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## Articles (Theme)

# UNFINISHED FUTURES: ETHNOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS ON INFRASTRUCTURE AND ASPIRATIONS IN AN INFORMAL SETTLEMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## Abstract

The paper introduces "unfinishedness" as a central feature of fieldwork. I argue that unfinishedness, as a temporal and ontological condition of fieldwork, is evoked through the complex relation of people's aspirations and infrastructural life situation. By consequence, the acceptance of unfinishedness as an inherent principle of fieldwork encounters opens up potential lines of thought about how to reconfigure anthropological research. Based on field research in Enkanini, an informal settlement, in South Africa, two field stories are presented that demonstrate how people negotiate their aspirations in conjunction with particular infrastructural conditions and how they get by in the meantime. Moreover, the article sheds light on the so-called *iShack* project, a nongovernmental project that has brought solar electricity to most households in the settlement. This particular project is crucial for the shaping of people's future aspirations and gives way to states of unfinished futures.

## Key Terms

unfinishedness, future, urban infrastructure, ethnography, South Africa

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# YARIM KALMIŞ GELECEKLER: GÜNEY AFRİKA'DA ENFORMEL BİR YERLEŞİM BİRİMİNDE ALTYAPI VE ÖZLEMLER ÜZERİNE ETNOGRAFİK DÜŞÜNCELER

## Öz

Bu yazı "yarım kalmışlık" meselesini saha çalışmasının temel niteliklerinden biri olarak ortaya koyuyor. Yazıda saha çalışmasının ontolojik ve dünyevi/zamansal bir koşulu olarak yarım kalmışlığın, insanların özlemleriyle altyapıya dayalı yaşam koşulları arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiden kaynaklandığını ileri sürüyorum. Yarım kalmışlığı saha çalışmasının doğasında var olan temel bir ilke olarak benimsemek, antropolojik araştırmanın nasıl yeniden yapılandırılabileceğine dair bir dizi potansiyel fikrin tartışmaya açılmasına da öncülük ediyor. Bu çalışmada Güney Afrika'da enformel bir yerleşim birimi olan Enkanini'de yürütülen saha çalışmasından elde edilen iki hikâye üzerinden, bu bölgede yaşayan insanların kendi özlemlerini içinde yaşadıkları özel altyapısal koşullarla nasıl müzakere ettikleri ve bu koşullarda nasıl idare edebildikleri anlatılıyor. Yanı sıra makale *iShack* adı verilen ve söz konusu yerleşim birimindeki çoğu hanenin güneş enerjisine dayalı elektriğe kavuşmasını sağlayan bir sivil toplum projesine de ışık tutuyor. Bölgede yaşayan insanların gelecek özlemlerinin şekillenmesinde yaşamsal bir rol üstlenen söz konusu proje, yarım kalmış geleceklerin doğmasına da vesile oluyor.

## Anahtar Terimler

Yarım kalmışlık, gelecek, kentsel altyapı, etnografi, Güney Afrika

My field acquaintance Dumile[1] is desperately looking for work. He would take up anything after he had worked for some years for the so-called *iShack Project*, a nongovernmental initiative. He thinks about becoming a paramedic, a baker, an environmentalist, a clothing seller, even a dog trainer. Abby, a single mother and *shebeen* (pub) owner, feels uncomfortable about still being in the settlement. She gets tired of being busy all the time and not being able to pursue her dreams and plans. What she would like to have is a house and her own company. Both Dumile and Abby, at one point or another, emphasized to be still here or there, still in this or that situation—still here, but not yet there.

I suggest that what stands at the core of these two different fieldwork encounters is what I call "unfinishedness". "Unfinishedness" offers a lens through which the

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[1] All real names have been changed.

present can be read through its future. In relation to authors such as Francis Nyamnjoh (2015) and George Marcus (2008, 2009), "unfinishedness" will be distinguished from "incompleteness" that addresses broader epistemological discussions as well as South African internal debates. It will then also be put in conjunction with AbdouMaliq Simone's "provisionality" and "readiness to switch gears" (2001, 2004) as well as with Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman's concern with "crisis" and "improvisations" (1995, 2017) that aim at descriptions on a more ontological plane. These similar concepts will provide a good starting point, but they do not neatly match with "unfinishedness", as I will conceptualize it. Unfinishedness is evoked, as my central hypothesis, through the complex and plural relations between aspirations and infrastructures. What makes "unfinishedness" such a compelling and suitable concept for my understanding of my six months of fieldwork from January 2016 until early June 2016 in South Africa, in the Western Cape, in one of Stellenbosch's informal settlements called Enkanini (that is part and overflow from Kayamandi, the greater district, since 2006), is that it addresses very fundamental dimensions of research: On the one side, it speaks to an anthropological/philosophical understanding of how to conceptualize the "future" in the sense that it uncovers certain ruptures or cleavages between theory and practice or imagination and reality; on the other side, it is useful to ponder on conditions of fieldwork and thereby  unravel unfinishedness as a fundamental principle of most fieldwork encounters. These two dimensions taken together are triggers in evoking overall feelings and evaluations of life's unfinishedness. Moreover, the unfinishedness of the future as much as the unfinishedness as an inherent principle of fieldwork will come to the fore in the following accounts and will be my argumentational core throughout this paper.

