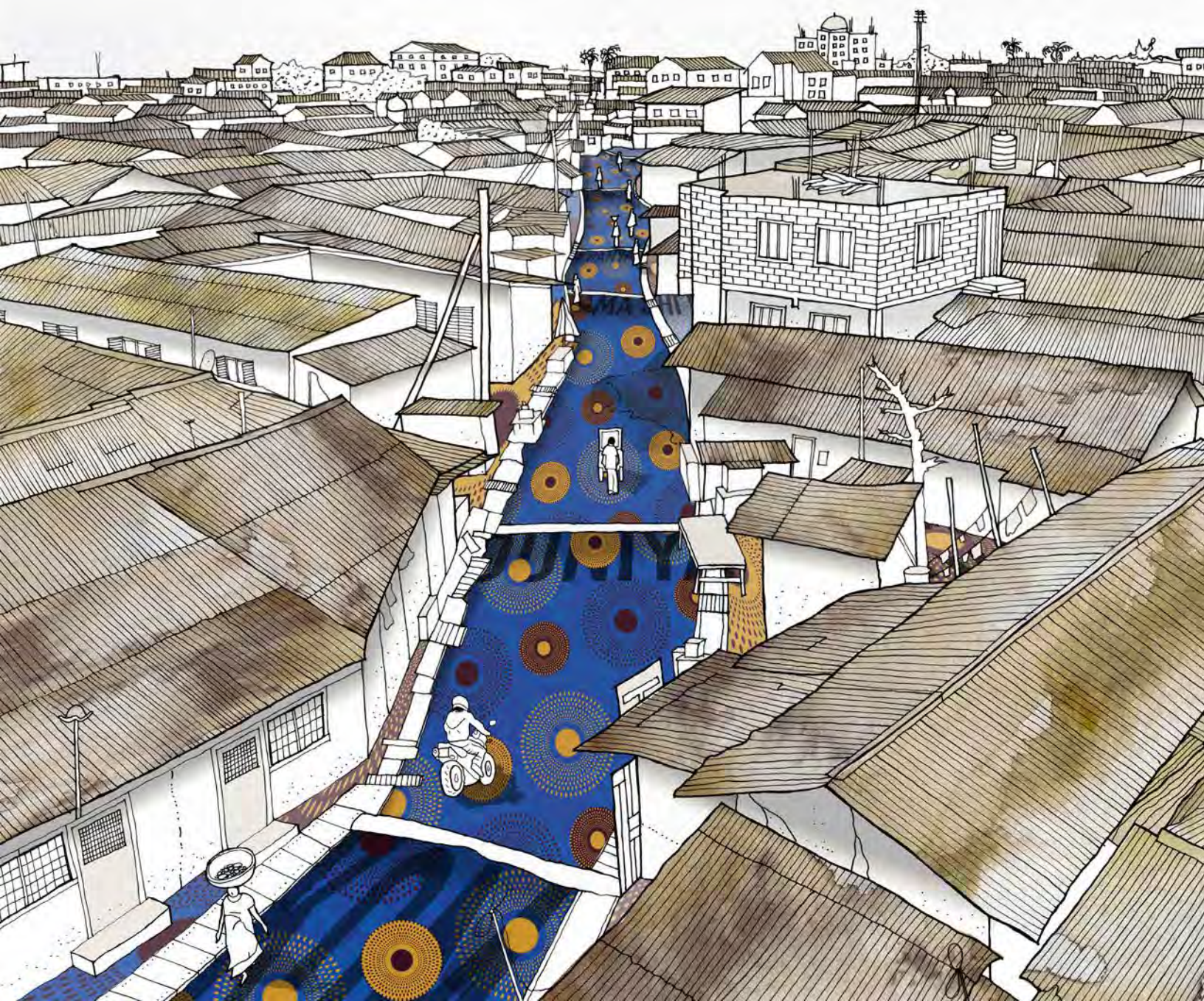


# PORTFOLIO

Emily Williamson Ibrahim

anthropologist . architectural designer . artist

[www.emilywilliamsonibrahim.com](http://www.emilywilliamsonibrahim.com)





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<sup>1</sup> For a writing sample, please contact me at [emilyan@bu.edu](mailto:emilyan@bu.edu).

<sup>2</sup> For additional materials such as courses I have taught, additional sample syllabi, or student evaluations, please contact me at [emilyan@bu.edu](mailto:emilyan@bu.edu).

Note: Unless otherwise noted, all drawings and photographs by Emily Williamson Ibrahim.

Cover: A Road of Folded Speech  
Left: Nima Urban Landscape



Left: Comings-and-Goings from the United States to Ghana  
 Right: Photograph by John Schaidler

# Bio

Emily Williamson Ibrahim is a PhD candidate in anthropology at Boston University. Her current research focuses on a cryptic form of communication called “folded speech” in Hausa that offer a lens through which to understand how people manage anxieties about living with uncertainty among “zongos” (the name used to describe predominantly Muslim urban settlements in Ghana, West Africa). Emily holds a Master of Science in Architectural Studies from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), a Master of Architecture degree from the University of Virginia (UVA), and an undergraduate degree in Art History from Colby College. Emily has worked as an architect in Washington, DC, collaborated

on cultural heritage projects in Ghana, Peru, and Haiti, has taught at Landscape Architecture at the Rhode Island School of Design, and is a co-founder of the nonprofit organization called the “Zongo Story Project” ([www.zongostoryproject.com](http://www.zongostoryproject.com)) in which she works with students in Ghana to write, illustrate, and tell stories that are meaningful to them. In 2016, their book “Gizo-Gizo: A Tale from the Zongo Lagoon” won the African Studies Association’s Africana Book Award for the best children’s book.

For more information about her projects and publications, please visit her website at: [www.emilywilliamsonibrahim.com](http://www.emilywilliamsonibrahim.com).



This place is an  
**ELEPHANT'S STOMACH.**  
It holds everything inside.

Sometimes he is wearing  
**MUSLIM CLOTHING.**  
Sometimes  
**THE CLOTH OF A KING.**  
Sometimes he will dress like  
**A YOUNG BOY.**  
Everyone has what they love.

**YOU CAN'T JUST STICK  
TO ONE THING HERE.**  
You always have to be  
changing your mind.  
You have to wake up and  
see what will happen.

In Nima,  
**I FEEL FREEEEEE.**

We are have Tuaregs here.  
**THEY DON'T BELIEVE IN BOUNDARIES.**  
If they are in America, America belongs to them.  
**WE ARE LIKE THE TUAREGS.**  
That is Nima.

**WE ARE ALL STRANGERS HERE.**  
It is like a door to the country. It is a place  
where you see yourself and all other countries.  
It is a place on your way somewhere else.

When you come to Nima,  
**YOU CAN BE ANYONE YOU WANT.**  
You don't have to be the person you are in your village.

In Nima ...  
**YOU CAN DO WHATEVER YOU WANT.**  
**YOU JUST HAVE TO DO THE RIGHT THING.**

# Research Program

My research program has grown out of my interdisciplinary training as an artist, architectural designer, and anthropologist as interwoven with my long-term commitment to understanding the diverse socio-spatial dynamics of “stranger settlements” – commonly known as zongos stretching across West Africa. With over thirteen years of engagement with these communities as a teacher, designer, and ethnographer, I have acquired linguistic mastery in Hausa (their lingua franca) and learned how zongos’ highly diverse and mobile environments contribute to generating innovative modes of communication. It is only through this experiential knowledge that I have been able to access the fascinating phenomenon of folded speech – a cryptic category of communicative phrases that does significant work towards helping zongo inhabitants negotiate anxieties over how to live amicably with others in a place where comings-and-goings are the primary contours of experience. Indeed, what might people of the zongo teach us about how a mercurial life on the move can cultivate a nimble moral imagination and creative forms of communication?

Zongo means “traveler’s camp” or “stranger’s quarters” in the Hausa language. They are part of a long history of Muslim travelers – clerics, traders, and explorers – constructing economic, religious, and political ties with their indigenous hosts in unfamiliar places. The Hausa ethnic group in particular developed intricate commercial exchange systems connecting their homeland in northern Nigeria to the southern areas of the Gold Coast. In Ghana today, these comings-and-goings continue to shape social life, creating a vast, diverse network of personal and communal relations interconnecting zongos to places of origin and other migrant destinations. However, just as these to-and-fro movements weave together diverse, tight-knit communities, they have also been used as ammunition to render zongo inhabitants’ as “other,” generating an often poverty-stricken environment lined

with distrust and precarity. These complex dynamics accenting mobility, strangerhood, and marginality have long captured my curiosity and motivate my broader research questions about how people use inventive kinds of communication in this fluctuating context. How do the zongos’ shared language of Hausa soak up, make symbolic meaning out of, and work on, a wider socio-historical reality textured by comings-and-goings? What kinds of narrative strategies do people of the zongo use to address anxieties about others whose actions often feel judgmental, elusive, and fickle? And lastly, what does this illuminate about other ways in which people negotiate uncertainty in a place where everyone sees everyone else as a stranger?

We have everyone in Nima.  
**SCHOLARS, DRINKERS,  
TEACHERS, HOOKERS,  
THIEVES, CLUBBERS,  
PHILOSOPHERS,  
HYPOCRITES, BANKERS,  
CHIEFS, COWBOYS, AND  
PRETENDERS.**  
They are all here.

Kwame Nkrumah described Nima as a city within a city.

**NIMA IS THE WHOLE WORLD IN ONE PLACE.**  
All of the West African countries, you see them here.  
The moment you enter Nima, you will want to be Ghanaian.

Left: “This Place is an Elephant’s Stomach.”

# Research and Design Projects

## Folded Speech:

An Ethics of Comings-and-Goings  
in an Accra Zongo

In my dissertation, I draw on my long-term fieldwork in Nima, Ghana's most diverse zongo, where residents voice moral injunctions called "folded speech" - a highly cryptic and deeply symbolic category of communicative phrases. From these short, yet puzzling phrases such as: "The World is Nothing," "Love Your Friends, But Don't Trust Them," or "If You Give Kindness, You Receive Wickedness in Return," I have unearthed the ways in which their linguistic structure, symbolism, and indirectness propel the listener into a cognitive mode of comings-and-goings from one perspective to another. Drawing on theories of play, performance, and ritual, I argue that this to-and-fro mode works like a tonic to address manifestations of uncertainty such as greed, trust, and patience between self and other. Rather than fashioning hard-lined regulations, policies, or law to curb these uncertainties however, I suggest that individuals employ the practice of folded speech to play with boundaries that can generate what I term, "ethics comings-and-goings." In keeping doubt, questioning, and possibilities alive through this practice of folding, this research contributes to the anthropology of uncertainty in Africa by not only illuminating how people employ imaginative strategies to, as Donna Haraway puts it, "stay with the trouble," but also bringing two conventionally distinct threads of uncertainty (relational and temporal) into conversation with one another.

