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The long road:

Hope, violence, and ethical register in London street culture

ABSTRACT
Street cultures remain a challenging topic for anthropological analysis, reflecting broader disciplinary tensions. Approaches that focus on structure and power tend to provide overly deterministic accounts of action, especially regarding violence, while attempts to trace ethical striving have tended to characterize street cultures as domains of ethical failure or as defined by the pursuit of short-term pleasures. Navigating between these approaches, I draw on ethnographic accounts from "the Caldwell," a deprived London social housing estate, to argue that ethical registers are an important locus of ethical life. Youth strive to build worthwhile lives not simply by adopting particular ethical stances, but by pushing on the limits of available stances by weaving these together into a broader ethical register. For many young people involved with the Caldwell's street culture, ethical striving is inextricable from, and may even primarily entail, efforts to cultivate collective registers, which entangle criminal and noncriminal horizons. [*street culture*, *gangs*, *violence*, *ethics*, *inequality*, *exclusion*, *hip-hop*, *stance*, *register*, *London*]

When the text message came, I was chatting with Damon and his friends Mia and Trev. The four of us were at a community hub on the Caldwell,[1] a social housing estate in the London neighborhood of Kilburn, early on a Saturday night. There had been talk of a big night out, and we had decided to linger here until plans crystalized. Trev's phone buzzed. He glanced at the message and quickly handed the phone to Damon, whose face darkened as he read. Damon turned to us with urgency: "I've got to go out there!" Some of the men suspected of killing his brother had been spotted nearby.

Damon's eldest brother had been murdered several years earlier, in what the police called a "targeted attack." As Damon grappled with his anger and with his desire to make something of himself, he was drawn into London's street culture. He became involved in a range of criminal pursuits and joined the city's bloody "postcode wars"—a series of often violent rivalries between youth from different areas. In local terms, Damon was living life "on road."

Over the last year, however, Damon had been striving to leave the road behind, finding a steady job as a tradesman and spending time with newer friends such as Mia. This shift often felt uncertain and fragile, but it was also a source of pride. Earlier that evening, Damon had been talking—almost preaching—to Trev about the tricky business of maintaining friendships with others who were still involved in criminal dealings, without being overly influenced by them.

Exchanging worried glances with Mia, I hastily texted Damon's sister, Lisa, who was due to join us on the night out. She soon arrived, toting a bottle of vodka and some juice. She greeted us and poured drinks, talking as if we would soon be heading to the bar. We sat and chatted for a while, until Damon received another message, propelling him to his feet. "They're going over there right now, and it's going to kick off!" he exclaimed. "I've gotta go with them!"

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Alarmed, I found myself standing too. “You don’t have to!” I said. “No one is making you. Don’t pretend like you don’t got a choice!”

Damon fired back, “There is no choice! It’s a matter of life and death! It’s gonna be me or them, but it’s going to go until someone dies—there’s no choice about that!”

Lisa cut in forcefully, and I felt a momentary surge of relief, thinking she would talk some sense into Damon. A moment later my relief gave way to mounting panic as I realized that she seemed to be taking Damon’s side. “It’s not about these young kids running around,” Lisa explained. “They’re stupid and all, but they don’t matter. It’s just about the five people in that car [who were involved in the killing]. We know who they are, and we know what’s gotta happen. There have to be consequences!”

Even more surprisingly, Damon sat back down. Instead of making for the door, he and Lisa talked through their memories of the killing. Dozens of people could name the men involved. Despite this, police never named any suspects or made arrests. From here, the conversation turned toward fury at the police—not just over the killing, but over how they treated youth from the Caldwell in general. Trev, Mia, and I were drawn back into the conversation, swapping stories we had heard of encounters with the police—instances of mistreatment, as well as cases of clever evasion or near misses. Soon this morphed into gossip, and it wasn’t long before we were all laughing, taking turns poking fun at notorious local characters.

Throughout the evening we continued to speak as if Damon were on the verge of leaving. Nonetheless, for hours, we stayed put, drinking and chatting. Finally, in the early hours of the morning, Lisa received a message that people were heading to the club. She suggested we join them. Worn out from a night of somewhat giddy conversation and quiet anxiety, we all headed home instead.

What kept Damon from seeking out his brother’s killers? This was a situation with deep ethical stakes—literally “a matter of life and death.” Yet it also challenges dominant understandings of ethical life—within both Western culture and anthropology itself. Lisa’s ability to credibly speak to Damon’s anger, and Damon’s ambiguously decisive response, tapped into a locally specific understanding of choice, possibility, and hope. This understanding was cultivated by a range of actors; Damon and Lisa’s acts were thus *collective accomplishments*. This collective dimension of ethical life often goes overlooked. To grasp how ethical capacity is collectively generated, I hope to rethink ethical striving as a process of developing and drawing on distinctive *ethical registers*.

For 16 months, across 2014–15, I lived as an ethnographer on the Caldwell, renting a room in an imposing 1970s tower block. The day after moving in, I was warned by a neighbor that the estate could be a dangerous place. Across the following months, from locals and through the media, I frequently encountered the image of the Caldwell as beset by a local “gang.” To illustrate this image, some locals would point to the groups of young men and women who could be spotted hanging out on street corners and in parks—often with hoods raised, rap blaring from portable speakers, and icy expressions aimed at passersby. Signs of dark dealings also marked the estate itself, in the form of discarded syringes, smashed-in windows, and graffiti or street-corner bouquets commemorating victims of shootings.

During this time, I got to know a group of young men and women who had grown up on the Caldwell together. This process was slow, uncertain, and not without tension. The group ranged from their late teens to their early 30s, and they were mostly from black Caribbean, black African, and mixed backgrounds, alongside a few who were Asian or white British. Many of the men had been drawn into drug dealing and the “postcode wars” between rival estates, and several had been to jail. Men and women had lost friends or family members to shootings, stabbings, or jail. Yet their relationship to these dark histories and activities was never straightforward. Young people continually struggled with questions of how they ought to live, given the circumstances they faced; they played with different values, identities, and ways of being as a matter of everyday life.

Rather than classifying this group as part of a clear-cut “gang,” I see them as engaging with local “street culture” in a range of different ways. Following Ilan (2015), I understand all street cultures as incorporating a posture of defiance toward social exclusion, one that is (partly) elaborated through valorizing crime and violence. Yet, beyond this shared dimension, street cultures are also highly varied and dynamic. In what follows, I focus on stories from Damon and Lisa; their older brother, Troy; and Vince, a close childhood friend of Damon’s, as they attempt to navigate their relationship to the street.