In the setting I worked in, there was one particularity that distinguishes Enkanini from many other informal settlements in South Africa or in the world. Namely the so-called *iShack* project—an NGO-driven pilot project, founded in collaboration between Stellenbosch University's Sustainability Institute and residents. By now, the *iShack* project has brought several hundreds, if not thousands, of solar panels to the settlement. The project later turned into a business through big funding by, amongst others, the Bill Gates Foundation and the Green Fund. As an infrastructure, it has, on occasions, turned out to be not only a condition, but also a terrain and an object of resistance or recalcitrance. Moreover, it has brought people's (long-term) aspirations for modernity to the surface as much as it has revealed very personal and subjective and emotional

(short-term) relations to infrastructures (see Larkin, 2013, and von Schnitzler, 2016 on the different meanings of infrastructure). The implementation of the *iShack* project in the settlement was deemed a suitable solution in order to help people to get by in the meantime, to assist them and provide the means for getting closer to their aspirations by getting "electricity". This account will demonstrate, however, that it has at the same time faced many challenges and earned some discontent, hindering people to aspire to infrastructure's modernity in the long-run.

The article will tell of my spending time with Dumile. It conveys conversations we had in his little living room, or while walking around in the area, about his never-ending job search, his future fantasies and aspirations, and about his former work experiences as a community agent for the *iShack* project. Accompanying him on several occasions and sharing his expert knowledge with me on the project, as well as his very personal prospects, will provide a profound sense of the interlocking between aspirations and infrastructures.[2] His views and his special relation to the project is complemented by a slimmed version of a recorded interview with Abby, a residential end user who foremost relied on electricity for her small business. Both stories will powerfully bring together many people's situation of getting by inasmuch as they struggle and very much aspire to find what they called "real jobs". Moreover, both of them contrasted "solar" electricity, that in their cases does not suffice to operate their businesses and prospects, with what they have called "real" electricity (Abby, for instance, had an illegal electricity connection, but the supply never lasted until month end either). These two accounts will give a sense of how unfinishedness comes about in conjunction with people's aspirations and infrastructural situations. In each case the intermingling, as much as the ruptures, and the impacts created between infrastructure and aspirations, that generate particular expressions and feelings of people's momentary state of unfinishedness, are central to the presented accounts.

## Conceptualizing Unfinishedness

Unfinishedness is characterised by its in-betweenness and its indecisiveness in the face of an uncertain and open future. I talk of an unfinishedness that, in the first place, is generated by certain ideals and standards of fulfilment, totality and outcome. Such an

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[2] Accompanying experts in their engagement with infrastructures or just hearing from them about their engagements is certainly one of the best ways to gain insights into an infrastructure's working. In a similar vein, Nikhil Anand, for example, has accompanied a water engineer on his repair visits through Mumbai's water network and leaky state (Anand, 2015).

unfinishedness comes in many forms and shapes and is elicited through interruptions, through distractions, inter-mittencies, postponements, breakdowns, or certain uncertainties. Furthermore, it marks the ever-widening gap between people's infrastructural conditions (and the lack of such conditions) on the one side and their aspirations on the other side.

The first benefit of such a concept lies in its strength to account for material things and for relationships as much as for subjectivities. A second benefit comes with its, what I would call, "evaluative flexibility": on the one hand, "unfinishedness" can be understood in relation to an illusion of completeness—the perfect future, the perfect research outcome, etc.—and is thereby characterised as something "bad", something which is lacking, insufficient, disturbing; or, on the other hand, it can provide the energy and motivation for further accomplishments and imaginations, ultimately perceived as encouraging, animating, and hope-generating in the pursuit of a "good" life (Ortner, 2016; Fischer, 2014; Appadurai, 2013).

Conceptually, I refrain from conflating "unfinishedness" with "incompleteness" due to the formers emphasis on the temporal dimension illustrated as the moment of the "not-yet-there" whereas incompleteness is associated more with the old philosophical debate about the relation between parts and wholes. Hence, I am taking a different approach than Francis Nyamnjoh in his article "Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality" (2015) in which he argues that "incompleteness" has become a norm for conviviality and relationships in what he calls the "African Frontier" (ibid., p. 10). Frontier Africans, Nyamnjoh's subjectivation of the term, are people who defy binaries, who do not distinguish between nature and culture, city and village, who do not insist on permanencies (ibid., p. 6) and who "explore the fullness of their potentialities" (ibid., p. 7).[3] Although we might share many points of departure, I am not fully convinced by his normative stability, his appraisal of "incompleteness" as a solely "good" thing for "African" people when he says that "incomplete is normal" (ibid., p. 4) and that "things, words, deeds, and beings are always incomplete, not because of their absences but because of their possibilities" (ibid., p. 8). Furthermore, inasmuch as I do not comply with his assumed binary of the West and the rest (Africa), I certainly join him in his appraisal of potentialities, possibilities, in his reference to the "capacity to aspire" (ibid. 1; see also Appadurai 2013). Yet, I also depart from him because his is merely a "world of flux" (ibid., p. 6), of

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[3] See also Nyamnjoh, 2012 where he also applies his term "Frontier Africans" to the academic realm.