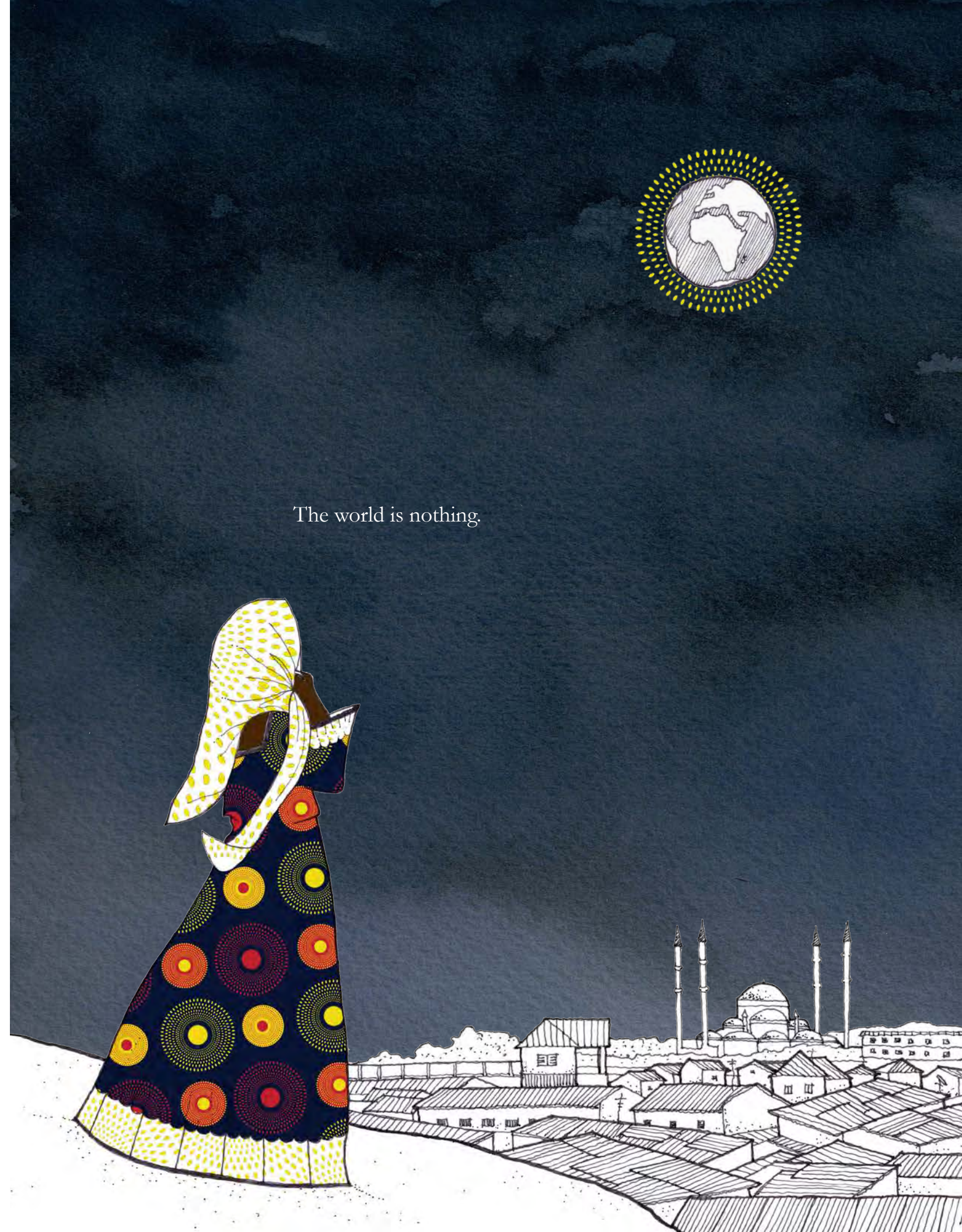
*Authorship (Academic - BU; Dissertation in-progress): Emily Williamson Ibrahim; Advisor: Professor Joanna Davidson; Funded by the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (DDRA) Grant, BU Center for Humanities Dissertation Fellowship, BU Graduate Arts Research Grant, BU Initiative On Cities Research Grant, and BU Long-Term Graduate Research Abroad Fellowship.*

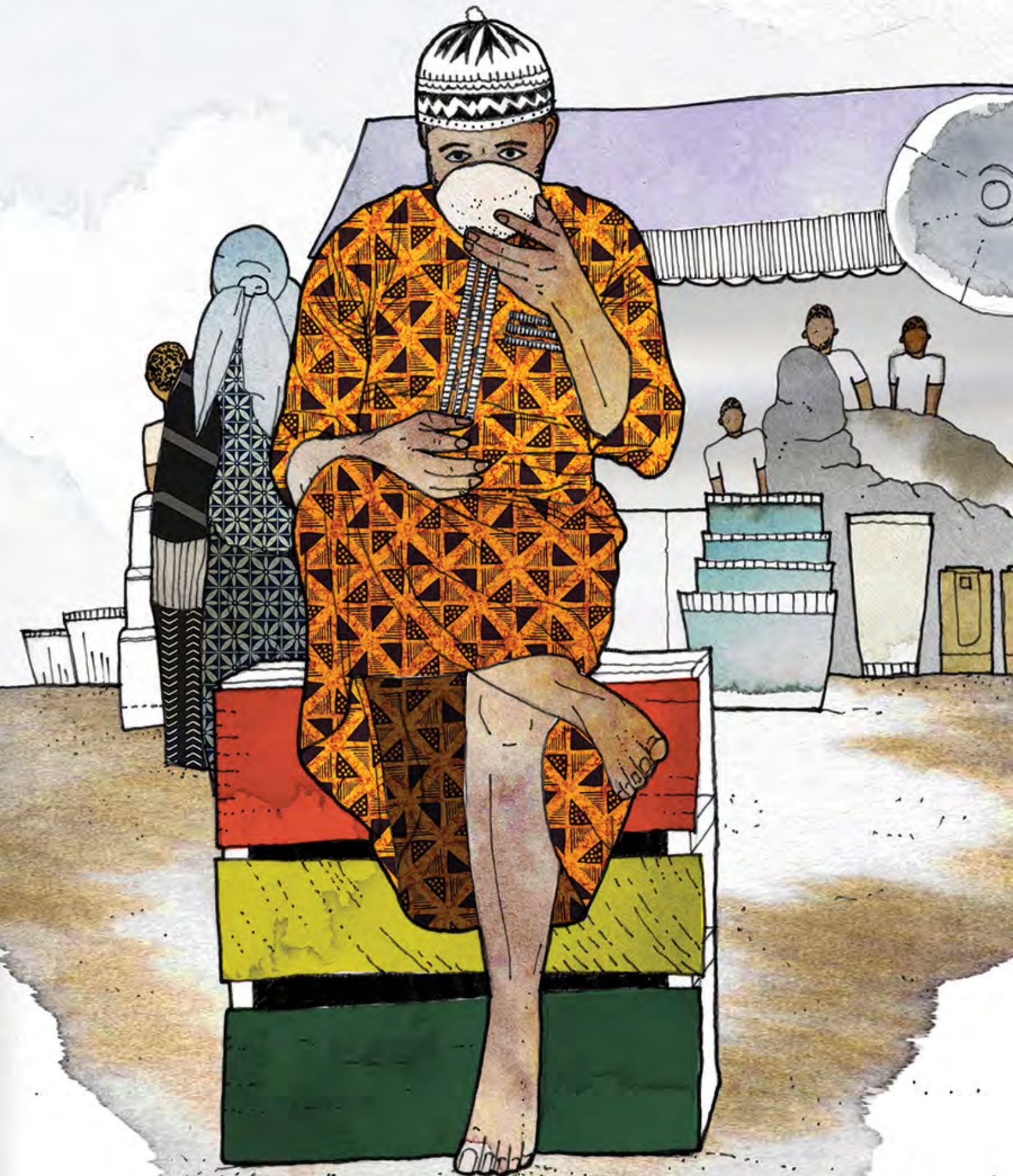


Cloth Metaphors for Folded Speech  
Right: "The World is Nothing."



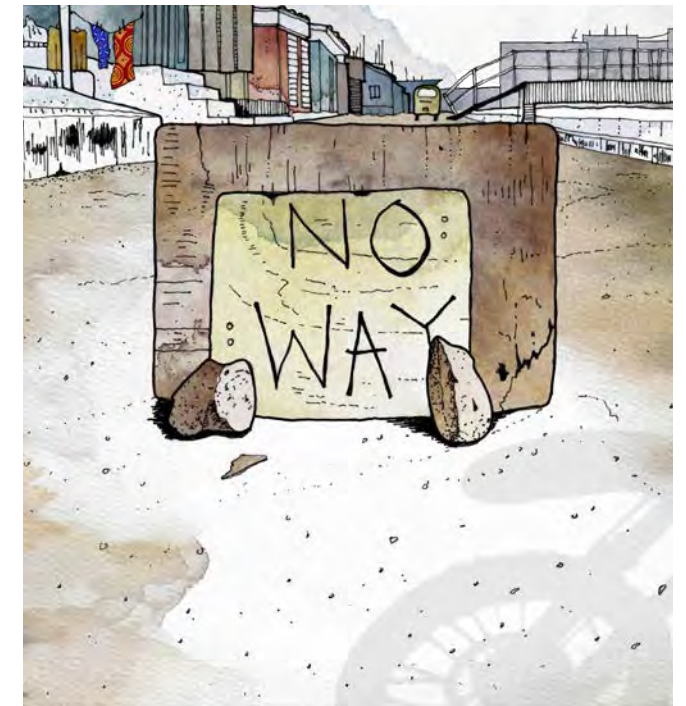
The world is nothing.





## Drawings of Comings-and-Goings

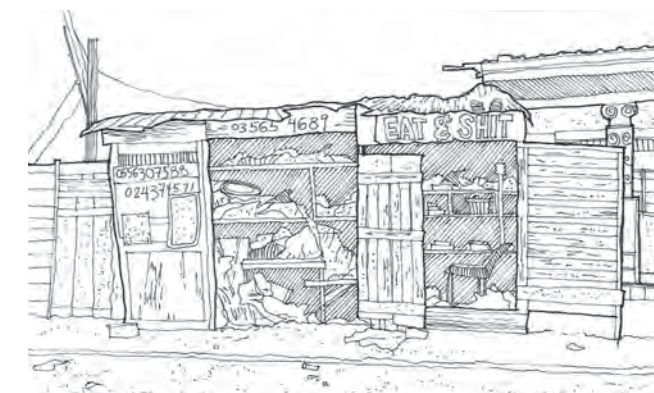
Lastly, to further enrich and complicate how I interpret my ethnographic findings, I use visual representation as a robust tool in two ways. By putting my own drawings and theoretical diagrams, texts, photographs, and paintings by Nima artists into conversation with one another, I encourage readers to participate in a second level of comings-and-goings that not only complicates, but also offers alternative readings of the main narrative. In so doing, I explore how multiple entry points into my research not only leave space for other kinds of interpretations, but also bring to light the diverse voices of zongo inhabitants. Second, I contend that the drawing process helps us see differently. Inspired by Paulo Freire's theory of *de-familiarization* which shows how bringing disparate ideas together stimulates more creative, expansive kinds of learning, the act of drawing makes the familiar strange, helping us see a whole field of connections that would otherwise remain obscured by the ordinary and familiar. Whether paying close attention to what the patterns of cloth dangling from a wash line reveal about age, gender, & status or experimenting with what the folding techniques of West African wax cloth illuminate about "folding words," drawing requires revisiting one's research sites and ideas from other points of view and at a slower pace (for more examples, see: [www.emilywilliamsonibrahim.com](http://www.emilywilliamsonibrahim.com)). I argue that such techniques offer deeper ethnographic insights that take us in new directions and ultimately make for more ethical, multi-faceted research projects.



No Way at Nima Gutter.



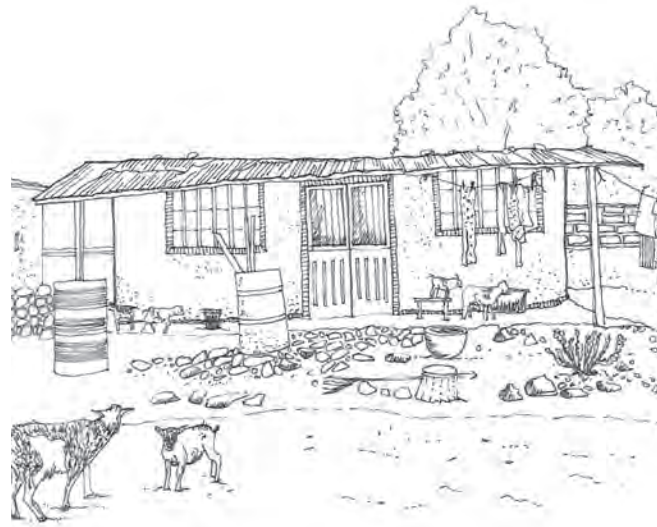
A Traditional Wedding Ceremony in a Zongo.



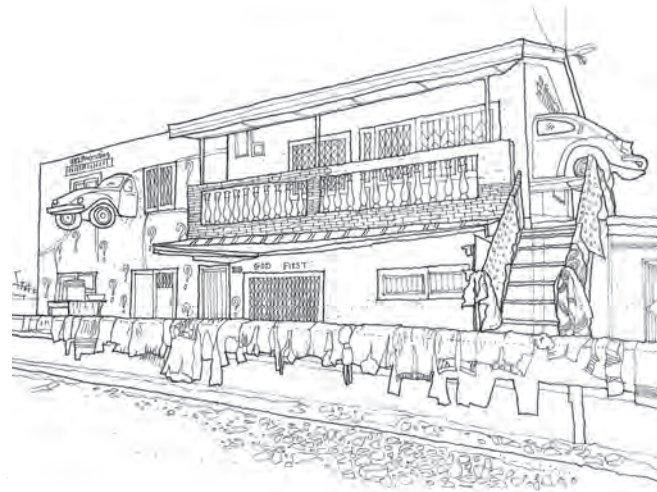
Eat & Shit  
Left: "Love Your Friends, But Don't Trust Them."