Street cultures pose a tricky challenge for scholars interested in ethics. The valorization of crime and violence sits uncomfortably alongside popular images of the urban margins as sites of willful, destructive deviance. Consequently, most ethnographic accounts of Britain’s urban margins, and of street cultures more generally, have adopted a more determinist lens—they understand the trappings of street culture as survival strategies or as habituated dispositions that emerge in response to systemic exclusion and its foreclosure of possibilities. Those who have attempted to take ethics more seriously have struggled to reconcile understandings of ethical striving with the persistence of street culture’s more “negative” aspects. At worst, these are seen as barriers to ethical striving—part of the background of oppression that those on the margins must navigate. At best they are seen as highly limited forms of ethics—self-defeating responses to everyday exclusions that rarely work to sustainably open up new possibilities. Conceptualizing street cultures as

ethical registers allows us to recognize greater potential within everyday practices while tracing how these potentials interact with broader structural confines. It enables us to trace how different possibilities for inhabiting the world—ranging from violence to care to the refusal of violence—are often deeply intertwined and highly dependent on one another.

I borrow the concept of *register* from linguistic anthropology but deliberately push it beyond its conventional usage. Linguistic registers are distinctive, collectively cultivated styles of speech that inflect and rework languages within specific settings. Familiar examples include street slang, ritual speech, and "professional" language. Registers connect speech to context, indexing group boundaries and particular, situated ways of being. Typically, speakers of a language are familiar with several different registers, but their fluency in each is likely to vary based on their own situated position (Agha 2008). Here, I understand registers more broadly as shared repertories of meaningful practices—not only lexicons and grammatical rules but also stories, habits, skills, styles of dress, repertoires of feeling, and ways of making sense of the world. These, like linguistic registers, *rework* and *inflect* broader systems of meaning in context-specific ways. If we understand ethical life as concerned with questions of how best to inhabit the world, then registers serve as tool kits for mediating between the pressures and possibilities of a given world and the hopes and struggles of everyday life.

Implicitly or explicitly, the meaningful practices within registers supply a range of "evaluative stances"—ways "of categorizing and judging experience" (Kockelman 2004, 129). Central to the register of road culture on the Caldwell are several stances: playful evasiveness and straightforward seriousness, individuality and collectivism, disenchanted presentism and insistent hope.

Building on Keane's (2015) approach, in which taking stances forms the foundation of ethical life, I highlight how ethical possibility is cultivated not simply through adopting different stances but through practices which work to bring these stances into mutual relation and thus ground ethical potential within everyday life. Individual stances, such as evasiveness or seriousness, are each characterized by their own possibilities and limits. This seems to be recognized by youth on the Caldwell, who adopt an overarching stance of irony that provides them with a metapragmatic orientation—a stance toward what it means to take a stance. Irony entails a sustained indeterminacy, positioning actors ambiguously between commitment and disavowal. Approaching ethics ironically enables young people to shift between different stances and to use them to inflect one another, weaving them together into a broader ethical register. For instance, they might use stories of serious violence to underwrite feelings of individual capability and projects of collective care. In doing so, they expand the ethical possibilities of everyday life. By focusing on how ethical stances are joined and inflected to form broader registers, I highlight this interweaving as a form of collective ethical labor.

Cultures of excess

Over the past two decades, there has been an outpouring of anthropological work on ethical life. This diverse body of scholarship is united by a broad understanding of ethics as grounded in a human capacity for judgment and action, both of which work to reach beyond the cultural frames and structural conditions within which life unfolds. Several influential works in this domain have strongly criticized determinist understandings of culture, structure, and power (e.g., Appadurai 2013; Laidlaw 2013; Mattingly 2014; Robbins 2013). More generally, anthropologists interested in ethics have frequently conceptualized ethical striving as something that determinist modes of social theory cannot adequately grasp. Many anthropologists have converged around similar accounts of what purportedly determinist approaches neglect: For Lambek (2010, 24), such approaches overlook the "vectoral qualities of ethical practice" that open up new futures and ways of being. For Faubion (2001, 90), they make it impossible to consider the human "quest for excellence" or "heroic excess." For Das (2010, 395–96), determinist theories overlook "the generation of an adjacent self" which embodies a "a slow flowering" of new possibility. For Appadurai (2013, 295), what goes overlooked is the "ethics of possibility," understood as "those ways of thinking, feeling and acting that increase the horizons of hope." For Mattingly (2014, xviii), drawing on Hannah Arendt, it is the "miracle of natality" that, as Feldman (2013, 150) puts it, "interrupts" the "historical process." And so on.

This conception of ethical life—as the capacity for excess, for stepping beyond the given—puts us onto fraught territory when it comes to marginalized groups. In public discourses, the ethical capacity of marginal groups is often invoked to depict them as *un*ethical actors, who are responsible for perpetuating the hardships they face while also compromising the moral character of the public at large. In the UK, after World War II, successive governments sought to restrict migration from Britain's current and former colonies, based on ideas of racial character that entangled biology and morality to depict the newcomers as innate threats to public well-being and social solidarity (Paul 1997). As understandings of difference gradually shifted from biological to cultural categories, this moral dimension was accentuated. Depictions of cultural difference slipped fluidly between tropes of fixed, collective inheritance and those of free personal choice. Responsibility for conflict and for social exclusion was placed simultaneously on minority cultures, which were characterized as transmitting the

"wrong" values and as fracturing public moral consensus, and on individuals, who were exhorted to transcend cultural particularity (Samanani, forthcoming; Werbner 2005).

Koch (2018, 60) has traced a parallel trajectory in the postwar era, when "paternalistic policies on council estates . . . merged with tenants' own aspirations for nuclear family homes," thus ensuring "a fragile moral union between citizens and the state." Citizenship came to be exemplified by nuclear families and male breadwinners, as well as by the embodiment of "decency" and national identity. This discourse partly overlapped with working-class aspirations and identities, enabling working classes to be (partly) recognized as good, deserving citizens. But this "fragile moral union" disintegrated in the neoliberal era as livelihoods grew more precarious, policy reforms led to disinvestment in social housing, and the welfare state was constricted. Poverty and joblessness, as well as the culture of Britain's poor and working classes, were reimagined in policy and in popular media as markers of ethical failure and as threats to the moral integrity of the nation (Rose 1999).