"activation, potency, and enhancement" (ibid., p. 6) and, as he emphasizes, "a universe of self-consciously incomplete beings" (ibid., p. 6)—all expressions that certainly seem exaggerated and, as said, are one-sided in the sense of singularly highlighting the "good life" and not its counterpart.

A more sobering and thus less illusioned picture is sketched by authors such as Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman (1995, 2017), or AbdouMaliq Simone (2001, 2004). Studying "subjectivities of the crisis," and in reversal, "the crisis of the subject" in Cameroon in the 1990s (Mbembe & Roitman, 1995, p. 323), Mbembe and Roitman do not directly foreground concepts like "incompleteness" or "unfinishedness". But their account can be very much related to these concepts when they consider "forms of inscription of the crisis" into "physicalities" and "materialities" (ibid., p. 327) as much as what they term the "register of improvisations" (ibid., p. 326), or "ways of doing" (ibid., p. 340), with which one reacts to and copes with the crisis as a condition and lived experience (ibid., p. 325). Interestingly, they are also primarily contemplating urban infrastructural conditions, bureaucracies, and their breakdowns (ibid., pp. 327-338) and how these different materialities affect and contribute to an everyday life in which "people weave their existence in incoherence, uncertainty, instability and discontinuity" (ibid. p. 325). More than this, they are taking into account people's "possibility of self-constitution" and their "productive moments" (ibid., p. 325) in the face of "the unforeseen and the unexpected" and "the incomplete nature of things" (ibid., p. 325). But unlike Nyamnjoh, they are less enthusiastic about the ways in which people, as they say, are "obliged (sic) to negotiate forms of uncertainty and instability unknown heretofore" (ibid., p. 348).

A further argumentational refinement is made here, by AbdouMaliq Simone in his remarkable article "People as infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg" (2004). He considers not only the co-relatedness of different infrastructures, but also how people rely on, work in, and also struggle with these infrastructures. In other words, how they live *within* them.[4] Alternatively, Simone depicts people *as* infrastructure. He extends the notion of infrastructure to people in order to account for the intricacies of urban city life in Johannesburg. For him, it is not only the pipes and wires that constitute infrastructure, but also people's activities, their

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[4] Brenda Chalfin's recent article "Wastelandia: Infrastructure and the Commonwealth of Waste in Urban Ghana" provides a good example of people's lives within infrastructure. In Tema, Ghana, she depicts how a public toilet enterprise enables and creates pathways for public life, for gatherings, and for what she terms "infrastructural-chain-reactions" (Chalfin, 2016, p. 13).

unaccountable movements, interactions, their conjunction, and their provisional possibilities (ibid., p. 407) (this, perhaps very similar to what Mbembe and Roitman termed "do-it-yourself bureaucracies", see Mbembe & Roitman, 1995, p. 343). "These intersections, particularly in the last two decades, have depended on the ability of residents to engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices. These conjunctions become an infrastructure—a platform providing for and reproducing life in the city" (ibid., p. 408). I understand Simone's conceptualization in terms of people's struggling with getting by as well as in terms of the stakes they have in their actions. He mentions preparedness, provisionality, trusts, risks, or a "readiness to switch gears" (ibid., p. 424; see also Simone, 2001, p. 19, 25 ff., 2017, p. 148). These various stakes, marking the gap between material conditions and future aspirations and imaginations, are what can be read and understood, in my own terms, as "unfinishedness". As in Mbembe's and Roitman's, and in Simone's texts, unfinishedness is inherent in the field I encountered and engaged with. Unfinishedness is an ontological quality of things and affairs which is then also mirrored in the epistemological realm. Thus, every field can be, but must not be like this. The temporal condition of these fields manifested in perceptions of change, of crisis, in hopes, anxieties, and aspirations stand in relation to a future unknown. Whether this is an immediate or a remote future, a future present or a future perfect, they cannot be separated from one another. Time, then, is inherently part of the ontological condition of the field with all the human and non-human, internal and external actors that constitute it.