Bangkok Base.



A House in the Eastern Region



A House on Nima Highway



Clothesline in a Nima Compound



A Road of Folded Speech



A Death at Sea



A Folded Landscape I



A Folded Landscape II



## Zongo Story Project

[www.zongostoryproject.com](http://www.zongostoryproject.com)

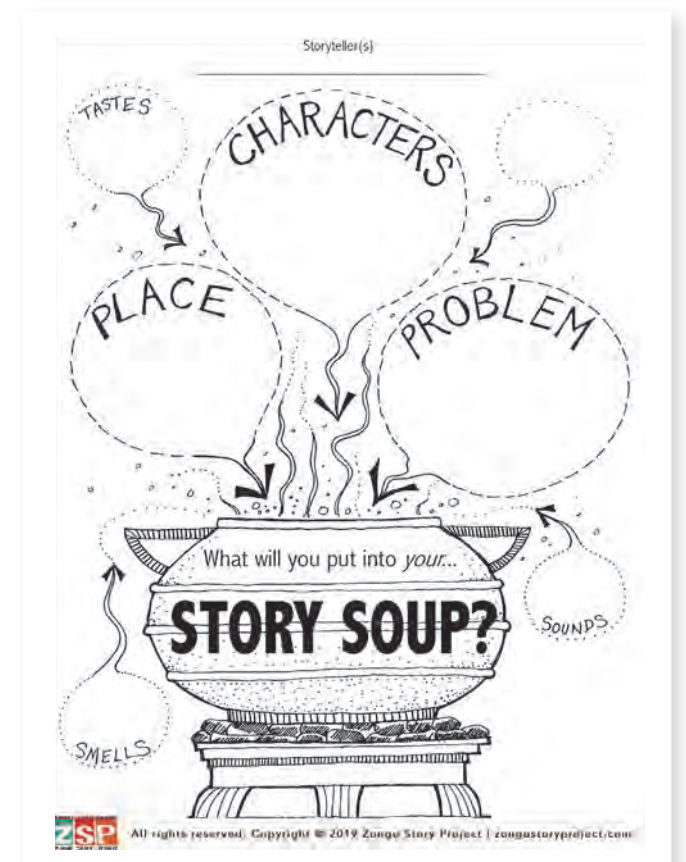
Employing the story as the primary learning and teaching platform, the Zongo Story Project aims towards three primary goals. The first goal is to elevate proficiencies in oral, written and visual forms of literacy. Rather than compartmentalize speaking, writing, reading, and drawing, there is research that shows one form of literacy helps raise the performance of the others. Thus, this project seeks to work across these various ways of understanding the world to foster a deep, local literacy that moves from what students see and interpret around them, to more abstract concepts and knowledge building. The second goal is to develop skills for creative thinking and problem-solving. Instead of an emphasis on facts and rote memorization within the classroom, this project encourages thoughtful analysis, questioning, reflection, and application to everyday experience. In turn, these critical modes of thinking and problem-solving help students gain entrepreneurial agency, inventively contribute to improving their world, and link what is to what could be. The third goal is to learn from local histories, landscape heritage, material culture, and contemporary societal concerns. Rather than learning from imported textbooks that have little local and personal relevance, this project is designed to build up a rich library of books with which Ghanaian students can identify. In addition, students will gain not only an increased awareness about where and how they live, but also the capacity to bring about meaningful, positive change in their communities.

*Authorship (Independent): Zongo Story Project Co-Founders, Program Coordinators, and Teachers Emily Williamson and John Schaidler.*

Left: Photograph by John Schaidler



Playsheet: Zooming In, Zooming Out



Playsheet: Story Soup



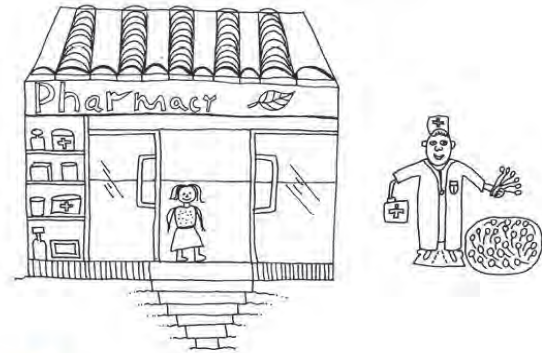
### HAJIA HABIBA'S CHILDREN GET SICK

WRITTEN BY BRIGHT NAJIA OUSU  
ILLUSTRATED BY RIZDIN FAJAWU

Once upon a time, there was a woman named Hajia Habiba who lived in a village called Minna. She was a Muslim and had given birth to four boys named Kajo, Kofi, Kwame, and Kwabena.

One day, her children woke up complaining of headaches and fevers. Soon, they started losing weight. They were always feeling thirsty. Hajia Habiba grew worried. She took them to the local clinic. The doctor explained that they were suffering from Marasmus, could not cure it. He sent them to the shrine. At the shrine, the chief priest told them to bring him an egg, brownish fowl, and a black cat. They did as he said. The chief priest did some rituals, but nothing happened. "What do we do now?" Hajia Habiba asked increasingly worried. The Chief priest said, "Bring me all your money." She didn't know what else to do so she brought it. He did some more rituals, but still nothing happened. At this point, the Chief Priest ran away with the money. No one ever saw him again.

Hajia Habiba felt helpless. She had no money left and her children were still very sick. She took them to the mosque. The Imam told them to pray and pray and pray. The Imam also prayed. The neighbors also prayed. At last, the children were healed.

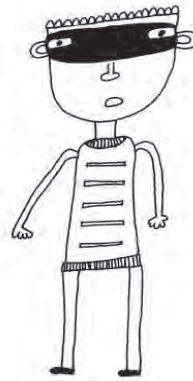


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### THE KING AND THE KIDNAPPER

WRITTEN BY AMR BLAL BIL MUSAIBI (RJ)  
ILLUSTRATED BY KEMI MOHAMMED

Once in a kingdom called Cape Coast, there lived a great king named Mohammed who loved his wife and children so much. He was very kind, but hated any enemy that came his way. One day, a certain thing happened in his palace. That night after they all went to bed, a kidnapper scaled the wall and entered in through an open window. He was trying to kidnap the king's favorite daughter named Sadiya.



As the kidnapper took her by the arm, Sadiya started screaming. "Help! Help! Help!"

The king woke up and chased the kidnapper through all of the rooms in the palace. They went through the sitting room, the kitchen, and even the washroom. At last, the kidnapper fell down! The king fought the kidnapper with all of his strength. Sadiya also joined the fight. They chased him away into the night. That was the end of the kidnapper.

Being a kidnapper is not good.

Have you seen the deeds of the kidnapper?

### HOW THE ELEPHANT GOT ITS TRUNK

WRITTEN BY RAHINA HAMZA SIDIBE

Elephant got its trunk by earning it. He earned it in a battle with Buffalo. They were fighting over one trunk and Elephant won. Ever since, Elephant has been showing off his trunk to the other animals. He will never take it off.

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### LAILA AND GUY CASH

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY AMINA MOHAMMED

Once upon a time, there lived a girl named Laila in a village called Samikroni. She was from a very poor home. She had one brother and two sisters. Her father was a watchman and her mother sold sachet water. They stayed in a chamber and hall. The children slept in the hall while the parents slept in the chamber. There was no electricity in the house. The children used a box iron to iron their clothes. Laila had only one school uniform. Sometimes, she would go to school barefooted and on an empty stomach. Laila was very brilliant. She had an aggregate of 8 and received admission to Royal Senior High School. Her parents managed to pay for her school fees for the first term.

Guy Cash had a lot of money. He rarely ate from the school dining hall. He could afford the most expensive lunch. His father was a drug dealer. He dealt in cocaine and heroin. He gave Guy Cash a lot of money. He was an average student. Laila who helped him with his academic work. Guy Cash gave Laila money and gifts. He bought her two pairs of sandals and three shirts. He took Laila to his parents house in Accra. His parents were glad to see her. They gave Laila 500 cedis. Laila showed the money to her parents. They were grateful to Guy Cash's parents.

Laila and Guy became close friends and Guy's academic work improved tremendously. One day, Guy stole some cocaine and sniffed. He became addicted. His academic work deteriorated. Laila did not know that Guy was sniffing cocaine. One day, Guy asked her to go and buy him cocaine. She was shocked, but Guy persisted. Eventually, Laila found a place and bought cocaine for Guy. Guy continued to give Laila money to buy him cocaine. He no longer cared about his academic work.

One day, Laila bought adulterated cocaine by a mistake. Guy shouted at her. "Laila, you stole my money!" He even wanted to stab her with a knife! Guy forced Laila to sniff both the genuine cocaine and the adulterated one. Laila also became addicted.

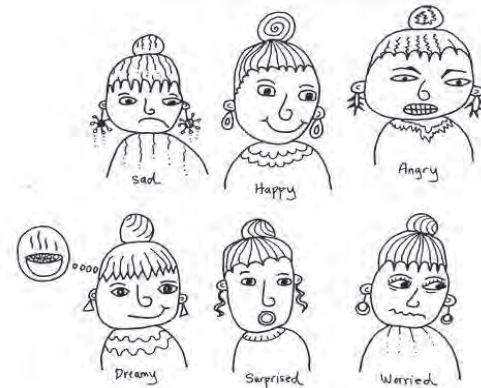
There are many lessons that we can get from this story. It is not good to take in cocaine or other drugs. It is not good to follow bad peers. Girls should be able to go to school and should be well-educated.



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### FACES OF EMOTION

ILLUSTRATED BY BLESSING ANAAMUE AFELIBISA



### MOTHER BIRD AND LION

WRITTEN BY UMAR FARUK ISSAK AND BURHAN MOHAMMED

Once upon a time, there was Mother Bird with her little children. They lived in a nest on a mango tree with so many leaves. Everyday, Mother Bird would go out to look for food for them to chop. One day, Lion caught her in his mouth! Mother Bird told him, "Please don't kill me. I need to take care of my children. If I die, my children will also die." The lion felt badly. He left Mother Bird alone and sauntered away.

The next day, Hunter caught Lion. He began to roar. Mother Bird heard the roar. She followed the sound and distracted Hunter by flying back and forth in front of his face. Hunter became dizzy and fell down. Lion ran away to safety. Mother Bird saved Lion.

The moral of this story is that it is good to be kind. One day, the kindness will come back to you.

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Sample Stories and Drawings by ZSP Students

Top Right: Photograph by John Schaidler



## Book Cover Design

Designed book cover options for the edited Volume:  
*“Opting Out”: Women Messing with Marriage Around the World* edited by Joanna Davidson and Dinah Hannaford.  
The selected design is entitled, “You Fly, I Fly.” (Bottom Right). Book Release Date: November, 2022.



Cloth Courtyards  
Left: A Messy Knot (detail)



“You Fly, I Fly.”

# Gizo-Gizo!

## A Tale from the Zongo Lagoon

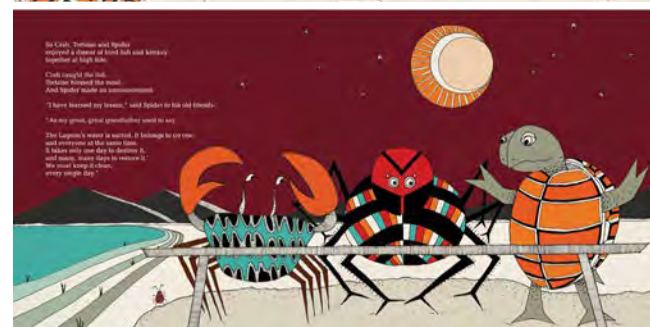
*Gizo-Gizo!* was awarded Best Book for young people in the 25th Children's Africana Book Awards. Additionally, *Gizo-Gizo!* is part of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Book Club and is currently being translated into Japanese.

