a snapshot of their existence in 2004. Importantly, Dennis and Jeremiah decided not to film a "typical" day but Christmas day, the very same date their father had died many years before, so to make his absence visible and bring into focus the alternative life trajectory they could have lived.

Dennis and Jeremiah begin the film early on Christmas morning by visiting their auntie, who is also HIV-positive and lives nearby in a small house but one that has lights, music and electricity. They talk to their auntie but also to their young cousin, who was born with HIV, before returning to their own home to give us a sense of their Christmas day and to interview their mother and older sisters about the difference between how they spend Christmas now and how they spent it when their father was still alive. They ask Diana, their eldest sister, to describe their infancy, and she tells them they had a car, a kitchen, an electric stove and a refrigerator, and their own bedrooms. They then ask their mother to describe the house where they once lived. After they have constructed a mental image of the house, she tells them where it is located, and they go to film the house where they would otherwise have been spending Christmas in a different but equally possible life. To finish, they return to their own house and interview their mother about their father's personality and the circumstances and consequences of his death, including, significantly, the day she discovered she was HIV-positive.

What follows can be understood as an ethnographic and performative portrait of how the contingencies and necessities of existence have affected their upbringing and family. It is presented in the form of online film clips, but for those reading without Internet, below are four key film scenes presented as a photo essay that consists of screen grabs and an accompanying narrative. The location is the city of Kampala, Uganda, where HIV/AIDS affects almost every family. It is important to remember that the filming was done in 2004 on a basic camcorder, some time prior to contemporary

high-definition formats and the availability of affordable, good-quality digital cameras and phones.

The clips can be viewed online at https://www.utpjournals.press/doi/suppl/10.3138/anth.2017-0003.

Scene One

My name is Dennis Bete, son of Yudaya. I am the third-born in Yudaya's family. I would like to share with you some views about AIDS and what it has done to our family. Right now, we are going to the home of our Auntie, the sister of our Mum. Let's go inside. That's their sitting room. They are lucky, they have electricity. They watch TV. They have a radio. The big boy is preparing for lunch. It is their lunchtime. That's the Aunt we have been telling you about, the sister to our Mum. Auntie is also HIV-positive. The child who you can see sleeping is sick. She is the daughter to our Auntie and is also HIV-positive. Auntie brings drinks for her daughter. She is saying "wake up, wake up, have a drink." "Auntie, how old is she?" [Auntie replies 12.] "And which class is she?" [Auntie replies Primary 6.] And so now we are in Auntie's bedroom. You see, her husband had two wives. Can you imagine! Two wives staying in one house! The husband died, also of HIV. But they never realised when he was living that he was HIV-positive. They thought that people were bewitching him. They never got a message from him that he was HIV-positive.

Scene Two: Remembering Christmas Day

Dennis: Mum, Mum. How did we use to spend Christmas when our Dad was alive?

Mum: By this time we used to be having a drink.

Dennis: You mean you didn't have to work on Christmas Day?

Mum: Even your Dad didn't work. We used to go out with your Daddy. I cooked food for breakfast. We used to have a fridge full of food. I can't even imagine how we used to eat on that day. It was a day of eating. Music! But you can't hear music right now. Booming. The whole house was booming. Just listening to music!

Dennis: Our big sister Diana is preparing today's meal. Ahh, Diana. What are you cooking?

Diana: This is meat for Christmas.

Dennis: Eh, that's a surprise! What do you remember about this day Christmas?

Diana: Our Dad used to take us out. We used to have sodas, but now Mummy cannot afford so we are just here at home. Our Dad used to take us out to the beach, but now we are going to just eat and sleep. We used to get new clothes.

Dennis: Can you remember where we lived when we were still young?

Diana: Yes I can still remember it was before the floods.

Dennis: About the house, when you compare the other house with this one. Which one is better?

Diana: The other one. It was self-contained, it had a bathroom, a kitchen. We used to cook inside the house but now we cook outside. I used to have my own room, even Mummy and Daddy had their own room. But now in this house, we all live in one room.

Dennis: The other one had power and electricity or not?

Diana: Yes, we had electricity. We used to own a TV. We were watching good movies. But now we are without electricity.

Dennis: What about the compound?

Diana: The compound was very nice. We had a garden, flowers.

Dennis: So it really was an admirable house?

Diana: Yes.

Dennis and Jeremiah travel to the other house

This is the house where we used to live when our Daddy was living. It really is so nice. It is so admirable. It had a garage. Our sister even had a bedroom as a baby, but now we all sleep in one room.

Scene Three: Back Home

Jeremiah: So, we have returned to where we live from the other house where we used to stay. There you can see Dennis. You can see Dennis is very tired.