Across these intertwined histories, marginal groups have been imagined as having a negative ethical capacity—that is, a capacity not for "heroic" excess or the ethical "interruption" of history, but for the culturally habituated or willful abdication of ethical responsibility (Samanani, forthcoming; Valentine and Harris 2014). Excluded groups have been characterized in the popular imagination as entitled and disruptive; they are represented by images of "fake" refugees; single mothers manipulating the welfare system; antisocial, tracksuited "chavs"; or gang members. Given this fraught terrain, most scholarship on street cultures in the UK has—perhaps unsurprisingly—approached questions of ethics gingerly, if at all.

Early attention to British street "subcultures" emerged at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the mid-1970s, and key theoretical developments followed in the 1980s. Although scholars in this tradition place varying emphasis on ideology, cultural creativity, and inequality (for an overview, see Gunter 2010), the key components of their approach are evident even in early work, such as the landmark study by Stuart Hall et al. (1978) on the UK's supposed "mugging crisis." Here, the authors trace the emergence of street cultures at the intersection of racist ideologies, economic exclusion, and everyday creativity. Popular discourses that frame minority populations as social and moral threats work to position such groups as a "reserve army of labour"—subject to on-demand employment and take-what-you-can-get wages—without prompting mass outrage. Street cultures emerge as ways of reasserting both dignity and survival against these intertwined exclusions, meaning that "respectable black families depend on the rackets as much as the hustler; if the latter need 'the game' to survive economically, the former need it to survive culturally" (Hall et al. 1978, 353). Against these intertwined exclusions, Hall and colleagues insist that "the question . . . 'why do they turn to crime?' is a practical obscenity" (359).

From this perspective, street cultures reflect creative efforts to "make life intelligible" (Gilroy 1987, 154) by those facing multiple forms of marginality. Yet the scope of this creative action is limited by how it is "articulated"—that is, historically, contingently joined—with dominant structures (Hall 1986). Cultural studies approaches conceive street cultures less as contesting overarching conditions of exclusion and more as making them inhabitable. Consequently, those elements of street culture tied to broader conditions of socioeconomic exclusion—such as consumerism, violence, and crime—are understood as structurally determined, nearly inevitable at a collective level, if not necessarily an individual one. As Hall (1986, 51) puts it, "How could culture, on its own, transcend the social, political and economic terrain on which it operates[?]" This relatively functionalist approach, which sees crime and violence as rational survival strategies within the sharp constraints of broader structures, guides several contemporary ethnographies. Among these are Mollona's (2009) account of the informal economy in a working-class neighborhood in Sheffield, Sanders's (2004) ethnography of gang crime in the London borough of Lambeth, and Densley's (2013) study of members from 12 self-described gangs, across London.

A second approach follows from the turn in the 1980s toward what Ortner (1984) has called "practice theory"—with Bourdieu as a central figure. Like cultural studies approaches, this approach situates street cultures in relation to ideological and structural exclusions—sometimes recast as symbolic and structural violence. But rather than simply delimiting the possibilities for creatively pursuing livelihoods and dignity, such exclusions are understood as shaping embodied dispositions at a more fundamental level. Here, to grow up in a "violent" context entails learning a certain grammar of value, dignity, and action, one that offers recognition within local milieus while sharply curtailing the possibilities for recognition, understanding, and agency in other settings. As with anthropological studies of gang life in the US (e.g., Bourgois 2003; Ralph 2010), this remains the dominant approach to understanding marginal urban cultures and violence in the UK (e.g., Gunter 2010; McKenzie 2015). In such accounts, violent conditions shape dispositions oriented toward further violence. Writing about youth living on a South London council estate, for instance, Evans (2006, 55) argues that "among some people violence comes to be conceived as a social good. Because of the tension implied by the constant threat of violence against oneself in everyday life, it can become a pleasure and a release from this tension to watch other people fighting." In his ethnography of London's rap scene, Bramwell (2015, 77) similarly argues that "neither 'violent' lyrics nor 'violent' behaviour

within London's youth cultures will substantially change until the lived experience of young people changes."

Both these approaches run up against their limits when attempting to account for certain dimensions of street cultures, such as violence, consumerism, and short-termism. Whether through relations of articulation or embodiment, these dimensions are seen as given in advance, as foundational and inaccessible to the lively creativity and everyday striving that is nonetheless recognized as a hallmark of street cultures. Moreover, by focusing on collectively constricting conditions, these approaches offer little help in understanding the different potentials contained within particular lives and moments—in understanding why some embrace the street when others do not, or how actors might resist or repurpose violence, not simply embody and enact it. Here, these dominant approaches leave us at a determinist dead end, highlighting the need to bring ethics back in.

But this is no easy task. Anthropologists hoping to take both power and ethics seriously must simultaneously maintain an understanding of structure as somehow constricting, and an understanding of people's enduring ethical capacity to bring new possibilities into being. To do so, anthropologists have often conceived of structural pressures and ethical explorations as playing out at different scales, where the latter entails how people "get by and make do with the (mostly bad) lot that has been handed them" (Mattingly 2014, xvii). Ethics, in this reading, is a "tactical" practice for navigating everyday life (de Certeau 1984; see also Das 2010; Han 2012; Lambek 2010; Mattingly 2014). At this everyday level, ethical deliberation is approached as an intrinsic facet of human experience. In such accounts, when ethical maneuvers do accumulate into larger changes, they do so largely at this human scale—opening up new possibilities within the frame of particular interactions, biographies, and relationships. When viewed at this level, however, street cultures seem to reflect a relatively limited ability to break with the given, leading anthropologists to characterize them as heavily determined, relatively narrow ethical domains.

Taking up the need to go beyond depictions of the urban poor as self-destructive or saddled with false consciousness, Koch (2018) argues for greater recognition of everyday "understandings of what it means to be a good person," looking at a poor council estate in the South of England. Koch focuses on women's projects of care, pursued within a context of dispossession and violence. Such projects often involve various tactics for managing neglectful or violent partners involved with street criminality. To bring women's ethical agency into view, Koch ends up depicting men as comparable to "agents of the benefit system" (102)—as an invasive, untrustworthy, and disruptive presence, forming part of the constricting background against which women's moral agency unfolds, rather than as potentially ethical actors in their own right. This even leads Koch to curtail her account of women's morality. Her ethnography is replete with accounts of women entering or rekindling relationships with "disruptive" men. Despite her general insistence on kinship and care as ethical practices, she presents these particular relationships largely as challenges to be overcome. Ultimately, to bring other ethical capacities into focus, Koch ends up treating street life as a domain of a priori evil (see also McKenzie 2015).