In Hausa culture, you often begin telling a story in the same way: The storyteller says, "Gatanan Gatananku!" "I am about to begin!" And the children respond, "Tazo Mujita!" "We are all ears!" The conceptual framework for this project originated out of a larger, community-based initiative called the Zongo Water Project, whose mission is to use water as a way to improve the quality of life for the Zongo. Working closely with local teachers, Emily Williamson carried out a series of educational workshops at the Hassaniyya Quranic School in the summers of 2012, 2013, and 2014 to teach students about local water and environmental concerns. Employing the story as the foundational element, Emily engaged students in dialogue, shared readings, performances, writing exercises, and visual art, culminating in community drama performances and original folktales. The illustrations and text of this book grew directly out of the work produced in these workshops.

*Authorship (Independent and Academic-MIT): Emily Williamson with the Students and Teachers of the Hassaniyya Quranic School in Cape Coast, Ghana; Edited by John Schaidler; Funded by MIT's Public Service Center.*

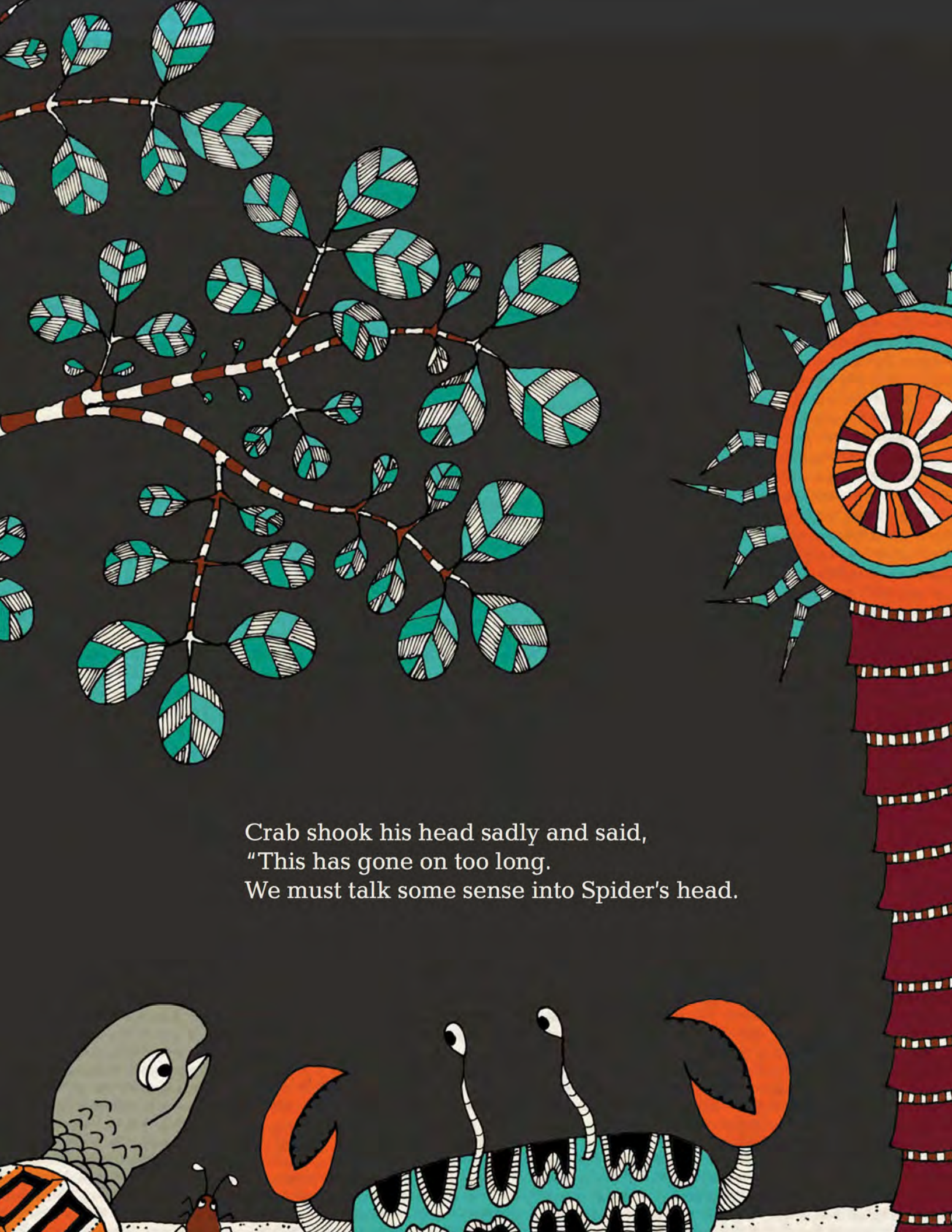


Book Cover

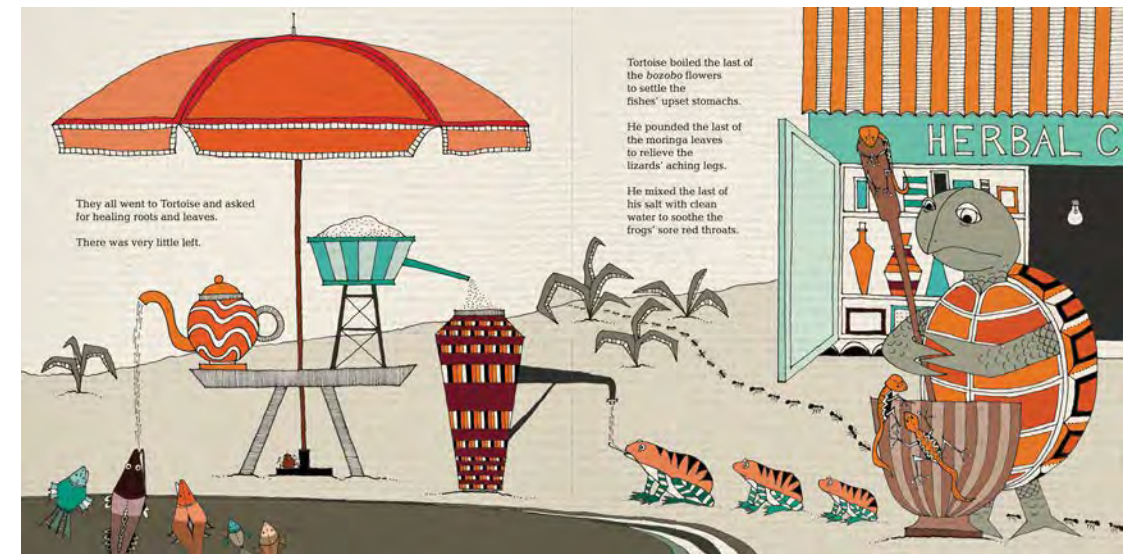


Sample Page Spreads





Crab shook his head sadly and said,  
 "This has gone on too long.  
 We must talk some sense into Spider's head."



Tortoise Selling Herbal Medicines to his Sick Friends



Spider Throwing Rubbish into the Lagoon

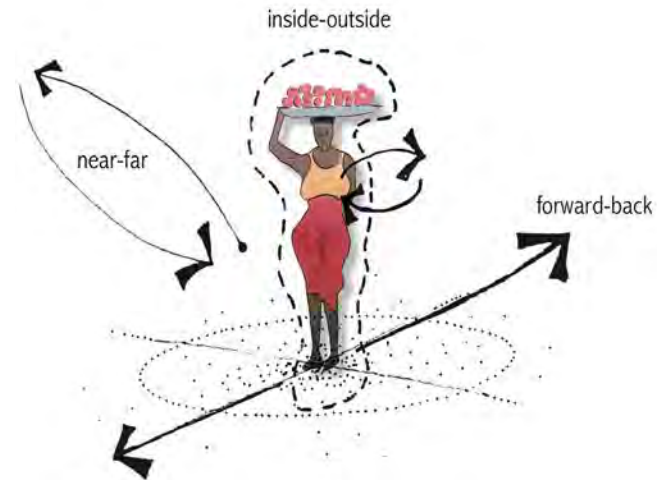


Crab Warning Spider About the Dangers of His Mining Business

# Picturing and Performing Protection in an Accra Zongo

Whether in the form of wearing silver scorpion necklaces, uttering the words “As-salamu Alaykum” when crossing a compound threshold, mingling with others over a steaming cup of Attaya mint tea, or presenting a pretend smile to an enemy, various protective strategies offer people living in Nima-Accra, Ghana a sense of stability, comfort and order in a place fundamentally defined by “comings and goings” and “freedom to do what one wants.” As one resident described the web of relations in this predominantly Muslim migrant community, “We are all strangers here. We need to take care of each other ... because you never know tomorrow.” On the one hand, this highly mobile and diverse environment offers flexibility, opportunity, and autonomy. On the other hand, it also breeds a sense of danger, vulnerability, and distrust of the unknown. Emily argues that people living in Nima employ a range of protective strategies to both negotiate these tensions and create meaningful attachments (and boundaries) with and between other people and places. As part of her larger dissertation project concerning how people living in Nima create and sustain multiple ways of belonging, she is exploring the use and meanings of these protective techniques through long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Nima (July 2018- January 2020). In addition, her findings will engage broader theoretical discussions on protection, boundaries, and uncertainty (i.e. Veena Das, Georg Simmel, Richard Werbner). This paper has the capacity to offer alternative ways in which to think about protection— about caring for oneself and others – in a stranger context that relies less on laws, regulations, or static boundaries and more upon mingling and moving together.

*Authorship (Academic-BU): Emily Williamson, Funded by the Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad (DDRA) Grant.*



*Bodily Orientations and Values*



*Social Boundaries*



*Words of Protection  
Right: Multiple Versions of the Self*



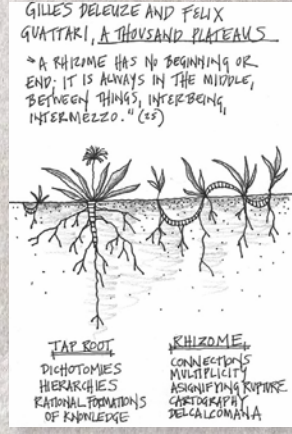
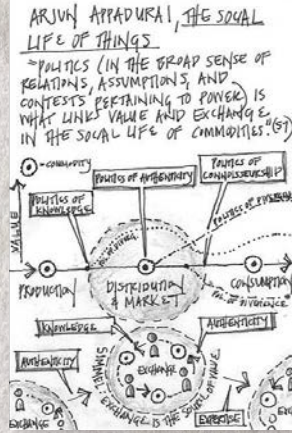
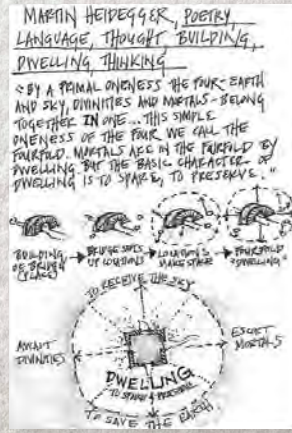
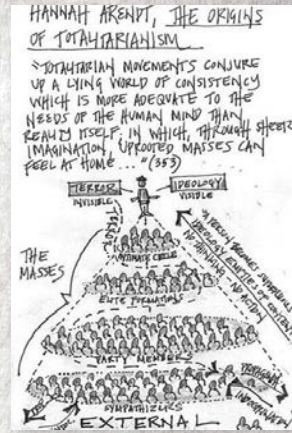
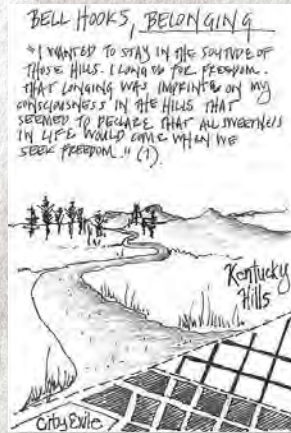
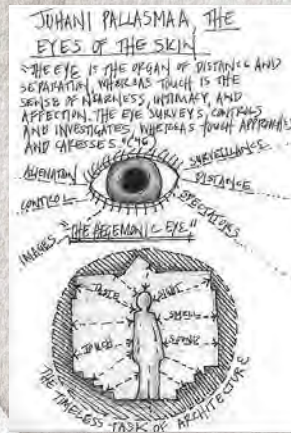
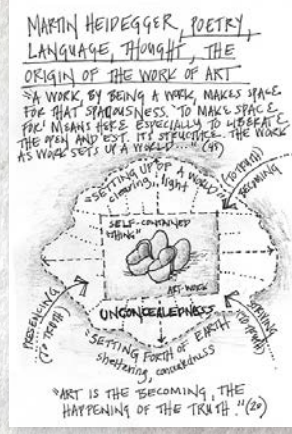
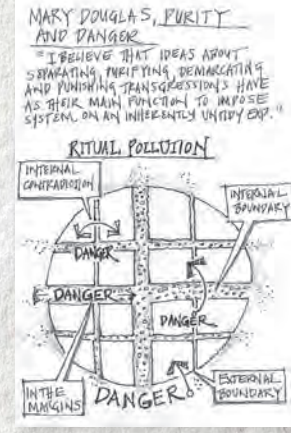
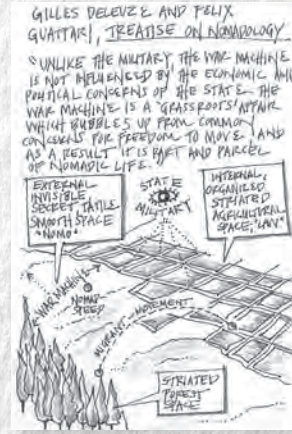
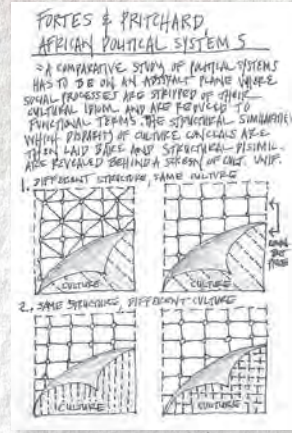
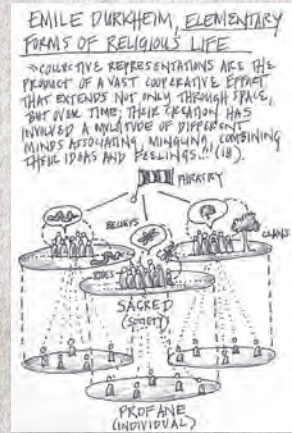
# Diagramming Socio-Cultural Theory