Primarily concerned with epistemological questions and processes, rather than ontological matters, George Marcus conflates unfinishedness and incompleteness in a different way when he thinks of unfinishedness more in terms of its relation to fulfillment, outcome, success, and totality in regard to what he, and James Faubion, call "research design" in their publication *Fieldwork Is Not What It Used to Be* (2009). Marcus introduces "a norm of incompleteness" (ibid., 2009, p. 28) that guides anthropological research and that, although in another text—in his discussions with Paul Rabinow in *Designs For an Anthropology of the Contemporary* (2008)[5]—, is described as "a theorem of

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[5] Their discussions ponder upon the question whether new forms, concepts, and practices of anthropology are required (Rabinow's position), or whether a consequent reordering of anthropological research would already suffice (Marcus' position), in order to understand or revive anthropological research. Rabinow, as they agree, is emphasizing a more "ontological" approach, while Marcus is primarily concerned with "epistemology" (e.g., ibid., 2008, p. 77). Perhaps, João Biehl, a former Rabinow' student, is one of the authors who combines their two stances by his more ambivalent assessment of unfinishedness, when he often shifts gears between an emphasis on the epistemological

reasonable and responsible incompleteness, in which fieldwork self-consciously accomplishes something unfinished" and is therefore opposed to "the traditional 'holistic' norm embedded in expectations of fieldwork" (ibid., 2008, p. 82). In this perspective, incompleteness is a conceptual lens through which to come to terms with one's own field experiences and accomplishments; it is "a norm for contextualizing conditions of fieldwork research" (Marcus & Faubion, 2009, p. 28). Addressing the changing nature of fieldwork under contemporary conditions, it is either a positive "norm of practice (…) expected of kinds of inquiry that remain open-ended even when they are 'finished'" (ibid., p. 28), or, more self-deceptively, incompleteness becomes a "rhetoric", a "pro forma apology" revealing, and thereby also assuaging, "a certain edge of anxiety or tension" (ibid., p. 28). I have brought in Marcus here and I will return to him at the very end, because my own ethnographic account will gradually turn from an initial depiction of unfinishedness as an ontological marker of people's lived experience, as in the following subchapter, towards a more methodologically inclined reflection of my ethnographer's position in the conclusionary remarks of this article.

A certain difference, however, exists between the different argumentational lines presented. Marcus thinks about "incompleteness" from the angle of how to work through and frame an entire anthropological project, of which fieldwork is only one part, irrespective of subject matter. Following Mbembe, Roitman, Simone, as well as Nyamnjoh, I conceive of "unfinishedness" in terms of an experience, an ontological quality that is evoked and manifests itself under particular conditions in particular subjectivities, materialities, and relationships. All authors discussed provide different approximations to the concept of unfinishedness I am fleshing out in this article. On one side, George Marcus and Francis Nyamnjoh introduce "incompleteness" as a directive concept, similar to "unfinishedness". However, Nyamnjoh is not sufficiently taking temporality into account, and Marcus is primarily insisting on an epistemological perspective. On the other side, Janet Roitman, Achille Mbembe, and AbdouMaliq Simone are perhaps conceptually much closer, but using more dispersive terminologies. Moreover, "unfinishedness", as I outlined it, might further differ from the phenomena of crisis described by Mbembe and Roitman due to the fact that its narrative structure

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and the ontological dimension of unfinishedness. Thus, sometimes also equalling it with incompleteness as in the following passage: "Simply engaging with the complexity of people's lives and desires - their constraints, subjectivities, and projects - in ever-changing social worlds constantly necessitates the rethinking of our theoretical apparatuses. What would it mean for our research methodologies and ways of writing to consistently embrace this unfinishedness, seeking ways to analyse the general, the structural, and the processual while maintaining an acute awareness of the inevitable incompleteness of our theories?" (Biehl, 2010, p. 320).

and temporal character comes less in the guise of disruption and suddenness, nor is it preceded and followed by an imagined spectrum or period of order (see Roitman, 2017).[6]

Once unfinishedness is identified as the central focal point through which to look at my fieldwork experiences (my observations, my encounters, and people's perceived as well as imagined situations), the task is, to quote João Biehl from his publication "Ethnography in the Way of Theory", to "bring this unfinishedness into our storytelling" (2014, p. 96).

## Unfinished Encounters

One afternoon I sit in Dumile's living room. SABC News flickers and jitters from a little mobile TV. The TV itself is embedded in a shelf unit covering the entire wall of this little room. Massive speakers stand to each side of this ensemble, with the TV in its center. One can hardly see on the screen. Needless to say, we talk about electricity. Dumile has worked as an agent for the *iShack* project in 2013 and 2014. It was an exhausting job, too exhausting, he explains. Every single day he had to work: recruit people, convince them, install, and deliver the panels. He only got R2500 for this work every month.[7] "I knew there gonna be some hidden obstacles. I did know the disadvantages, but I didn't say anything." He himself managed to get the solar panel for his own house for free from the project administration. With it, he can use his TV, deploy the electric iron, charge his phone and also has some light in the evening. He actually has a fridge, too, but he has "borrowed it to a friend", as he says. It would take up too much electricity. "The biggest problem we face in winter. At about 8pm we are left without electricity because the panels can only store for up to 3 hours. But in winter when the sun goes down earlier, there is not enough storage left", he says reflecting on his problem. At the moment, he is considering an "illegal connection" with the other side of Kayamandi. "Soon I will do that." A lot of people do not pay the *iShack* bills every month. They get illegal connections, or they simply do not pay, as Dumile generally explains the conditions to me.