Things fare little better when Mattingly (2017) directly explores young people's involvement with gangs. Mattingly argues that gang life can offer a number of "pleasures": a "sensual" pleasure in toughness and violence that enacts a "freedom from fear" (899); "the pleasure of recognition—the intense satisfaction in being seen, being someone to be reckoned with" (900); and the pleasure of belonging, experienced as a quasi-familial "love" that "demands fierce protection" (901). Mattingly stresses that the allure of such pleasures emerges in relation to the foreclosure of opportunities for survival, security, joy, and esteem by other means. Nonetheless, she argues that recognizing such pleasures is important for resisting "an implicit stereotype of gang life as a purely negative moral space" (902). By focusing on pleasures, however, Mattingly also depicts the streets as an ultimately tragic moral space. Although "pleasurable," gang life enacts and cultivates "an active form of despair," in which gang activity "graphically expresses not freedom so much as entrapment and a 'spirit of resignation' about community life" (901)—effectively positioning gang life as a self-limiting ethical project that cannot reach a state of "sustainable autopoiesis" (Faubion 2011, 92).

In these accounts, street cultures are presented as limited ethical domains—characterized at worst by forms of evil that add to the struggles of the already marginalized, and at best by limited, perhaps even self-defeating responses to everyday exclusions. Without disregarding the force of structural and ideological exclusions, or the genuinely harmful consequences of crime and violence, we can expand our understanding of street cultures as sites of ethical striving when we approach them as collectively cultivated registers.

Locating the road

The difficulty in framing those affiliated with street cultures as ethical subjects speaks to the limits of current thinking about both ethics and power in anthropology. Yet this difficulty does not belong to anthropologists alone. Street cultures seem to be characterized by a range of different, even contradictory, orientations, generating significant debate over how best to describe them (Garot 2007; Ilan 2015; Miller 2020). This plurality, however, may well be the point. On the Caldwell, road culture was often characterized by reflexive evasiveness—a nimble, playful refusal of easy legibility. This evasiveness, however, was frequently coupled with

its opposite: an insistence that things were, or ought to be, self-evident. Both these stances contained the other—an insistence on the self-evident nature of street culture was often deployed playfully, but the self-evident nature of street culture was framed as encompassing its wide-ranging, playful iterations. This made for slippery ground, as I quickly discovered.

In the early stages of my fieldwork, I was often tripped up. I would meet people who insisted that we needed to talk. As a researcher, they said, I needed to understand their perspective, because they embodied "the real community" or "how it really is." But I would soon find that I couldn't reach them by phone and that no one seemed to recognize their name. Later I would discover that I had been given the numbers of burner phones and a nickname selected from a list of aliases. Other practices compounded this slipperiness. When people did agree to speak, plans were treated as fluid—subject to continual revisions in time, place, or numbers, which rapidly altered power dynamics. More than once, I found myself at unexpected group gatherings, being interviewed myself as an ostensible outsider. In conversation, when people shared stories of road life, it was often difficult to tell what was intended as an honest retelling and what was fabricated or embellished. Repetition was no guarantee, since commitment to an exaggerated or absurd story could form part of elaborate, collective jokes.

Such evasiveness served decidedly practical purposes, helping counteract the scrutiny of locals, rivals from other neighborhoods, and state authorities. The London Metropolitan Police rely on a tool known as the Gangs Matrix, in which a set of fixed criteria—including known associates and their profiles, association with criminal incidents (including simply being a victim of crime), encounters with the police, and fashion choices—serves to assess whether young people are "involved" with gangs. Even though 35 percent of those in the Gangs Matrix have never committed any serious offense (Amnesty International 2018), such classifications inform police strategy and behavior—contributing to a justice system in which minority youth face harsher treatment and more punitive outcomes (Lammy 2017). A similar classificatory logic played out within inter-estate rivalries, in which being associated with certain friends, incidents, or tensions—or simply a certain area—could prompt confrontation. On top of this, youth also contended with the scrutiny of other neighborhood figures (including, of course, anthropologists) whose motives and allegiances were uncertain or with whom they hoped to maintain good relations. Faced with this range of risks, evasion was often an important survival strategy.

Evasion, however, was more than simply pragmatic. It characterized an ethical stance that was playful, creative, and funny. In celebrated acts of evasion—which made for endlessly repeated stories—road youth were able to deter seemingly inevitable outcomes while simultaneously "clowning on" opponents, demonstrating local cunning in contrast to the haplessness of others. In the summer of 2015, Damon and Mia excitedly told me an exemplary story, from a party the night before. The story centered on a successful drug dealer, Mags, whose lavish birthday parties were the stuff of legend. That year, he had organized a street party, setting up a mammoth sound system in a parking lot. The party attracted hundreds of revelers. It wasn't long before noise complaints accumulated and the police showed up. Knowing they couldn't arrest everyone, they asked around for the organizer. Everyone told them to speak to Mags. Finding him proved difficult until, finally, an officer was handed a phone with Mags on a video call. Mags confirmed he had organized the party, and the officer demanded to speak to him in person: "Nah," Mags replied laconically, turning the camera to reveal his surroundings. "I'm in jail, fam." Ultimately, no one was arrested, and the party continued well into the morning.

For doubters: questions of veracity are somewhat beside the point. One might try to pin down street cultures—to assess the truth of stories, or indeed to determine "authentic" markers of style, slang, practice, or boundaries. But this would overlook how street subcultures play with what is given about the world, through evading authority, deflecting conflict, or holding open spaces of creativity. This playfulness makes street subcultures "always essentially ambiguous," capable of "slip[ing] beneath any authoritative interpretation" (Hebdige 1982/83, 86).

This ambiguity is often overlooked. British policy and policing, for example, remain committed to the idea that "gangs" exist as clear-cut entities (Alexander 2008). Likewise, much of the scholarly literature has attempted to demarcate street cultures in terms of a clearly defined "code of the streets"—distinguishing "street" youth from "decent" ones (Anderson 1999; Brookman et al. 2011)—or else to identify street cultures through distinctive boundary markers, such as specific hoodies, hairstyles, or sneakers (Ralph 2010). In contrast, on the Caldwell, street and "straight" styles, practices and networks, blended and blurred with one another—making the definition of street or road culture into something slippery and tautological. To be "on road" could refer to a range of things—dealing drugs, picking fights with rivals, a general style or attitude, or simply hanging out with friends, such as at a family-oriented community barbecue. It was possible to be described as "on road," "doing the road," or "living the road life" while avoiding all criminal activity, just as one could deal drugs or pick fights and not be considered a "proper roadman." Sometimes the terms "street" and "road" were used interchangeably; other times it was implied that "road" culture involved a "harder" aesthetic, greater local savvy, or a more criminal orientation. People fooled around with conventions of language and style. They remixed familiar details into new stories, engaged in mock confrontations, or told

absurd stories in deadpan serious tones—stringing audiences along and blurring the lines between sincerity and mockery. This was a subculture that continually played with the conditions of its own legibility and coherence as such.