Emily drew ~200 diagrams - one for nearly every book on her PhD in Anthropology qualifying exam list. Creating these visual summaries were useful for a spatial and temporal understanding of authors' primary arguments. These cards will also serve as helpful teaching tools in the future.

Authorship (Academic): Emily Williamson, done in conjunction with studying for her PhD qualifying exam at Boston University (not a requirement).



Sample Diagrams

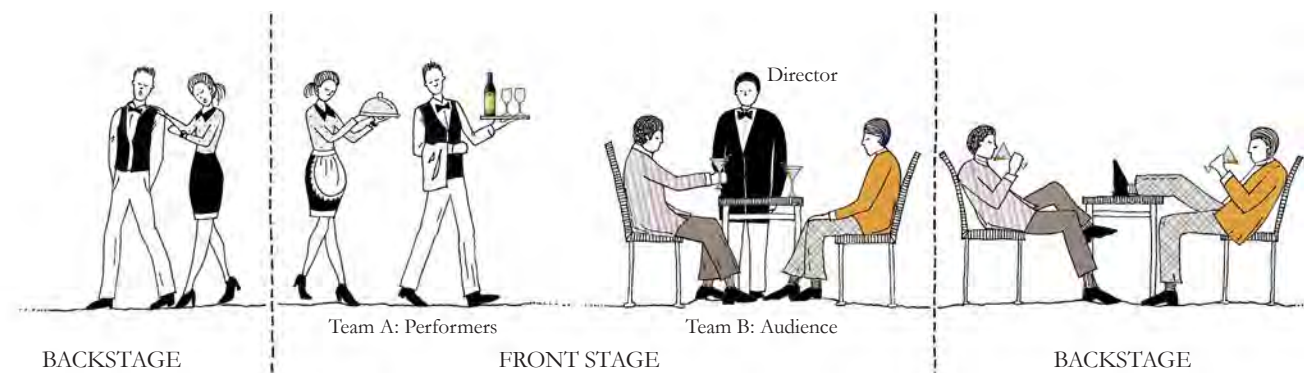


# Diagramming Erving Goffman's *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

*Authorship (Academic): Emily Williamson, done in conjunction with reading for her dissertation at Boston University (not a requirement).*



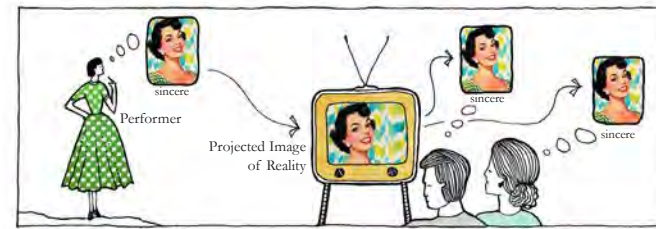
Front Stage / Back Stage



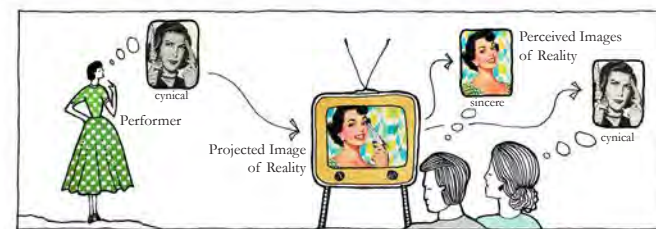
Cooperation Between Teams



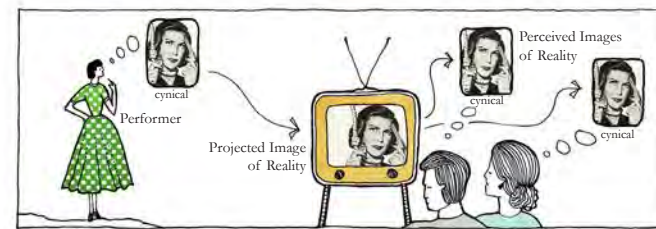
Social Distance



BELIEF



PART BELIEF



DISBELIEF

Cynicism and Sincerity



Dark Secrets



Inside Secrets



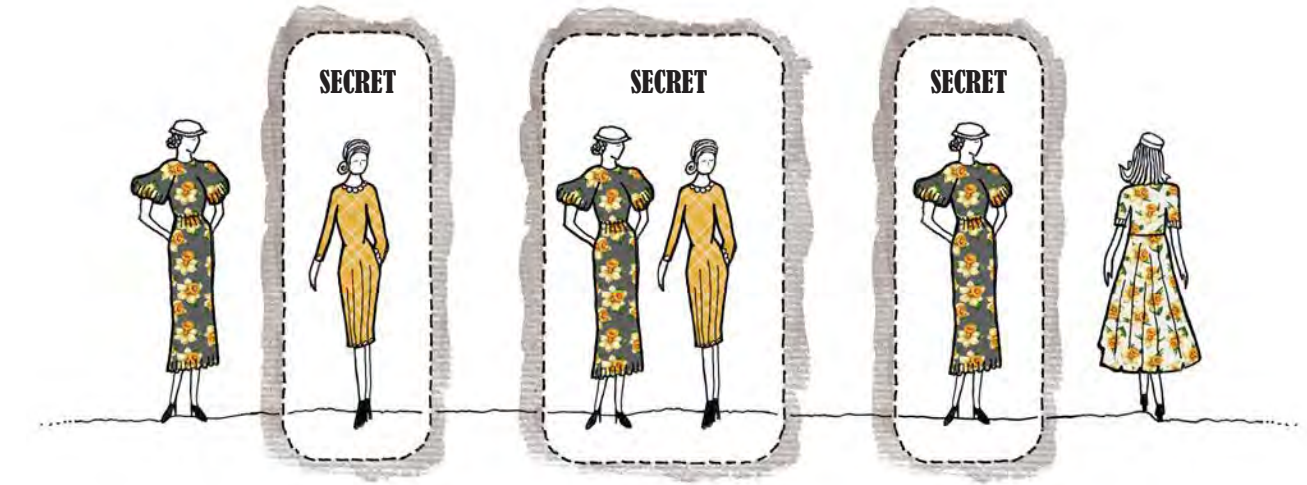
Strategic Secrets



Free Secrets



Entrusted Secrets



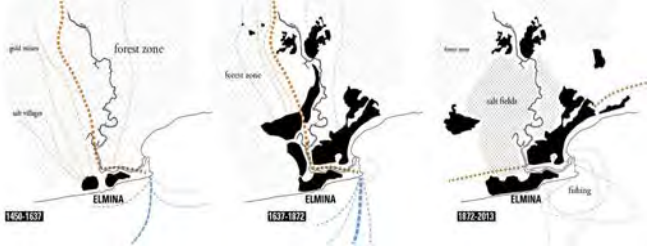


# Historical Geographies Of An Islamic Trade Route In West Africa

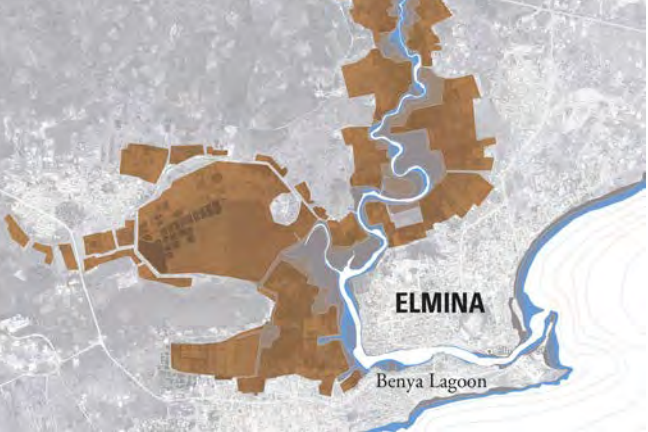
The purpose of this project was to investigate the changing historical patterns among terrestrial, marine, and coastal-based trade along the Black Volta Trade Route in West Africa to estimate the time periods in which one system of trade surpasses that of the other two. Instead of examining these water-societal relationships at a single scale or level however, the research surveys four levels of trade to develop a deeper understanding of how these patterns operate differently depending upon the grain and extent of inquiry. For example, at a macro level, the climatic relationship between the Sahara and the Savanna might deem to be the most significant factor, whereas at the micro level, human experience relative to the lagoon might be the most influential. For this particular investigation, the four levels of trade from largest to smallest include the Route (Trans-boundary Water Systems), the Region (Drainage Basin Systems), the Urban (Coastal Systems), and the Community (Lagoon Systems). These levels of trade are then further sub-divided into three historical periods that correspond roughly to one another, but whose dates differ slightly depending upon the major historical shifts at that particular level. Since the Black Volta Trade Route runs north-south and perpendicular to the coastline, terrestrial and marine-based trade occupies the north-south axis and coastal-based trade approximates the east-west axis. Additionally, the climate becomes much dryer as one moves north towards the Sahara Desert and slightly dryer as one moves east towards the Volta River's delta.