Antina von Schnitzler has referred to it in her research on the introduction and tampering and tinkering of prepaid water and electricity meters since the 1980s in South

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[6] Being more attentive to the scale of crisis, one has to recognize the "constancy of transformation", as argued by Larkin in his article in *African Futures* (2017, p. 44), and therefore not to give in "to the illusory sense of stability, disruption, and resolution that narrative imposes on events" that are understood and performatively marked as "crisis" (ibid., p. 44).

[7] At the time I was pursuing fieldwork, the exchange rate with Euros was at about R15 up to R18 for one Euro.

Africa as the "culture of nonpayment". People who were formerly seen as boycotters and part of the liberation struggle, argues von Schnitzler, are today in post-apartheid times cast as "criminals" and "saboteurs" (von Schnitzler, 2016, pp. 16, 70, see also Mbembe & Roitman, 1995, p. 339). Here in Enkanini they also have prepaid meters, but meters connected to the solarpanels, not to the electric grid. Dumile states: It is not that idea of helping the poor or providing infrastructure for them because the government seems incapable of it; now it is only a "private business". "You know, they take away our ideas, they brainstorm with us, but then they implement our ideas. Later we see them implemented, but they are ours. They make money with our ideas."

People like Dumile that I have spoken to aspire to get an electricity connection and all that arrives with its benefit: fridges to store their meat and drinks, TVs, microwaves, but the provisions made through the solar panels do not comply with their demands, needs, and wants.[8] While in the same living room, Dumile gives another utterance in stark contrast to the project framing: "I hope we get electricity next year, hopefully," Dumile says openly. "What will change?" I ask him. Dumile laughs: "No more darkness… and happiness". "It also would reduce fires", he says, because people would have not have to cook with gas stoves all the time. Crucially, people, as Dumile's statement suggests, distinguish between solar and electricity: Electricity "in-the-meantime" against "real" electricity, off-grid against grid, but only a connection to the grid, to modernity and therefore to the state would go hand in hand with most of their aspirations.

Later on, Dumile would walk all the way down with me as we both want to go to town to run some errands. First we do not talk much. We just walk down silently along this little stream of dirt water and waste. The sun is covered with a transparent veil of clouds. All things look soft and pale. Grey and blue. Initiating a conversation, I ask him about his weekend, how his projects and plans were coming about. "I had no chance to think about a future," he openly states. I did not mention the future; he himself was every now and again evoking it. He is constantly looking for bursaries since 2008, but never came across anything in particular. Dumile came to Enkanini in 2012 as a migrant

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[8] This goes well together with Steven Robins' and Peter Redfield's general description of Enkanini's predicament: "In (sic) 2015, the residents of the informal settlement of Enkanini in Stellenbosch violently rejected the "weak power" of an "experiment" by the Sustainability Institute of Stellenbosch University with the rollout of the *iShack* solar energy project. The *iShack* could only be used for lights, television sets, and charging cell phones and could not compete with the capacity provided for by the electricity grid to run fridges, stoves, and other large appliances (...). By rejecting the NGO's offer of "weak" solar power, residents could keep up the pressure on the local state to electrify the informal settlement" (Redfield & Robins, 2016, p. 13).

worker from the Eastern Cape where he had worked as a taxi driver. He was looking for better opportunities, for a job with a good salary, as he tells me. Now he seems quite disappointed with the matter of current affairs. I promise to check out bursaries for him online. I also encourage him to keep looking. We walk quite slowly, as he makes such small steps, then passing the dumping site where the kids come and go on their way to Kayamandi High School. About ten goats snuffling through the hills of waste, of empty plastic boxes and bottles. Coming further down, we approach the site of the communal toilets under construction. On the other side of the road, we see women doing their laundry all gathered around one single tap. We chat a bit more about what he could do with his future. "What vision do you have?", I ask him at some point. Without much respite, he tells me about his dream house: "To have my own house, built by bricks not zinc. My own haven. A two-storey building with a balcony. So I wake up in the morning and have a cup of coffee on the balcony and look over the scenery." He adds further to his depiction: "Soon, the pieces of the puzzle will come together. When everything falls in its place". Almost in town after crossing the railway line and the highway, we see some dog training exercising on the adjacent sports ground. "Do you also need training for this? What does one need for becoming a dog trainer?", he asks me. It is much easier than becoming a paramedic, we agree. It helps people. It is a good job, I encourage him. We finally arrive at the Caltex gas station next to the main taxi rank in town, which is where we depart.