Mum: Welcome back Dennis and Jeremiah! How was your journey?

Dennis: It was . . . the house looks so nice!

Mum: Jeremiah, have you seen it?

Jeremiah: Yes, nice house.

Dennis: Yes, yes. Very nice.

Mum: Very nice.

Dennis: Yes, I wish I was there.

Mum: You were there when you were young.

Dennis: I cannot recall. When was it? I can't remember.

Mum: That time when your Daddy was alive he cared for me, I was a bit young.

Dennis: Did you not have any plans to build a house for us?

Mum: Ahhh, you know here in Africa we women we have to follow orders. What a man, what a husband says, is what you have to follow.

Dennis: But you have to give him a plan. As you are his wife. Do you think that you complete this house?

Mum: Yes I will. I'm not going to die Dennis. I'm not going to die.

Dennis: Let's assume. Let's assume.

Mum: I will, I will, I will. You never know, I might get friends to help me. I might get money. You never know. Did you know that I was going to live this long?

Dennis: About our father. Can you recall what our Dad liked to be? What things would happen if our father was still alive?

Mum: He had a car. He would drive you around. He had many, many things. But I am wondering. Are you good at playing football?

Dennis: Of course!

Mum: Well, he had plans for you. Whenever he was looking at you, it was as if you were the only boy he had, even though he also had elder boys! He was encouraging me to have more children. I would have stopped at your sisters Diana and Victoria. But he liked children. When I was in hospital after giving birth to you, you could see him happy, you could see him driving, bringing me all sorts of things and meat for the baby. People would look at me in the hospital. I was among the big ladies in the hospital. As the wife of a minister he used to pay a private room for me. I was a big woman there! [Laughs] Ooh, those days!

Dennis: And about this lifetime which we are now?

Mum: This lifetime? I can't say much.

Dennis: Do you think that our Daddy wished to be here with us in this life?

Mum: If he can see it. If it is true he is down under the ground watching us, he is crying. He's regretting. You know why? He left us in a house which wasn't his own. You saw the house . . . it wasn't like this one. It had a kitchen and the toilet was inside. Your Daddy was working in the government. He never ever thought about this life we are living now. He was only thinking about the other life. Your Daddy was an old man. He was not of my age but he was alive . . . he had money – whereas now here

we are staying here! This one! I'm sure it would be different if he was still around. I wonder where right now would we be?

Scene Four: The HIV Test

Dennis: Mum, Mum, who encouraged you to go and have a test? Where did you get the strength to go and have that test?

Mum: You know I was thinking about how your Dad died. He was sick for a long time but he never told me anything. He denied to tell me. He used just to be in the bed. I used to look after him but he told me nothing. I thought I should go to be checked, be tested. You know, we were three wives. Then one co-wife, the mother of your elder sisters and brothers, she died first. Then your Dad fell.

Dennis: Did you realise before that you might be HIV-positive?

Mum: I was thinking, but not very sure. And I'm telling you by the time I left for test I thought I would be negative. Maybe because I was young.

Dennis: And about your going for testing. How did you feel at that particular moment when they told you that you were HIV-positive? At that particular moment when you were still in the hospital?

Mum: It was the blackest, darkest day. The year was 1991. OK, the first day they took my blood and then after two weeks I had to go back for the results. But in those two weeks I had already lost five kilogram[s] by the time I had to go back to collect my results. After leaving the room, I cried all the way back to our house.

Dennis: I can remember that.

Mum: You remember?

Dennis: When you came in the bedroom and you covered yourself.

Mum: Ah, yes, you know the things.

Jeremiah: Excuse me Mum. How did you feel in the moment when you were telling us about that status of yours? When you told us all that you were HIV-positive? How did you feel when you were talking to us?

Mum: I felt that if I told you that, you will be free. So that you will be HIV-negative. That's why I shared with you. I didn't want anyone else to be first to share with you.

Dennis: Do you share this message which you give to us with other people?

Mum: Why not? Why not? But first, it is you my children and then for the whole community. I think you can understand me. But is it you, my children, who are first.

Dennis: That means you are planning to build for us. What about the school fees?

Mum: Oh, that one. It is coming like Victoria these days. She has a friend who pays for her. Things will come slowly by slowly. You never know.

Jeremiah: OK Ma, do you think you will finish building our house?

Mum: It is good if you trust me. Look at me, everything is going to be done that you've learnt of before my death, and I'm telling you I'm not going to die now.

Jeremiah: It's because you are sick.

Mum: I'm sick. And the thing is that you can't get used to AIDS.