*Authorship (Academic-MIT): Emily Williamson;  
under the direction of Professor James Wescoat.*

Left: Fishing Boats at Elmina



Terrestrial-Marine Trade Patterns



Benya Lagoon



'Mina' Castle from the Sea



Elmina Lagoon



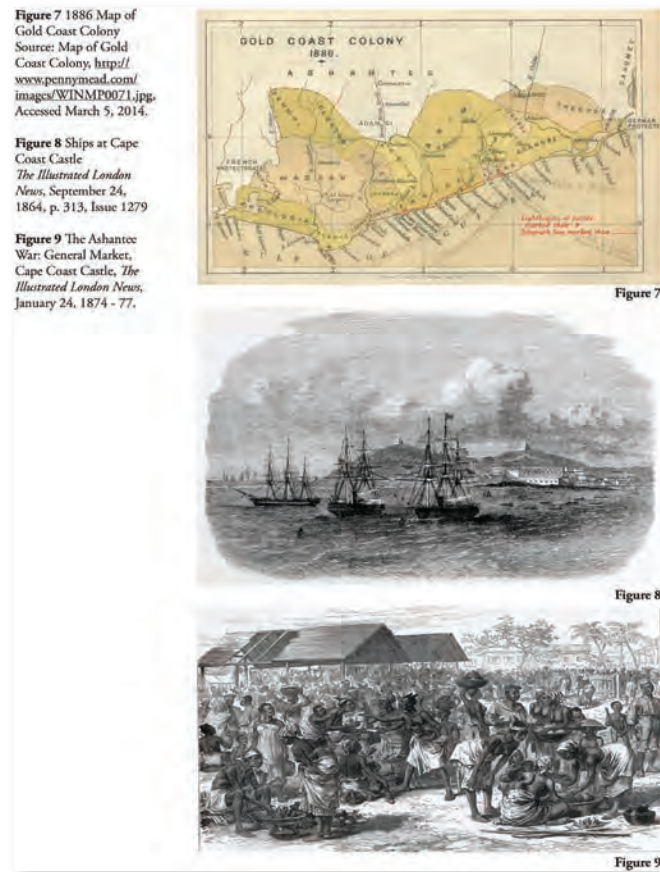
# Understanding the Zongo

## Socio-Spatial Processes of Marginalization in Ghana

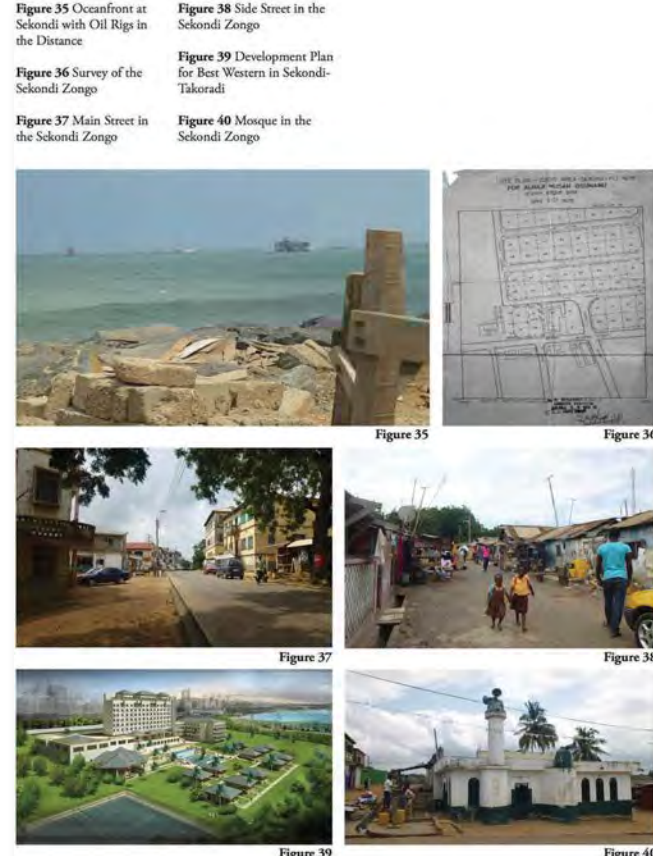
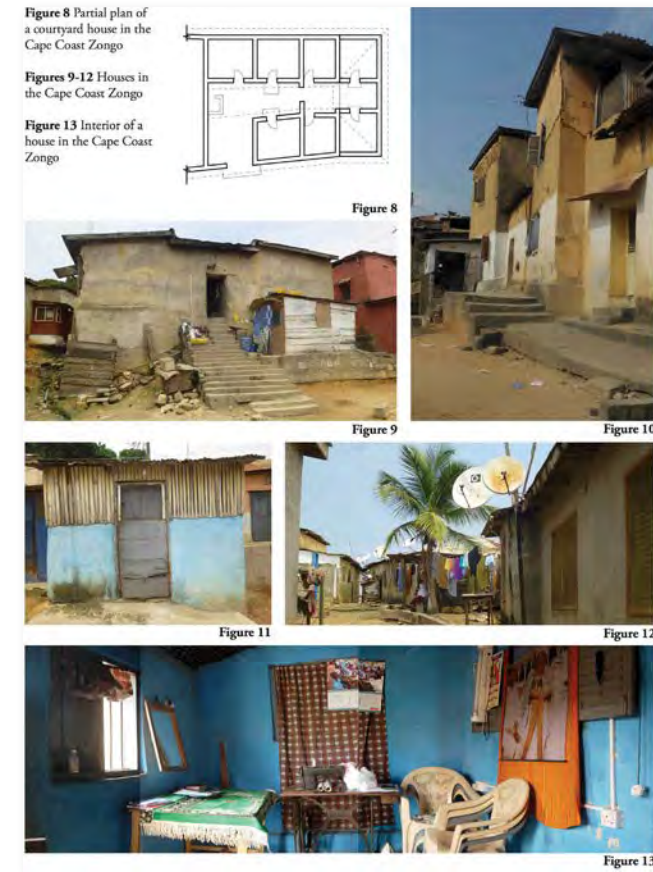
The spatial processes of marginalization and ghettoization have been described, labeled, and theorized extensively in the United States and Europe, yet there has been little research dedicated to these processes in the literature concerning urban Africa. Rather than using prescribed Western concepts, this project interrogates the spatial processes of marginalization by beginning with the local and particular – in this case, the Zongo, a fascinating, and understudied historical phenomenon in Ghana. Zongo means “traveler’s camp” or “stop-over” in Hausa and was used by British Colonial Officers to define the areas in which Muslims lived. Traditionally, the inhabitants of these settlements were Muslims migrating south either for trading purposes or as hired fighters.

Today, Zongos have become a vast network of settlements and there is at least one Zongo in every urban center in Ghana. Since these ethnic groups were not indigenous to the territory, it is not surprising that many were historically marginalized. This project uses history as the primary mechanism by which to dismantle, complicate, re-construct, and understand the Zongo phenomenon – to demonstrate how it has evolved over time - with and against political, economic, and religious forces. Rather than a sweeping comparative approach between settlements, the strategy is to deeply investigate its most extreme case of marginalization – that of the Zongo located in the coastal city of Cape Coast. It seeks to answer what combination of historical and social factors have caused the Cape Coast Zongo to become so marginalized. The project contributes to larger theoretical discussions explaining how, why, and when ghettoization functions in West Africa.

*Authorship (Academic-MIT Thesis): Emily Williamson; Advisor: Professor James Wescoat and reader Professor Nasser Rabbat.*



Sample Figures From My Thesis





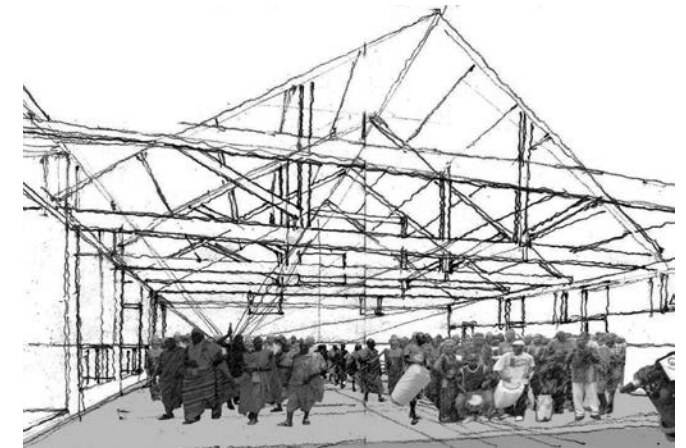
## Gothic House Preservation Planning

Working with Professor Maurice Cox and other graduate students, Emily as led the creation of a short and long term plan to restore and renovate Gothic House, an historic colonial monument in Cape Coast, Ghana. The project included an extensive survey of existing architectural conditions, in-depth conversations with local stakeholders (ie: Metropolitan Assembly, Oguaa Traditional Council, and Ghana Heritage Conservation Trust), and a final proposal that included architectural programming, conceptual diagrams, perspectives, and phased planning.

*Authorship (Academic - UVA): A collaboration under the direction of Professor Maurice Cox; Emily Williamson, student leader.*



*A Sketch of the Proposed Entry*



*A Sketch of the Proposed Great Hall*

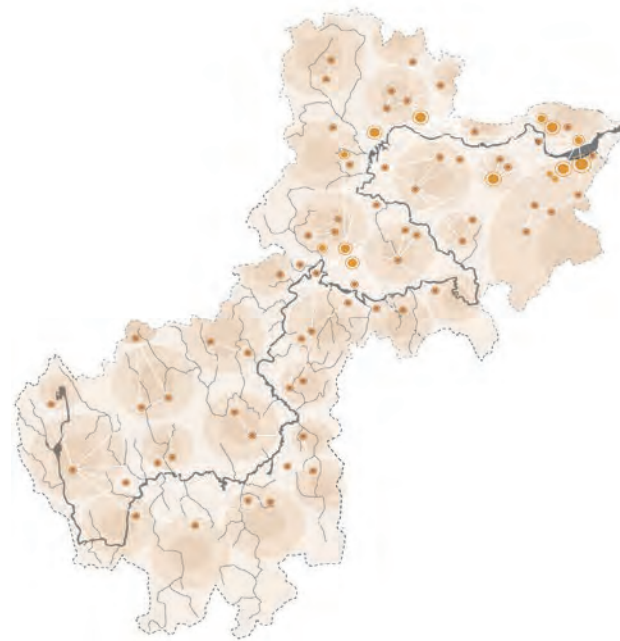


*Surveying Gothic House with the Omanhene Chief of the Oguaa Traditional Council  
Left: A Sketch of the Proposed Renovations of Gothic House*

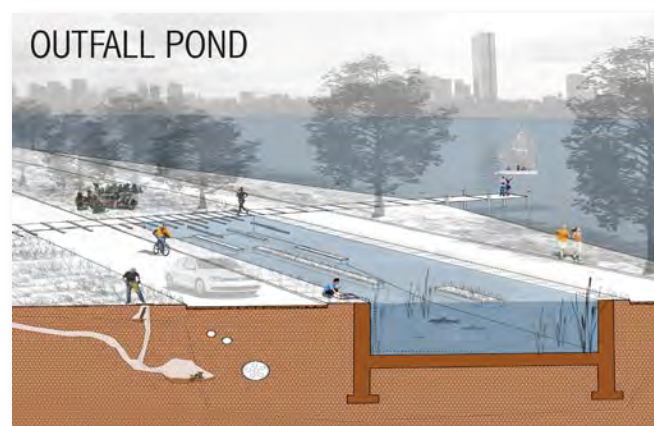
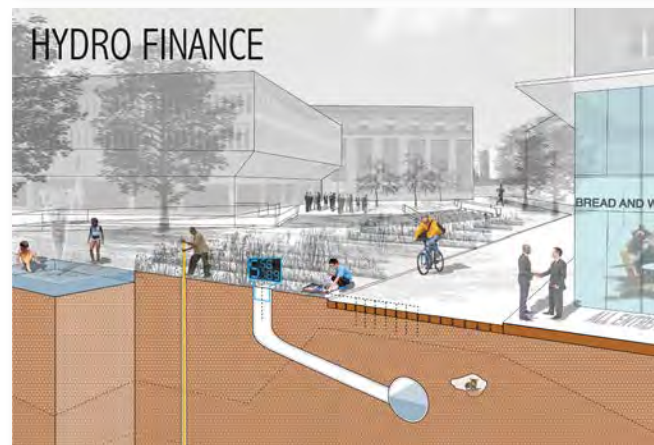
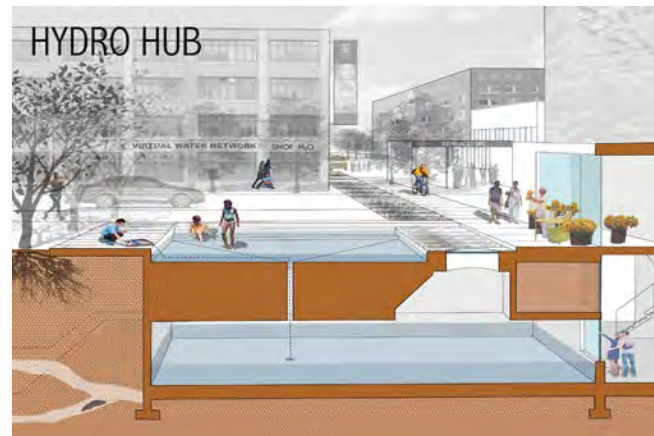
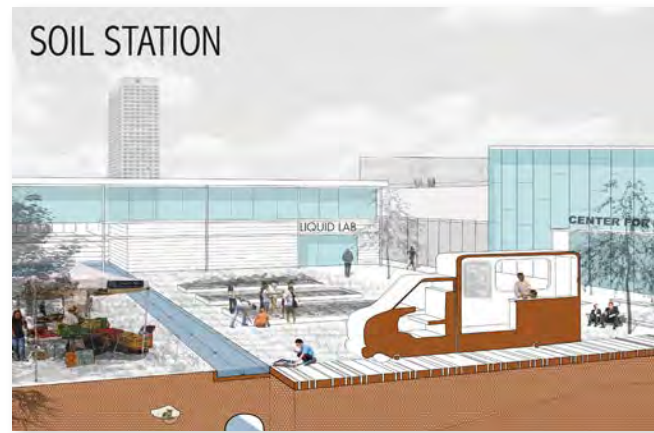
# Watershed Entrepreneurship

Founded by Arthur D. Little in 1886, MIT Entrepreneurship in particular, has played a pivotal role in catalyzing the success of the entrepreneur. This project begins with MIT's rich culture in entrepreneurship. It seeks to expand the entrepreneurial innovative capacity to include ecological systems as essential tools for invention. By mapping these two systems (entrepreneurship and the watershed) onto one another, their synthesis creates a new set of programs and opportunities we have coined 'Watershed Entrepreneurship'. Defined as the act and art of transforming ecologically performative systems into successful innovations that benefit both the individual and the collective, Watershed Entrepreneurship re-frames policy, human agency, and place-making to privilege individual entrepreneurial, capitalist attitudes and simultaneously a collective civic vision capable of improving the quality of water and reducing the quantity of run-off.