Addressed as criminals by police, as targets by rivals, and as trapped within cycles of poverty and conflict by popular representations, young people used this stance of evasion to resist, rework, or inflect pregiven scripts—to tell a different story about themselves and to confound the classifying gaze of others. Deflecting police scrutiny helped counter feelings of constraint while buying time for friends or family to intervene in fraught situations. An ambiguous attitude toward markers of belonging allowed people to move between close circles of confidants and the staging of a more encompassing sense of community. Stories remixed from familiar elements allowed friends to spontaneously construct coherent alibis and maintain good relations when confronted by family. All this helped sustain a sense that life contained just a bit more potential.

This is an ethical stance with transatlantic roots. Their deepest tips lie in the signifyin' tradition traced by Gates (1989)—itself grounded in trickster figures from African myth—which plays on slippages between the generic meanings attached to words and their capacity to mean otherwise or gesture elsewhere within more situated contexts. More immediately, these roots draw deeply from the continuation of this signifyin' tradition in hip-hop (Potter 1995). Here the ambivalent, slippery play between the given and the possible is staged as a mode of resistance that holds open the vision of a better world, even when history does not unfold progressively. The arsenal of hip-hop—punning, breaks and backbeats, out-of-place samples, and in-your-face aesthetics—offers a grammar for disjunctively staging "cultural breaks" that articulate angry critique, "unaccounted histories and as-yet unfulfilled futures" (Potter 1995, 3), outside predictable relations of meaning, and so outside a predictable place in history. These roots draw, as well, on practices of "hustling" prevalent in cities across the world, where those in pursuit of livelihoods chase opportunities and cultivate personas and dispositions that straddle or move fluidly between "formal" and "informal" economies, thus fundamentally challenging these categories themselves (Thieme 2018).

At this point, however, things get even trickier. The Caldwell is one of the poorest places in Britain and has remained so over decades, despite a series of regeneration initiatives (both "community led" and top-down) and endless policy reforms. This is a place where, according to a local teaching assistant, things pile up—the weary indifference of teachers and parents, the staggering number of local pawn and loan shops, the endless public debate over who truly "belongs" in Britain, the entrenchment of low-paid and insecure jobs, the incessant blame placed on the poor for their own circumstances, and the ever-present specter of violence. All this amounts to a message endlessly repeated: "What hope have you got?" Different forms of injustice compound, to the point where belonging and basic rights are easily called into question—as Damon once explained at an event discussing police stop-and-search practices:

> And you've got the police stopping and searching people on the street, because you look different, or you act different, right? So that's just another way of telling people they ain't really British. And then, did you know, if you go to jail for over two years, they take away your passport? They can just take it from you if you end up in jail like that? So how British are you?!

Hemmed in from all sides, Damon and his friends find that exclusion and inequality can take on a near-transcendent quality, that any given possibility becomes vulnerable to foreclosure.

In these circumstances, evasion continually encounters limits—precisely those stressed by cultural-studies and practice-theory approaches. Evasion is inescapably a worldly practice, constrained by a broader political economy and the affordances (Keane 2015) of available cultural and material forms, which shape embodied habits of understanding, feeling, and acting. To refuse these limits—insofar as they are even amenable to refusal—is to refuse the terms on which recognition and the capacity for action are most readily made available. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, youth cultivated a more serious, confrontational, and disjunctive stance, which took up and reproduced dominant images of road life alongside their insistence on playful fluidity.

This seriousness often manifested aesthetically. Musical preferences, especially in public, tended toward the edgier sounds of grime and its US counterpart, trap. In distinguishing grime from mainstream hip-hop, Hancox (2018, 67) describes it as "characterized by its sparse arrangements, futuristic, icy cold synths, devastating basslines and awkward, off-kilter rhythms," while Bramwell (2015, 10) describes London's rap scene as dominated by a "grotesque aesthetic." This disjunctive aesthetic colored fashion and self-presentation as well. Amid the fluid creativity of street fashion on the Caldwell, there was a pull toward tough, minimalist looks: "fatigue" (camouflage print) on hoodies, leggings, or trackpants; plain, tight T-shirts, vests, or tank tops; hoods pulled up to hide faces in shadow; and chains—which, in continuity with classic hip-hop fashion, continued to mark success and toughness—now worn concealed under shirts. In Instagram photos and music videos, as well as in the frequent aesthetic staging of hanging out on road—amid stark concrete walls, soaring gray tower blocks, dilapidated fencing, and shady stairwells lit by hazy halogen

lights—youth turned the markers of urban disinvestment into signs of savvy, power, belonging, and cool.

Beyond aesthetics, toughness and violence were often positioned as important markers of collective belonging and personal value—even though they were not *inextricably* linked to road life. Confrontations were often played theatrically to crowds of onlookers, informing gossip and local reputations. Friends would swap mythologized stories: of successful "raids" into rival territory, of decadent nights out and luxury purchases bankrolled by drug-dealing money, or of women who had conned money from credulous partners.

These tropes and stories, aesthetics and symbols, informed a second stance—one in which things were represented and read seriously and straightforwardly. Here, jarring aesthetics were genuine warnings, and stories of glamour genuine enticements—giving street life the dimension of ethical starkness evoked by Koch (2018) and Mattingly (2017).

These serious, "self-evident" readings of the road were often explicit. On one hot, quiet, spring night, I ran into Vince on the street. With little else to do, we soon ended up at my flat, sitting on the floor while nursing iced coffees. Having done a course in sociology, he was curious about my research—but after a few questions, Vince ended up doing most of the talking. Early in, he told me a story of getting jumped when getting off a bus. He saw it coming, he explained:

> You know when guys look a certain way, acting in a certain way, you know what they're like—it's road culture. And I know it's stereotypes—I know you might say that—but that's how you've got to think sometimes. Sometimes they're true!

Vince recognized that trouble was coming not only from reading the style and demeanor of his would-be assailants, but also from knowing that they were reading him in the same way.

Unfortunate in one moment, legibility was an asset the next. Later, Vince was vehemently explaining how those on road looked after "the community." Part of this, he argued, came from their ability to "defend" the area by easily spotting those who might cause trouble and knowing the right questions to ask. Meanwhile, public posturing and violent reputations signaled to rivals that the neighborhood was protected, preventing further violence.