This sitting and walking with Dumile presents an intricate interlocking of aspirations and infrastructure. As outlined, he is not only relying on and also in need of more complex infrastructural conditions in order to expand his possibilities for future work or housing. Rather, he is himself inextricably intertwined with these living conditions through his previous work with the *iShack* project and through his personal technical set-up with his little mobile TV and absent fridge. There is no way of holding apart his evocations of the future from the processes of infrastructure. More than a coincidence, future aspirations and infrastructures happen to be in mutual co-occurrence. Once again, "unfinishedness" is central: It is at the core of Dumile's future imaginations, when he is thinking and hoping for betterment and job opportunities whilst interruptions and postponements stretch the ever widening gap between his evocations of an ideal future and his current situation. Wishes about becoming a dog trainer, finding a bursary, or considering an illegal electricity connection fill in the gap towards the aspired dream house and leisurely life.

Dumile's relation to solar panels and to electricity as a former *iShack* worker is different from other people's usages of infrastructure (surely, as demonstrated, Dumile is an end user as well). Unlike my account of Dumile, who is involved in the immediate politics of infrastructure, another encounter emerged from a recorded interview with Abby, a residential end user. I got to know her through my research helper Thembani[9] who brought me to her *shebeen*[10] on the other side of the settlement. When we arrived that afternoon, Abby interrupted her braaiing (barbecue) and left her early customers. She sat down with me in her little living room, a narrow passage stuffed with a small couch on one side, and a similar set-up with a small TV and large speakers as in Dumile's house, on the other side. Kids passed up and down, in and out. They were screaming and yelling and therefore, many times, distracting our conversation. As a single parent of two children she had moved to Enkanini in 2007 in order to "come to change life here", as she told me. She was very eager to tell me about her life history, her situation, and her plans. I offer a short excerpt from our conversation:

> AB: "You know," (she immediately started off) "we don't live like nice life here. It is better than before, but *still* not comfortable" (my emphasis)
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> LB: "Ok, what do you think needs to change?"
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> AB: "Here, maybe if you can get, like a real house, not a shack. Because it is very difficult, when it is raining, ne. The water is coming under… because you see how the place is, ne. That is why it is like here, up on the mountain. And in winter, there is a lot of water inside. And then everything gets wet. Even the children must… (Men screaming outside.

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[9] George Marcus once labeled these assistants and research participants "epistemic partners" in his very appellative piece called "Where have all the tales of fieldwork gone?" (Marcus, 2006). Through my go-arounds with Thembani, I was introduced to a number of residents who had different stakes and different affections in living and coping with infrastructures. In each and every case, though, talking about electricity supply and infrastructural conditions led to disclosures about people's aspirations for jobs, houses, and security for themselves and their children. Depending on the encounter and the situation, we conducted focus group discussions, recorded or unrecorded interviews, simple conversations with or without note-taking or just small talk; sometimes I relied on translations, sometimes we got along with English.

[10] Shebeens are unlicensed alcoholic beverage-selling establishments in South Africa, often times operated by elderly women. Mostly located in informal settlements in which public spaces were and arguably continue to remain often rare, shebeens function as public gathering places, foremost for men. Shebeens emerged in reaction to the 1927 Liquor Act which prohibited the black population of South Africa from selling alcohol and entering into legal bars and pubs. Shebeens later operated as places of resistance during apartheid, where today many of them (although by no means all, as in Abby's case) have become legalized. Despite the shebeen's important historical role, they have been, throughout time, prevailing sites of gendered violence. Nevertheless, today some have even become tourist attractions.

We get interrupted. Somebody stands in the door and asks her for a price or wants to return a bottle. She then resumes her thoughts.) And here in Enkanini our problem is electricity. Electricity, toilets. Yes. (.) I got electricity from there up, on top there (she points towards the hillside and refers to an illegal connection from Kayamandi). I pay R1000 every month and it is already finished. I just received a call. Most of the time it is finished before end of the month."

LB: "Wow, R1000 a month, this is a lot," (I respond baffled) "What for? In order to have a fridge and…?"
AB: "Ja, for a fridge. (.) I got three fridges, here. And I have to connect the jukebox. I connect my own music, when people, like now, don't have their own money. And if they are not drunk yet, (1) it is not easy to take money for music, you see. Then past ten, I take my jukebox, they are playing the whole night. That is why I want electricity."

LB: "Alright, so you need it for your work?"

AB: "Yes, for my business, but I am not working. Just selling meat and alcohol. But I don't have the papers. I have to run for the police as well, when they are coming. But I am tired of selling, that is not mine. Selling drug is not nice. (1) And I am alone, I don't have a man. When the people is fighting, I can't do nothing, only stand and watch. So it is not nice. So maybe I can do something else, not this. Will be better for me. (.) I have plans and dreams as well. But the problem… I know that I am just dreaming. I can't just go…no…because I am not educated. I struggle. Because this life I am living now. I don't want it, really. I am tired of it."