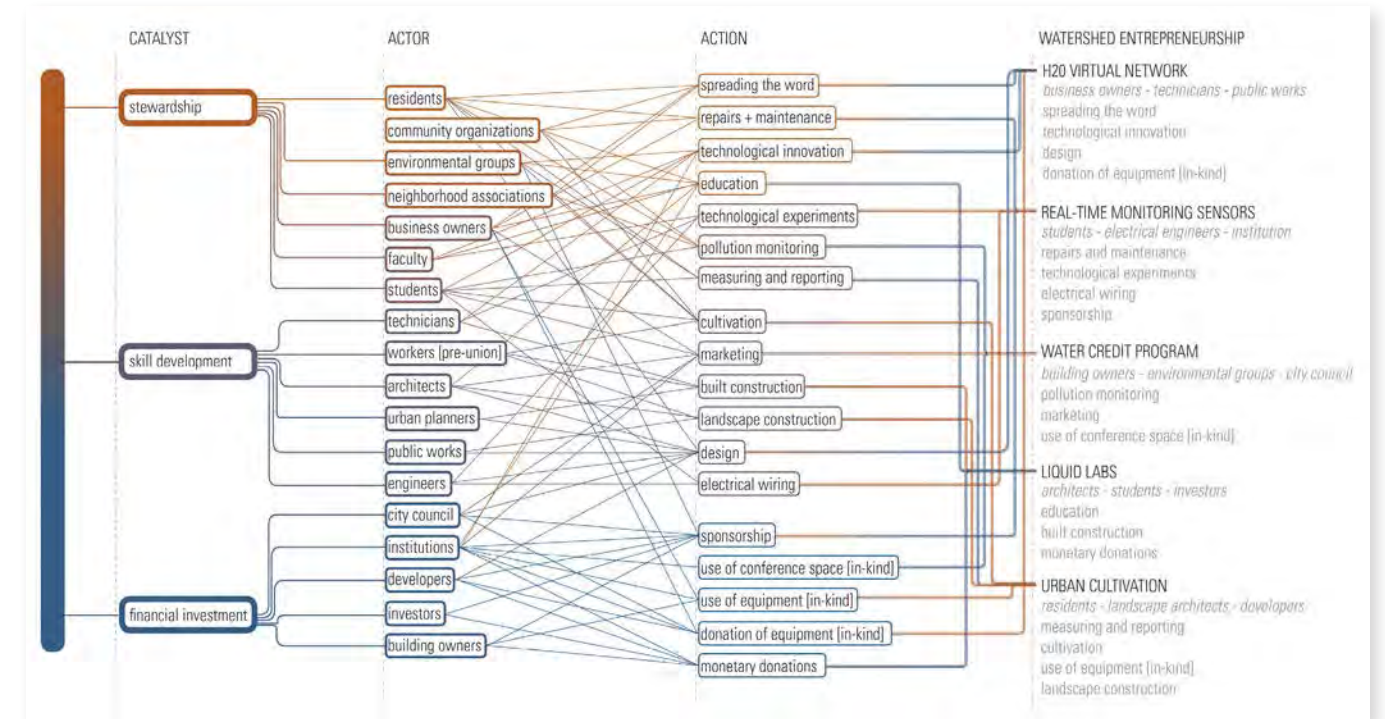
*Authorship (Academic-MIT): Emily Williamson, under the direction of Professor James Wescoat.*



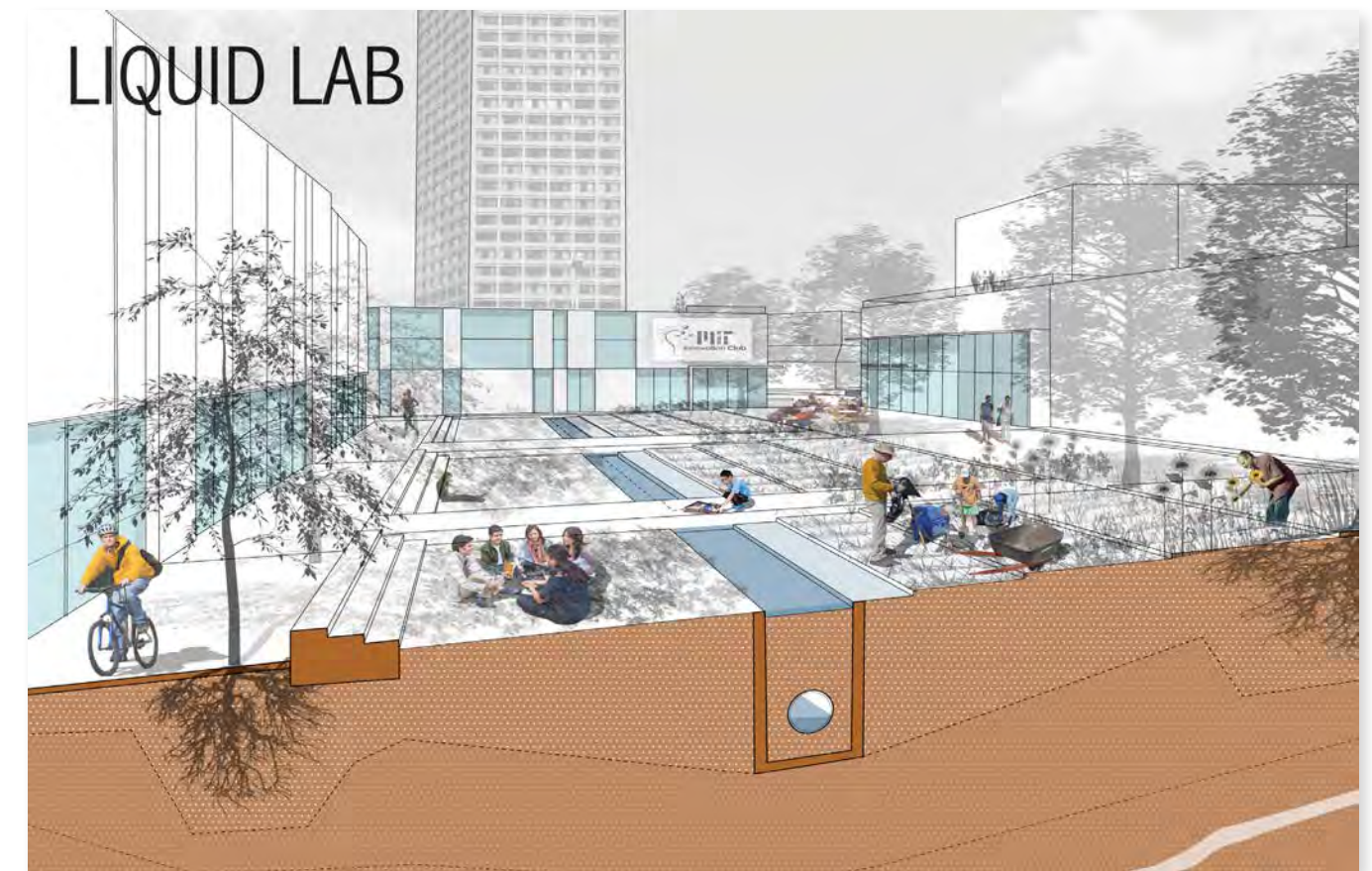
Charles River Watershed



Sectional Perspectives



Stakeholders Involved and the Actions Needed to Generate Watershed Entrepreneurship



Sectional Perspective



## Asante Traditional Buildings

Working with Community Consortium, Craterre, and local stakeholders, we undertook an initial condition assessment survey of ten traditional buildings located within the Asante Region of Ghana around Kumasi and Obuasi in partnership with the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board and Craterre. The purpose of this assessment was to inform a possible future comprehensive planning initiative centered around materials conservation, community building, and economic development.

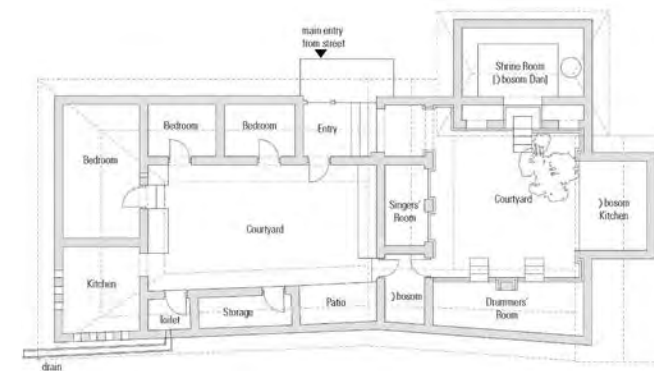
*Authorship (Independent): Community Consortium working with Craterre, Emily Williamson - consultant for architectural and landscape condition assessment surveys, graphic design, and book layout.*



Original Pitched Roof, ~1888-1896



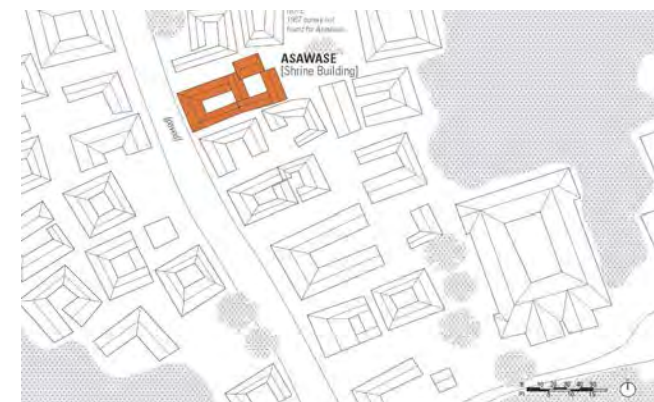
A Chief Discussing the Significance of the Shrine Room



Plan of Asawase Asante Traditional Building



Adarko Jachie Asante Traditional Building



Site Plan of Asawase Asante Traditional Building  
Left: Edwenase Asante Traditional Building



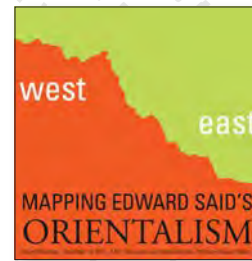
Ejisu-Besease Asante Traditional Building

# Mapping Edward Said's Orientalism

According to Edward Said, the discourse of Orientalism is composed of three overlapping definitions. It is at once an intellectual pursuit of researching the Orient, a style of thought that compares the East to the West, and finally, a corporate institution that describes, makes claims about, dominates, and possesses the Orient. Thus, rather than observing the world directly, Said argues that Orientalism operates as an apparatus through which to view, analyze and represent the people, landscapes, and “natures” of the Orient. Furthermore, he surmises that this “imaginative geography” – the culturally constructed boundaries drawn between East and West – is not a new phenomenon and may be traced back to the ages of Ancient Greece. He writes, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and has been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.” To that end, even though the boundaries between East and West change over time, the Orient maintains a distinct internal consistency whose image always reflects the needs and desires of the West.