Later, when I asked Vince about how outsiders viewed the estate, he again shifted perspective. "People are too quick to categorize," he insisted, arguing that despite their dealings, local youth didn't deserve to be classified as a "gang." "There's more there than whatever that category says there is," he said, "[. . .] More than meets the eye." Toward the end of the conversation, after having repeatedly emphasized his understanding of the road as a caring community, and his own feelings of belonging, Vince surprised me by declaring that he hoped to move away soon, since his daughter was growing older. Baffled, I asked why, and he laughed: "Cuz I believe in social reproduction, innit!"[2]

Vince's shifting orientations reveal an overarching stance that encompasses both seriousness and evasion—and that entails both acting within the terms of a given world and trying to slip beyond it. Treating neither option as satisfactory in its own right, this overarching stance places seriousness and evasion in a recursive relationship in which each can contain, and provide a way of acting both within and against, the other. As ethical stances, both seriousness and evasion provide what Keane (2003) calls "metalanguages of action," which supply people with distinctive understandings of what "meaningful action" entails. Crucially, however, young people on the Caldwell seem to explicitly recognize the limits to action inherent within each of these stances. Rather than taking up either stance in its own right, then, youth draw them together in relation to one another and to local circumstances, as part of a broader, heavily ironic register. Visible across London as a youthful response to persistent marginality and disenchantment (Millington 2016), irony, as Lambek (2003) argues, entails a committedly indeterminate stance, according to which actors navigate between fully endorsing or disavowing particular possibilities or positions.

For Gal (2005), identifying recursive relationships can help reveal the incompleteness of categories, supporting ideological critique. In contrast, here, those on road position evasion and seriousness in a recursive relationship—in which each contains the other—*because* they recognize that both stances respond incompletely to the challenges of everyday life. This knowing, ironic recursiveness is evident not just in Vince's shifting positions but throughout the examples above. Practices of evasion rarely refused ascribed categories outright. This would be the case, for instance, if people responded to police profiling by attempting to enact white-, middle-class-coded norms of decency. Instead, they played with dominant classifications, denying and reaffirming them simultaneously. Likewise, moments of hanging out, partying, or fighting in public, partly staged as serious, ostentatious performances of cool, toughness, and belonging, were also replete with gestures that deflected legibility—as unfamiliar passersby were met with intimating looks or confounded by rapid-fire, slang-heavy jokes.

Collective transcendence

Irony is not, however, simply a tactical response to the insufficiency of existing ethical stances available to those on the streets. It acts on and against this insufficiency over time, attempting to extend horizons of possibility in

tentative and uncertain ways. Irony has primarily been analyzed by anthropologists as a means of *reconciling* people to intolerable situations—as an *inward, subjective* disposition that thus produces forms of complicity (Fernandez and Huber 2001; Steinmüller 2013). Yet as an overarching stance in the register of road life, irony could also be used to inflect and rework the available foundations of judgment and action. This was especially evident in the ironic relation enacted between stances of individuality and collectivism, in which individual potential both emerged from and transcended the collective.

Before certain nights when drinking was involved, Damon and his friends would play a game they had invented called "money up." The rules were simple: rebound £1 coins off a wall, trying to land yours as close to the wall as possible. The closest shooter keeps all the coins, and a new round begins. Games would often continue until someone had acquired most or all the coins available, leaving someone with tens or even hundreds of pounds, and everyone else at a loss. Customarily, however, it was expected that the winner would buy drinks for everyone else. Financially, this practice left its participants roughly back where they started. Socially, however, it made it possible for one person to play benefactor, treating their friends for the evening.

A similar logic was evident in the videos made by local rappers, which often featured large quantities of cash and expensive sports cars. Videos were typically staged to imply that these possessions belonged to the lead artist, who appeared with their crew as backup. Behind the scenes, however, these eye-catching accessories were collectively sourced—as crews emptied bank accounts to build up stacks of cash or chipped in to rent a car. In some cases, this pooling of capacity also applied to toughness—or criminal culpability—when music videos were used as a means of "subliminally" (i.e., indirectly) "calling out" rivals by incorporating more-or-less coded taunts and threats. By the time I did my research in Kilburn, this particular practice had waned, after the police had begun to pay closer attention to the local rap scene, leading to an excess of scrutiny as they contended with its slippery aesthetics. Nonetheless, this logic remained evident within a broader tendency for interpersonal threats or feuds to become collectivized.

Across these instances, collectives came together to act or take responsibility in ways that would have been challenging or even impossible for individuals. This collective capacity, however, was recursively restaged as individualized—producing a performance of personal capability that transcended the acutely felt and deeply embodied limits of life on the Caldwell. Over time, this restaging of limits left an impression, feeding into a collective register of stories, practices, interpretive habits, and vital feelings—joy, power, invulnerability—that could provide the grounds for a different sense of embodied possibility. Within a context of ongoing exclusion, however, this register not only needed continuous replenishment and reevocation, but also relied especially on certain hyperagentive elements, such as those involving violence or criminality.

One such story, first told to me by Vince and later in an energetic, tag-team rendition by Vince, Damon, Troy, and several others at a house party, occurred long before my fieldwork—when Vince and Damon were teenagers. They were out with a group of friends, celebrating someone's birthday drinking in Trafalgar Square—the symbolic heart of London. Suddenly, they were ambushed by a group from a rival area. They managed to escape, but not before Vince was stabbed several times in the leg. He only noticed the wounds as they arrived back in Kilburn, as the adrenaline wore off.

At the party, the story then fragmented into competing voices. One group, including Damon's current girlfriend, had hurried out to find Vince. In animated tones they recounted the effort to rush him to hospital while attempting to concoct an explanation for his parents. Others recalled running through the estate, rounding up friends, and rushing back to central London, where, after some detective work, they tracked down the other group and "beat the shit out of them." When telling the story on his own, Vince concluded by emphasizing how it was a reminder that he was part of a "community that's going to be there for you through things like that. [. . .] They've got your back. When shit like that just happens, you get the whole area piling into cars and coming out for you." At the party, one storyteller attempted to wrap up the narrative in a somber, authoritative tone, as if concluding a sermon: "It showed everyone: you don't mess with the Caldwell"—before Troy cut in with an exultant, singsong "Best. Night. Of. My. Life!"