Lives Lived Otherwise

Dennis and Jeremiah's words and images combine to reveal just how different their lives would have been had their father remained alive and draws attention to how there is no such thing as a singular or self-contained life history or set of experiences – only ones that are imagined in relation to other, equally possible lives that a person could have lived. The radical disjuncture between Dennis and Jeremiah's current existential circumstances and those they imagine living had their father remained alive exposes both the specificities and contingencies of their existence. The alternative or imagined life provides an ongoing comparative moral framework for theorising and interpreting life events and experiences. Consequently, rather than thinking of a person's life biography as possessing an essential, factual or material content, for a more complete understanding, it is necessary to engage with the lives of the imagination and possibility that people reconstruct on an ongoing basis, wherein the reality and residue of one life constantly merges and inheres in the other.

By juxtaposing the two possible life courses and actively choosing to focus on Christmas day, Dennis and Jeremiah show how the contingencies of disease have shaped their past life, present circumstances and future possibilities – for example, by visiting and filming *outside* the big house in which they once lived and where they otherwise would be spending Christmas, and then returning to their unfinished mud-brick house where their older sister is cooking on a fire outside and discussing their mother's future health – to make an explicit comparison with the life they would have been living. This contrast often emerges while carrying out chores or negotiating conditions that are a direct outcome of their father's illness and death – for example, when carrying heavy containers of water from the well rather than turning on a tap; when chopping wood rather than switching on electricity; when eating stories instead of food; and when the whole family of five sleep in the same room. This identifies a series of objects, places and activities whereby key differences between the life courses are made visible and thus rendered filmable: everyday things such as buildings, electric lights, television, food and music become a series of tangible interfaces through which Dennis and Jeremiah's actual and virtual lives are conjoined yet also differentiated.

The sharing of experience that occurs as the viewer accompanies them into different situations is not simply a case of filming the different ways HIV/AIDS has affected their family but also of representing the indeterminacy and uncertainty that surrounds illness. Ill health often reveals gaps in knowledge and generates questions in search of causes and explanations, highlighting how illness is rarely just an individual medical problem but also a social, moral and pragmatic one (Reynolds-Whyte 1997). In the film, the family collectively inquires into on the reasons for Yudaya's illness and offers a range of reflections and responses to do with society, gender imbalance and the personality of the absent father. Although such questions are a means to seek answers, they are also a strategy to open up a dialogue, seek solace or create stability amid life's uncertainties (Reynolds-Whyte 1997).

The film starts with Dennis looking into the camera and directly addressing the viewer – "*I would like to share with you some views about AIDS and what it has done to our family*" – before going on to discuss with his mother how HIV/AIDS has affected their lives. In doing so, he actively invites an audience of imagined and unknown others into a personal and familial history that has been continuously shaped and reshaped by illness, politics and biomedical events in a globally interconnected world. In Western countries, the advent of antiretroviral medications in the late 1990s helped stabilise the health of people living with HIV/AIDS by increasing their immunity and T-cell count and reducing the viral load. In tragic contrast, the vast majority of people throughout Africa, including Yudaya, were for many years denied access to antiretrovirals, and millions of people continued to experience sickness and die from treatable opportunistic infections with the knowledge of life-saving medications, freely available in the West, that were denied to them due to their nationality and economic status. The advent of antiretrovirals fundamentally altered and exacerbated differences between people living with AIDS in different parts of the world, illustrating how experiences of HIV/AIDS cannot be understood unless placed in a global comparative context (Irving 2011, 2017). Many families, such as Yudaya's, had to confront illness and death with the knowledge of a "cure" available elsewhere in the world but denied to them. As such, Yudaya and her fellow Ugandans were able to *imagine* a life of health that they could be leading were it not for the land of their birth, their national identity and their marginal economic position, but they were unable to *live* that life given that their body was designated as expendable.

The Future Is Not Written

In 2008, four years after Dennis and Jeremiah made their film, I returned to Uganda. At 17 and 19 years old, the two young men had left school and were attempting to make a living. When Dennis was born in 1989, the population of Uganda was just 16 million. By 2008, it had doubled to 32 million, causing massive unemployment and a young generation whose lives contained little prospect of stable employment or a future career. Despite constant efforts to search for work and attempts to learn new skills, Dennis and Jeremiah remained unemployed and had no money. The family continued to live together in the still unfinished two-room mud-brick house, sharing the same bedroom and eating stories by candlelight.