We kept on talking for a while, but more about her different work places and experiences. She previously had worked in a little restaurant in town as a runner. She was a general worker on a farm, and she had worked as a domestic worker for a rich Afrikaans family, who one day unexpectedly fired her for breaking a coffee cup, as she said. Later, she decided to register a company for cleaning services, but her certificates expired. "It is hard, it is a mission, but I still wanna continue," she added with emphasis. Our conversation then came to a somewhat abrupt end, when the big jukebox next door burst out and ended the recording. She also needed to attend to her children and customers. The meat was waiting on the grill.

Abby's repeated and stated tiredness stands in sharp contrast to her agility, to her being in the midst of her household and shebeen next door, in which a number of

half drunken men demand their meals and drinks, want to change music or, from time to time, quarrel with each other. Because her R1000 illegal electricity supply is finished before month end, she has to make extra provisions: phone people and convince them to concede her credit or retain the connection. Accordingly, one can say that, following Mbembe and Roitman again, Abby has become part of a "do-it-yourself bureaucracy" (1995, p. 343). She also has a solar panel as she later told me, but only as a back-up. It would never suffice to keep three fridges and the much sought-after jukebox running. She only uses it for lighting and her little TV. Abby is very much dependent on the working of the infrastructural set-up in which she cares about the whole home-shebeen-meshwork (to use the concept of Tim Ingold, 2007) in which children, braai, drinkers, domestic work, speakers and bottles are weaved together. She has carved out a little future for herself and her children. She has dreams and plans, yet is extremely realistic about the difficulties and fragilities of her situation. Her dreams consist of having a "real house" and owning her own company. Her concrete plans and provisions for improving the infrastructure and her business, which she distinguishes from "real work", are carried out in order to work towards these goals. Her statements do not seem illusionary. Rather, she frequently emphasises the "still not there" and that it is not a "nice life" in Enkanini—all indicating her coping with and for a better future.

The having or not-having a job, reminiscent of Dumile's account, becomes crucial for any other improvement, upgrading or change of situation. Selling beers and meat is only something for the life-in-between. Notwithstanding, the panoply of reactions and feelings to fill the gap between or the will to combine infrastructural conditions and aspirations, is evident in both cases. Dumile is confronted with constant postponements and lives with a haunting indecisiveness about what to do next and what job opportunity to pursue. Abby, preoccupied with getting by, is demanding inasmuch as she is depending on infrastructural improvements. Constant interruptions and distractions mark her course and interfere in her home and bar set-up. Lately, she starts to get tired of this constant struggle for and with a future. Tiredness and indecisiveness are feelings induced through the intermingling of the infrastructural set-up and people's aspirations. They are indications for an unfinished future sparked by the co-incidence, co-occurrence, continuation, or discontinuation between infrastructures and aspirations. Sometimes infrastructures become aspirations (of modernity) themselves. At other times, infrastructures are, as conditions, what hold people back from pursuing and achieving higher/long-term aspirations like getting a job or a house. At the same

time, however, infrastructures are political terrains on which these various conditions and aspirations can be negotiated and renegotiated in the meantime. The research situations presented here are themselves marked by postponements, interruptions and indecisiveness (revealing the unfinished quality of fieldwork at the same time), and can be seen in light of João Biehl's pledge for different ethnographical storytelling. "Against the causality of origins and the weight of memory, our analyses must reveal mobilization and flight into indeterminate futures" (Biehl, 2010, p. 323), as he put it. Some of these 'flights into indeterminate futures' and 'mobilizations' appear in the stories of how Abby and Dumile organize their lives in the mean while.

## Conclusionary Remarks on Ethnography's Unfinishedness

The postponements, interruptions, and breakdowns—expressions of unfinishedness—in people's lives depicted, that so indispensably belong to the ontological features of Enkanini during the time I spent there, had a strong impact on my research as well. It might have been to its benefit when I found people, like Dumile or Abby, eager to talk to an outsider, like myself, and express their thoughts and feelings in order to give voice to their aspirations in the face of augmenting difficulties. It might also have been to its disadvantage when conversations got interrupted, had to pause, and when people could not be tracked again, as they had migrated, moved, or were sick. Often more to its disadvantage, there was seldom a possibility to calmly sit down together at a table, have a tea and then concentrate on having an informed, open, and detailed debate, conversation or recording. Things were always messier. Children cried, customers, neighbours, family members had to be attended to. Tasks and works had to be pursued. Conversations often had to be paused, or were interrupted and questions had to be reformulated. This had been the case with Abby for example. While we were sitting in her little living room and recording an interview, suddenly the volume of the jukebox in the shebeen next door burst out and ended our recording. Such research incidents reverberate with broader living conditions in informal settlements in general as can be argued with Fiona Ross in *Raw Life, New Hope* (2010):