In these lively retellings, the story seethes with surplus possibility. Part of this emerges from how it sketched a fractal relationship between the individual and collective—folding care and vengeance together into the collective potency of a "community," which then underwrites personal capacity. This sense of surplus possibility, however, also trades specifically on the disjunctive, disorienting, excessive phenomenology of violence (Bataille 1989). Here, the community's collective capacity—and that of the individuals within it—is not simply the sum of particular acts of care and vengeance but something transcendent; it emerges as a generalized feeling that "you don't mess with the Caldwell," or that the community has "got your back" across all circumstances. (In his telling, Vince went on to analogize the incident to community barbecues where no one was expected to pay.) This reaching for a sense of transcendence plays out against the tightly constricting horizons of everyday injustice, as charged stories of radical agency provide narratives that can speak back to the scope of everyday foreclosure. Forming part of a collective register, such stories can be reinhabited, at least in key moments, repeatedly, accessibly, and in novel ways—even for those who

were not directly involved in the violent retaliation, such as Damon's girlfriend or Vince himself. These stories evoke a capacity to *decisively* break with the given, a capacity that can furthermore be mapped onto a range of different ethical horizons—beyond those implied by acts of violence or criminality themselves.

Although not always readily apparent, these stories play a vital role in opening up new possibilities for inhabiting a world of tight constraint. Individuality remains the dominant way of imagining (ethical) subjecthood in the UK (Strathern 1992). The ongoing staging of a recursive relationship between individuality and collectivism on road does not provide a wholesale challenge to this dominance but rather reinflects it, reframing individuals' capacity as interdependent with that of the collective. In turn, this points us toward an expanded understanding of ethical striving, in which the potential for inhabiting and navigating the world is often a joint production. Given stances—such as that of individualism—are inflected and animated in new ways by being brought into relation with other positions. This work of stitching stances together, of animating and inflecting, is often a necessity for those on the margins, who must find ways of navigating a given world by taking up ways of being that are often constructed to favor people other than themselves. In such circumstances, ethical life consists of everyday attempts not only to go beyond the given but also to structure new possibilities in the first place—of efforts to cultivate new or expanded capacities for judgment, feeling, action, and hope. Acts, such as crime and violence, which may not seem to express sustainable notions of "the good" in their own right, may nonetheless play a vital role in making ethical striving more widely accessible to others, or in other moments. Ethical registers can be understood as collective repositories of such potential.

The long road

One summer afternoon, hanging out on the street with a group of friends, Damon and Troy ran into Jack, who managed an independent radio station based in the Caldwell's "community hub"—which played host to a number of locally based artists and independent businesses. The encounter turned into a public argument about the lack of engagement between the creatives and entrepreneurs based at the hub and the local "community." This eventually led Damon to host his own radio show—which he came to jokingly describe as "Question Time in the hood."[3] Recorded sporadically, Damon's shows always drew crowds of friends into the studio, who would pass around vodka, chat in the background, and jump animatedly into the half-slapstick, half-serious conversations on air.

These shows served as a forum for explicit ethical debate, touching on questions such as violence, role models, and policing. Across these questions, however, Damon maintained a decisively ironic stance. In an episode on success titled "Legacy or Lambo," Damon opened with an impassioned speech on the importance of leaving a legacy for future generations—contrasting this to materialistic visions of success. As soon as he felt the audience warming to this stance, he flipped:

> OK, I'm going to be a scumbag right now and I'm going to say, I'm literally going to say—I know certain people, or I might be one of those people who are going to say, "OK, if you ain't got a chain around your neck, or you ain't got a Rolex, a car." And when I'm talking about that, I'm not talking about a Lambo, I'm talking about a Maybach, because I've never been in one. [. . .] But anyways, if I don't have a Maybach, a chain round my neck, a Rolex, a bracelet, and a couple of [*pause*] females [*quietly*:], instead of that other word *bi* [*pause*] *ches*. [*loudly*:] Anyways! But at the end of the day, for me, if I had all of that, *I'd* think I was successful!

Playful and electric, Damon's on-air presentation continually subverted itself. He renounced his own argument for legacy over Lamborghini, partly because he preferred Maybachs, and he tried to objectify women in clumsy, self-defeating terms. This same refusal to adopt a fixed stance continued off air as well. After another show, in which he and Troy debated demeaning language in rap, Damon was approached by a friend of one of the entrepreneurs based at the hub, who commended him for being a "real feminist" and suggested that he do a whole show on gender. Despite the criticism of sexist language he had voiced on air, Damon brushed him off—first by cracking a sexist joke, and then, when pushed, more bluntly—"Naw, man, I ain't doing that. That's too deep."

On the Caldwell, "deep" and "long" were both widely used as dismissive terms for matters that were too fraught or complex to deal with, indexing a broader tendency to hold questions of ethical commitment in suspension. Just as those on road took an ironic stance that positioned them between evasion and seriousness, and between individuality and collectivity, these categories also reveal an ironic approach toward hope and commitment. By taking an indeterminate stance toward both short-term satisfactions and long-term commitments, people on the Caldwell held open possibilities that would be foreclosed if one insisted on taking a clear position—even simply for the moment. If we return to our opening scene, for instance, this stance is evident in Lisa's declaration about her brothers' killers—"We know what's gotta happen. There have to be consequences!"—and the effect it had on Damon, prompting him to sit back down and talk through his anger. Here, Lisa simultaneously acknowledges the necessity of resolution and the possibility that resolution might be deferred or rethought otherwise. If something has to happen, it need not happen tonight, although it might; it need not entail

retributive violence, although it might. Suspending commitment, in this way, trades on the sense of plural, surplus possibility, woven into the register of road life. In moving from talking about anger at the police to stories of outmaneuvering them, Damon and Lisa evoke an image of a community whose potential exceeds that of the law itself—one capable of reaching a resolution, even when the law has failed. This feeling of collective potential helps Damon defer acting in the present without feeling as if he has foreclosed the future.

This stance of committed indeterminacy closely resembles what Han (2012) describes as an ethic of "active awaiting." Those living in the slums of Santiago, Chile, argues Han, develop a practice of attentive endurance, in which they navigate the challenges of daily life while remaining alive to small opportunities for action, such as acquiring new household goods or cultivating new relationships. These small acts are oriented toward not only enduring the present but also "the hope that relations could change with time" (31). Similarly, on the Caldwell, people often hold open processes of making sense of the world and of forming particular commitments within it, keeping them unresolved as they search for new possibilities. This is a hustle economy of morality—a regularization of the creative, noncommittal exploration of different ethical possibilities, set against the perilousness of everyday life. But this is not a mode of hustling in which people accept entrapment in a perpetual present and the "evacuation of the near past and the near future" (Guyer 2007, 410; see also Thieme 2018). Those on road are well aware that the odds are far from being in their favor—that the present may continue for a while yet—but they are also continually, opportunistically alive to the possibilities for resolution, fragile or deferred as they may be.