However, following the establishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, a more concerted political will emerged to make antiretrovirals and health care available to global populations. People like Yudaya, who had long struggled with HIV/AIDS but managed to survive, were finally able to access medications, unlike many of her counterparts who died. Considerable progress has been made, and around 35 percent of the global population with HIV/AIDS has access to antiretrovirals (UNAIDS 2014); although this means 65 percent of people are still not receiving medications, HIV/AIDS is no longer referred to as an acute disease but a chronic one. Obviously, the story of those who died from HIV does not end with their death

but continues to affect their families' lives, including the lives of their children, highlighting the long-term intergenerational effects of disease. Throughout the world, HIV/AIDS is responsible for severing millions of familial relationships – between parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters – showing how neither the social nor the family can be taken for granted and how life is not pre-given as a human right but was something that individuals and communities have had to fight for (Das and Han 2016). As Janet Carsten (2008, 5) notes,

> Through large-scale political events as well as the institutional structures of the state that impinge upon personal and familial life, kinship emerges as a particular kind of sociality in which certain forms of temporality and memory-making, and certain dispositions towards the past, present, and future are made possible, while others are excluded.

For Yudaya's family, events in the wider political economy first denied her and her fellow Africans access to life-saving medications, condemning millions to death while those in the West survived, but then offered the families of those still alive a lifeline through the advent of the global fund. When I returned to Uganda in 2009, I found Yudaya fit and healthy. Her body had stabilised and regained its strength, and slowly, her life began to extend out in time and space. She began planning for the future and was dreaming of building of a bigger house for her family. Dennis, on the other hand, had completely disappeared and was nowhere to be found. Neither Yudaya nor anyone else knew where he was. Dennis had simply slipped out of the house early one morning and had not been seen for many months. We awaited news the whole summer, and by the end we had still not heard from him.

In 2011, I returned to Uganda and saw Yudaya and her family. By that time, Dennis was back in Kampala. In the intervening years, he had roamed Africa looking for work: he had tried to reach Angola or South Africa to find a job working in the mines but lacked the right connections. He travelled into Tanzania and found nothing, but then went further north and found some work in a school in Kenya teaching English. Dennis excelled in his teaching abilities; he impressed the principal with his diligence and was offered the chance to enter formal study and become a qualified teacher. In return for teaching English at the school, the school would pay for his teacher training expenses, and once he obtained his qualification, he would be offered a full teaching position. Dennis thought he had finally realised his role and career and found a route to an education that had been previously prevented by his father's death.

The possibility of life as a teacher suited Dennis, an intelligent and thoughtful young man who never had the opportunity to go to university because of his father's death. He was excited not only to find a life he wanted to lead but also at the prospect of learning. Nonetheless, the effects of broader and interconnected political events once more shaped the course of Dennis's life. In March 2010, two Kenyan students studying at Uganda's Makerere University were killed as they campaigned to become elected to run the student guild. For some years, tensions had been rising between factions of Ugandan and Kenyan students across Ugandan universities, as there was a perception among some Ugandan youth that Kenyans – who constituted a substantial proportion of the university population – had taken over and dominated the university sector at the expense of Ugandans, including those who were unable to attain places to study. Tensions had been simmering for years, and the killings triggered a series of clashes and riots. In a series of tit-for-tat attacks, Ugandan students studying in Kenya were assaulted and attacked across Kenyan schools and campuses. In the middle of the night, the principal of the school where Dennis was based came to find him, fearing for Dennis's life. They packed up his things, and the principal drove through the night to the Kenyan border, where he put Dennis on a bus to Uganda.

Dennis did not go home but travelled to the north of Uganda, where the war was, as he had heard from a friend that good money could be made working as a construction labourer in the still-dangerous areas where no-one wanted to work. The United States, United Nations and other global agencies had committed large sums of money to stabilise the region, build infrastructure and pave the way for Southern Sudanese independence. Stabilising and rebuilding a region – which had seen decades of conflict and many thousands of displaced persons – had recently become a focus of international priority following the discovery of oil. Dennis found work as a labourer, working all hours and earning good money. He was taken under the wing of an Acholi master builder who taught him all the stages involved in building, from brickmaking and laying foundations to laying bricks, flooring and plastering.

Dennis returned to the small mud-brick family house, now with the skills to start building his family a brand new house. Over the next year, he and Jeremiah made the bricks out of the local earth and built the new house on a piece of land right next to their old two-room home. The new house has many rooms. Yudaya has her own bedroom, as do Dennis, Jeremiah, Diana and Victoria. There is an indoor toilet, and the house is connected to the electrical grid. His time in the North,

however, was not without cost. A group he was travelling with got attacked by armed insurgents who robbed them, stripped them naked and beat them. They were not killed, but alongside the others, Dennis received a severe beating with a heavy wooden stick that caused substantial damage to his knees and legs. He recovered and can now go for early morning runs, but nevertheless there are days when the injury plays up and he walks with a limp.