> Given the instabilities of income and routine, disruption was part of everyday life in The Park [her research site in Cape Town], but no easier to deal with for all that it was expected. People complained that daily life was unpredictable, that they could not find their footing, or, having found it, were unable to secure it for long (Ross, 2010, p. 71)

Such living conditions demand that one adapts one's research tools and prospects to the specific situation as much as the situation has to adapt to the tools (see Mol, 2010, p. 15). Strikingly, as I was often trying to find appropriate tools and approaches in specific situations, the *infrastructure of ethnography* itself became visible and demanded repair, maintenance, and alternatives.[11] In more general terms, working through questions of people's future imaginations, their present and aspirations, in the face of particular infrastructural conditions sheds light on the conditions of fieldwork itself: how it was constructed and constituted, how the forming of relationships took shape, and how it was made over time. Similarly, Marcus and Faubion have called for "the training of ethnographers in-the-making" (2009, p. 25) due to the crucial fact that anthropological research design always has to handle "the essential unpredictability of fieldwork, its virtuous unruliness" (ibid., p. 23), as they put it. "A design process should be open-ended. It should incorporate scenarios of anticipation and changing course" (ibid., p. 28). In my terms, when one finds oneself in the midst of the field, one needs more options for repair, pathfinding, for alternative course-taking, for maintenance, and for upcoming challenges.[12]

In summation, my ethnographical ventures confirmed what I often felt while carrying out fieldwork, namely that a classical application of "participant observation" is difficult to sustain or is becoming obsolete (if it ever was considered suitable, see Rabinow 2003, p. 84). All this carriage that comes with what George Marcus and James Faubion called "the Malinowskian paradigm of research" (Faubion & Marcus, 2009, see

[11] To some extent, but not fully, this suggestion goes along with a little misappropriation of the term "infrastructure" because when I talk of "infrastructures of ethnography", I do not understand it only in the literal sense of a condition or a terrain, but as a metaphor as well, as "any system that appears to underlie and give rise to the phenomenal world (culture, episteme, social structure)" (Larkin, 2013, p. 328), as Larkin has differentiated it from other meanings of infrastructure. Of course, the tools of ethnography, means my body, my notebook, my recorder, the help of my translators, gate-keepers, and assistants might represent the "infrastructure of ethnography", but I have not analysed them as such in much detail here. Rather, what I am referring to is more the flexibility and spontaneity in the field that is needed in order to respond to particular situations and ethical challenges.

[12] Emily Billo and Nancy Hiemstra (2013) have equally addressed these, at times, disorienting challenges and the therefore required flexibility, when confronted with the "messiness of beginning fieldwork" (2013, p. 314). Their article is mainly concerned with the career-oriented pressure of PhD research and with the process of coming from the initial proposal to the actual execution of fieldwork, whilst my angle taken eclipsed, to a larger extent, the issues of planning, preparing, and accessing the field. When I focused, however, on the ontologically-inherent unfinishedness of ethnography and now suggested to engage with (new) infrastructures of ethnography in order to cope with this unfinishedness, my approach is very akin to the one envisioned by Billo and Hiemstra. In embracing the notions of "flexibility" and "reflexivity", as they phrased it, "(it) enables one to negotiate fieldwork as an undertaking inevitably accompanied by edits, revisions, and feedback, especially during the transition from a neat plan on paper to a realized project." (ibid., p. 324). Moreover, they have stressed the material qualities of the field and also concentrated on the logistical and methodological compromises they made (ibid., p. 322), all of which I have attempted to subsume under the terms of infrastructure and unfinishedness.

also Marcus et al., 2008, p. 79)—here, irrespective of its oldschool features of othering, salvaging, and studying the "primitive"—, e.g., turning from outsider to insider, observing while participating, or achieving progress and constantly gaining 'more' knowledge, and studying or discovering a 'whole' culture/society/community in its totality, seemed in part unnecessary, in part inapplicable to me, and in part infeasible in the context I was working in. It demonstrates how the theory and the practice are already at odds with understandings of fieldwork and how an adaption and reconceptualization of fieldwork is constantly required. Often times during fieldwork, I was not only witnessing, but imagining, too. Thus, ethnography, whatever its promises about arriving at a better-informed diagnosis of certain people's life situations, was often as much guesswork and writingwork, as it was fieldwork. In its core, it involves contingencies, interruptions as much as personal limits and imaginations. These aspects amount to ethnography's unfinishedness whilst they are constitutive for it at the same time. In order to make my point clear, from the beginning one has to refuse any temptations to classify or evaluate ethnography's unfinishedness as a shortcoming, a disadvantage or a misconception. Of course, this might be the case, but equally it might be true that the acceptance of ethnography's unfinishedness might lead to new possibilities and directions of how to carry out anthropological research.

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