For Damon, this gradual, exploratory movement toward resolution began, in many ways, with his radio show. Being on road allowed him to speak, with clear, compelling anger about urban decline, racism, violence, and poverty. Voicing this anger opened up another self, who could speak into a microphone with rage and humor, to a group of assembled friends and to unknown others over the airwaves. Damon as a roadman and Damon as a radio presenter overlapped, borrowing and trading on one another for credibility, but each self could also inhabit different terms of recognition, different possibilities for understanding and action. As a radio presenter, Damon became more legible to the entrepreneurs and artists at the hub, and they to him. This was how he met Mia, a freelance filmmaker, whom he eventually came to refer to as his "mentor." Mia's penchant for lengthy, bubbly conversations drew out yet another self. As the two became close friends, Damon took a step beyond his sharp, bombastic on-air persona to speak with more personal vulnerability—talking with Mia about his relationship worries or anxieties around the future. Their friendship allowed Mia to insist on Damon's legibility to others—pushing on her friends to help him secure a job. Equally, Damon's presence helped make Mia, and the hub as a space, more legible to Damon's friends, who began to spend more time there, creating a further set of subtle openings. People would spend long hours at the hub: sometimes to relax and joke with friends; sometimes for heaving, impromptu parties that led inevitably to noise complaints; and sometimes, following Damon's lead, to talk to Mia, or with one another, working through weighty questions of who they hoped to become.

Such resolutions were never only matters of self-cultivation. Damon's growing capacity to provisionally inhabit new stances remained underwritten by the ways in which others imbued these stances with potential—for understanding, action, and recognition. In the opening scene—when Damon and Trev were discussing what it means to stay friends with those still committed to living "on road," even when you're living a different life yourself—Damon was cultivating this capacity for inhabitation in two directions simultaneously. He was probing how the road could still remain a locus of belonging, dignity, and care for himself, even as his life changed, while also exploring how the changes he had undergone might become legible and compelling for Trev. In other words, Damon was drawing on the register of road life to reshape his own life while also working to reshape this register, to open up new possibilities within it for others. Both projects relied on each other. Yet they represented distinctive forms of ethical striving. In fact, for some, ethical life was primarily about cultivating *collective* potential.

One afternoon, roughly a year after Damon began presenting his radio show, Troy and I were chatting on the street when a group of school-leavers passed by, jubilant at the end of the year. Watching wistfully, Troy remarked,

> If I look back, now I'm a bit older—I mean, I don't have any regrets—but I think more and more—what have I got from this place, you know? What have I been able to keep? [. . .] I mean, at the end of the day, the road is the road—like, I can't really change that, you know? I'm just living my life, and that's who I am. And if you look like—OK, I've had my struggles, but you look at my sister, and she's going to university now. She's gonna get a degree when the rest of us hadn't really done that, you know? And you know why she was able to do that—it's cuz the rest of us, we was always pushing her to make it, to get it, you know? Because we knew—you got to get it or it's gonna get you! [. . .] So, you know, I look back and all, but I don't know if I'd change anything. This is my life, right?

Conclusion: Contesting the capacity for ethical striving

In this article, I have focused on the Caldwell's young residents and their ethical capacity for evaluation and meaningful action, a capacity that allows them to step

beyond a given world and cultivate lives worth living. In contrast to prevailing approaches within the anthropology of ethics, however, I have emphasized that this capacity is always situated—often constricted by broader circumstances, yet collectively cultivated. Not everyone shares an equal capacity to bring newness into the world, and people's attempts to shape lives worth living—however this process is understood—are often stymied by entrenched forms of inequality and exclusion. On the Caldwell, particular ethical stances—and here I covered only a few, ranging from evasion to collectivism to presentism—were all marked by certain possibilities as well as sharp limits. Against such limits, I have highlighted how ethical life involves not only attempts to shape lives or relations with others directly, but also more collective efforts to sustain and expand these capacities in the first place. I have understood these collective reservoirs of potential as registers, which work to inflect the possibilities and limits of a given world, and of particular ethical stances, in new, more expansive ways.

Thinking of ethical life in terms of registers allows us to scale up the level at which we locate ethical striving. Ethics is a practice of everyday life, but equally—and sometimes more fundamentally—it can be a matter of contesting and attempting to rework the conditions that shape everyday life in the first place. In other words, ethics in this reading is profoundly political and profoundly material. It has as much to do with the contested distribution of physical and symbolic resources—which carry particular affordances for thought and action—as it does with how people attempt to inhabit an already given world. Seemingly negative acts, such as crime and violence, which do not seem to directly express a strong vision of the good life, or which do not seem to cultivate positive ways of relating to others, may nonetheless play vital roles in contesting the ethical affordances of the world. This highlights a need to understand ethical striving in the round—to look at how different stories, lives, and possibilities may play off, and depend on, one another. In turn, this perspective reveals a way between determinist and more agentive approaches, revealing how the capacity to contest socioeconomic exclusion, cultivate new dispositions, and shape lives worth living may rely on entangled collective efforts, which can also reproduce conditions of exclusion—to different degrees within different milieus. This interdependency offers a sharp rejoinder to those who attempt to draw clear lines between "decent" and "street" lives, who attempt to reduce the capacity to transform one's life or avoid certain pitfalls to a matter of individual choice or responsibility, or who conversely see life on the margins as a site where ethical striving is virtually impossible.

There are other, untold stories that sit behind those I have told here. While some people drew on the register of the road to negotiate new possibilities, others drew on it to further pursue postcode rivalries or to underwrite their investment in criminal pursuits. Yet if I have focused on stories that attempt to break with history, I have also tried to point to how even these breaks with the given, these "miracles of natality," have remained inextricably intertwined with seemingly darker horizons. Registers mediate not only language or meaning but also the implications of political economy and the material ordering of the world. This mediation remains a process of give-and-take, of redistributing pressure, or, at best, pushing against the elasticity of tight constraints to open up just a bit more space. Life on the streets of the Caldwell reminds us how ethical life is always a matter of entanglement, both personal and political.

Notes

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1. Proper names have been anonymized. I borrow "the Caldwell" from Zadie Smith's novel *NW*, which is also set in North-West London. I omit media citations that would identify the estate or people in question.
2. Here, *cuz* is short for *because*, not *cousin*.
3. *Question Time* is a BBC television show in which politicians answer questions posed by members of the audience.

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