Conclusion: Flesh, Earth and the Shaping of Life

The family's journey over the last 25 years provides an ethnographic grounding to the idea of life as a contingent and conditional process that continuously encompasses the possibility for many different lives. For Yudaya and her family, this meant moving from the large rented house she shared with her husband and co-wives to a simple mud-brick house and forging a new life on the side of a hill. It is a life journey that has been directly influenced by local and global events, including an untimely bereavement; the development, denial and eventual access to antiretrovirals; the campus riots across East Africa; the war and subsequent discovery of oil in Northern Uganda; the benevolent tutorage of a master builder; and much else besides – all of which have combined to shape the lives each member of the family has lived and the alternative lives that were not.

The shape of the family's history has been intimately interconnected with the unfolding of small- and large-scale events beyond its control but that are continuously mediated through actions that have come to define the character of daily existence. Life could have turned out otherwise – had the father remained alive, had Yudaya not lived long enough to see the establishment of the global fund, had Dennis not travelled to look for work and ended up north – emphasising the sometimes radical disjunctures that exist between equally possible lives: that which is lived and that which might have been lived. Dennis might have equally been an accountant like his father or an English teacher in Kenya, but he ended up a builder. Yudaya could have died from AIDS, like both her co-wives, but she survived to see the birth of her first grandchildren by Diana and Victoria. This shifts the ethnographic focus away from stable or habitual social contexts toward the contingencies embedded in personal life, local and global events, chance, luck and fortune, and fluctuating global health commitments.

By condensing the relationship between the different possible lives into a range of practical, performative and symbolic forms, Dennis and Jeremiah's film portrays a series of objects, situations and activities that shows how their father's death continues to shape their everyday lives and material circumstances, revealing both how different their lives would have otherwise been *and* the imaginative processes against which those lives are understood, framed and interpreted. In this context, film becomes a means of establishing particular modes of attention and critical reflection through which people analyse and "look again" at their lives, circumstances and surroundings. Invariably, a person becomes a different kind of person through the process of filming or being filmed – whereby thoughts, emotions and understandings are experienced, brought into the public domain and enacted for a recorded medium, and which then facilitate further observations and reflections that would not necessarily be enacted in other fieldwork contexts. This is not a claim that film offers privileged access or can generate a universal subjectivity but a description of a process in which an audience is brought into their family life. By filming and juxtaposing two different possible life courses, one of poverty and uncertainty and another of comfort and security, Dennis and Jeremiah show how the contingencies and necessities of disease have not just affected their own life and future possibilities but those of families across the continent and the world.

The family's movements and actions can be understood as partly anticipatory and partly remedial means though which they exert influence over social relations, the contingencies and necessities of life, wider global events and their own place in the world. For Yudaya and her family, like for all of us, life remains an unfinished story and reminds us there is no such thing as a pure life experience, only life that is differentiated through action and that can only be lived and understood in relation the many possible lives one could have lived. As such, formulating a more complete and empirically viable ethnographic understanding of human life requires engaging with the entirety of people's subjectivity and recognising that lived experience is also constituted by the pasts, presents and futures that someone has not experienced because of contingencies of existence but that continue to shape people's perceptions and imaginations in the imagination.

Uganda's red earth constantly bears material witness to the life of persons who can trace their existence through footprints left in the dust but also through the houses built on Kampala's hillsides. The family's new home, built by Dennis and Jeremiah, is made from the very same earth it stands on – the very same land that furnishes them with a particular national identity and allows or denies rights to certain kinds of material and imagined lives in the global political economy. The earth is scooped up, mixed with straw, stones and water, and moulded into large bricks fired in neighbourhood kilns. The ground from which the bricks were extracted forms

a compact floor upon which a wooden frame is erected, and the house is built using the bricks made from the earth. Dennis and Jeremiah carried out all the work themselves – on a house mixed out of earth, straw and personal history – which would not exist without Yudaya or her husband's death from AIDS. On one hand, the house embodies hard work, a builder's knowledge and local materials, but on the other hand, it is made out of the contingencies and necessities of existence as lived and experienced over the last 25 years.

Clips of the building process filmed by Dennis can be viewed online at https://vimeo.com/album/5431057.

Andrew Irving, *Department of Anthropology, Oxford Road, University of Manchester, Manchester, UK. Email: andrew.irving@manchester.ac.uk.*

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, my thanks go to Yudaya, Dennis, Jeremiah, Diana and Victoria, without whom this article would never have been possible. I would also like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for funding my original PhD and post-doctoral research, and the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology and the Office of the President for their support in carrying out this research.

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