Rather than deconstructing, rearranging or challenging Said's thesis of Orientalism, the diagrams that follow adopt the very premise of his thesis and illustrate the changing, yet persistent dialectic between West (in red) and East (in green). Beginning with the Myth of Europa, each diagram is an historical frame (not a period) that marks an important paradigm shift in the power dynamics and geographical boundaries between the two entities. Thierry Hentsch eloquently describes the oppositional relationship between East and West, “As essences they are complementary, yet as distinct as oil and vinegar: the blend is often savory, but the fine line separating the two seems to always reappear. The line seems to always have existed; as though, from Antiquity onward, the Orient and West have been locked in ceaseless and unrelenting combat, with the Mediterranean as its epicenter, its shifting field, its zone of demarcation.” You can download a PDF copy of the booklet under the publications tab.

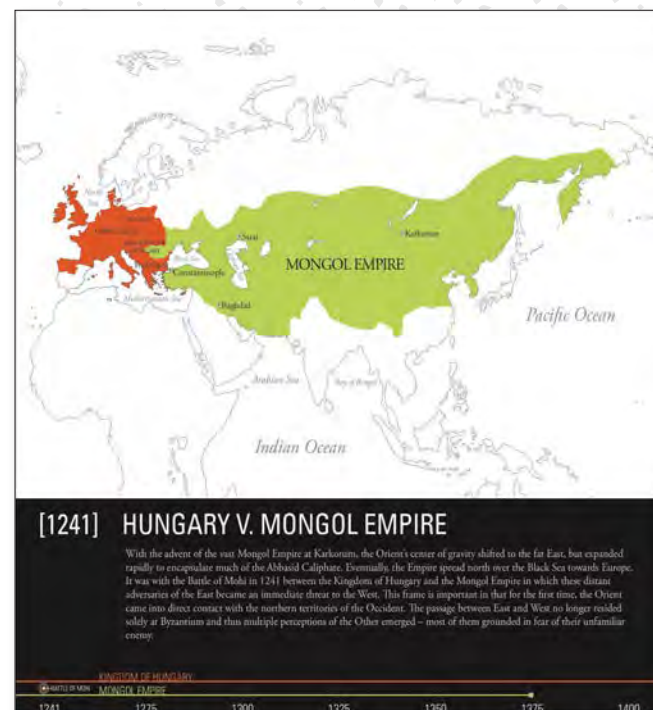
*Authorship (Academic-MIT): Emily Williamson; under the direction of Professor Nasser Rabbat.*



Cover



1300BC Achaean v. Troyland



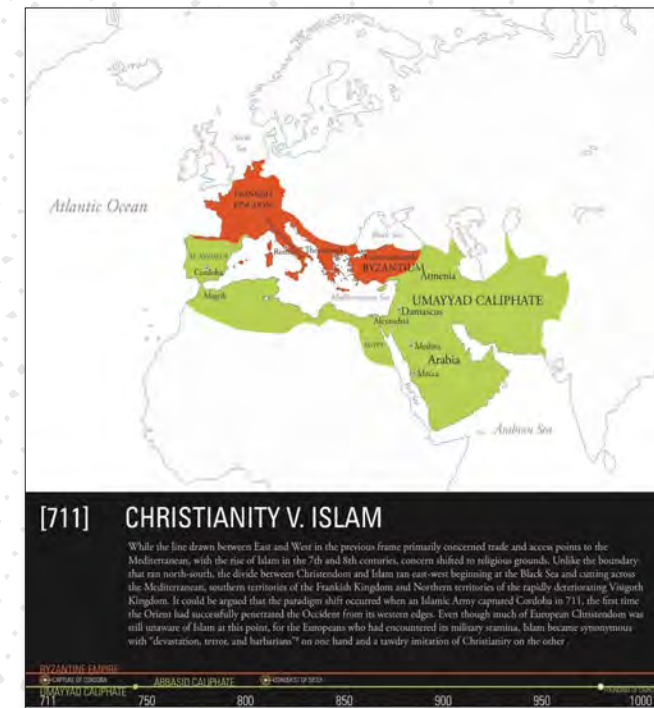
1241 Hungary v. Mongol Empire



58 Rome v. Persia



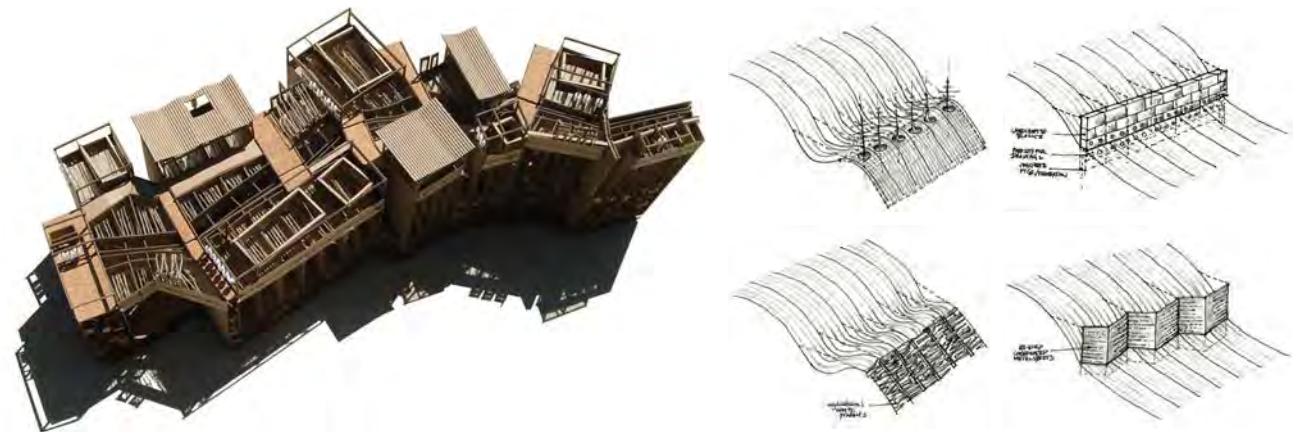
1826 Independence of Greece



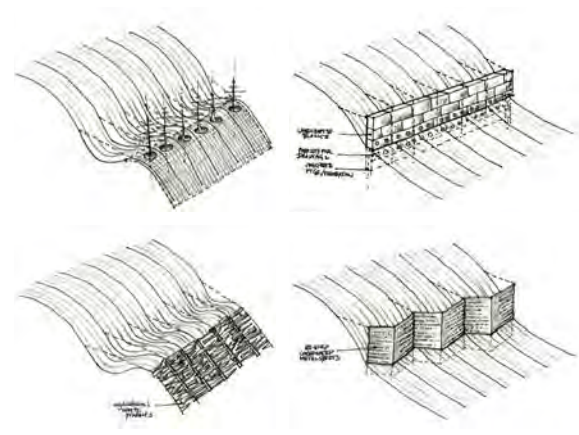
711 Christianity v. Islam



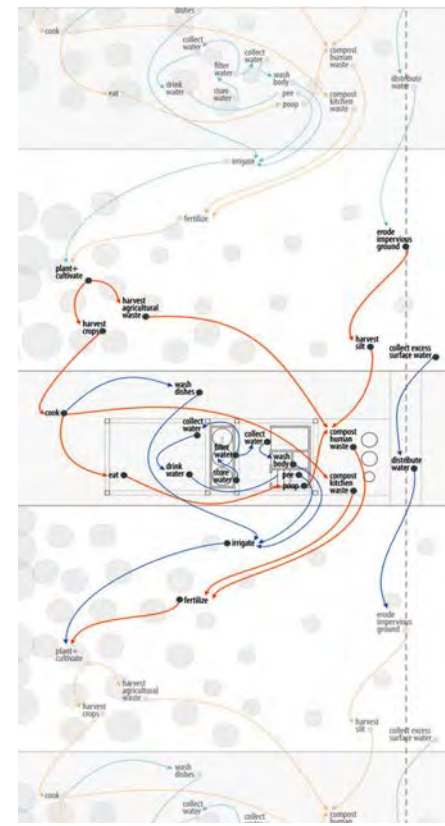
1919 Colonial Empire



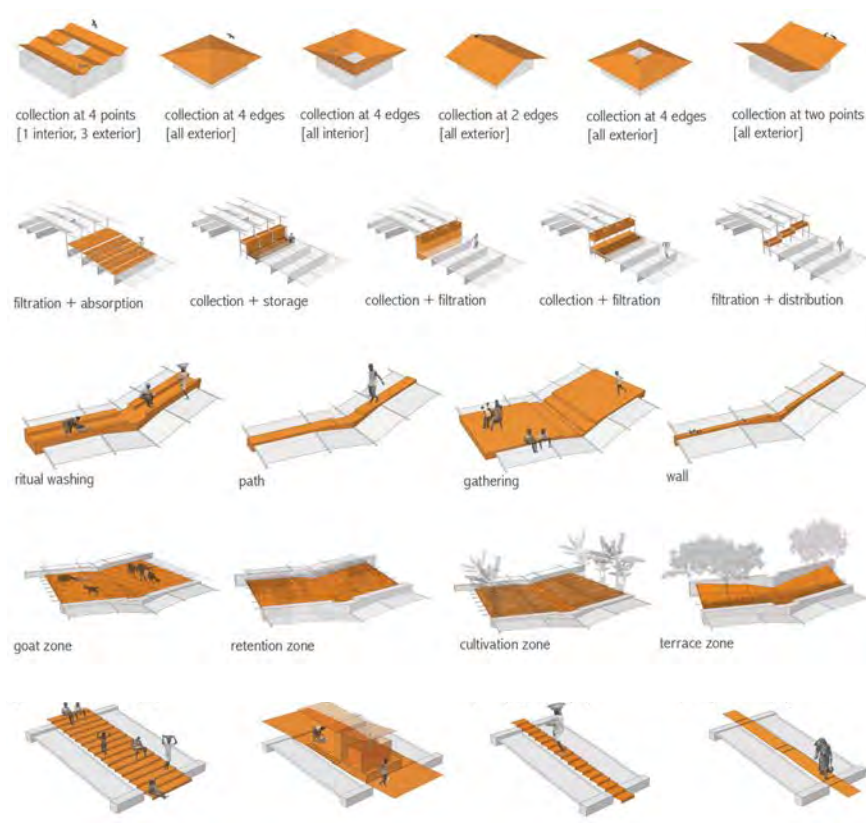
A Diagrammatic Model of the System Along the Primary Drain



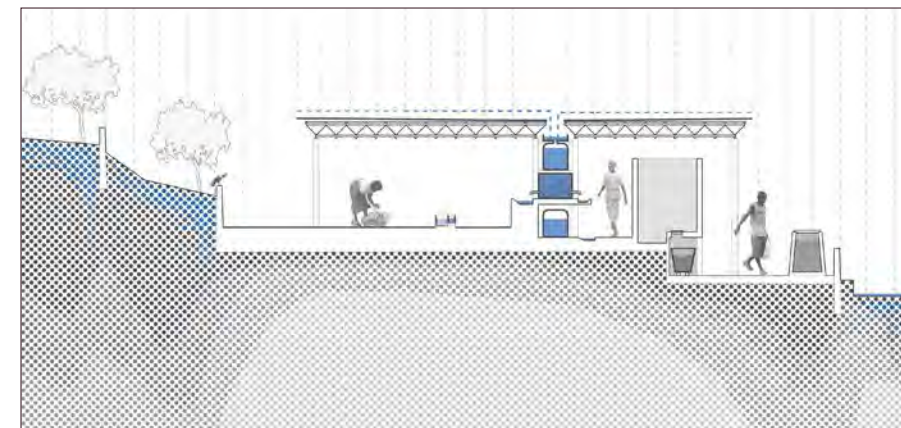
Temporary Weirs



Wet and Dry Flows



Kit of Parts to be Employed as Needed



Water Collection, Storage, and Distribution System, Section

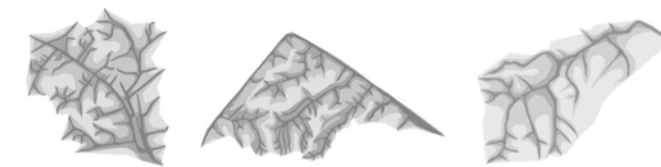


Work-in-Progress, Phase I, Axon

# Zongo Water Project

The Zongo Water Project is about using water as a way to improve the quality of life for the Zongo Community, a minority Islamic settlement located in Cape Coast, Ghana. Even though this migrant community has lived and traded in the city of Cape Coast for over a century, the residents are still treated as outsiders and most of the buildings don't have access to the city's public infrastructure. While the problems of flood and drought, sanitation, hygiene, and erosion are germane to the entirety of Ghana's Central region, these issues are of particular concern for the visibly impoverished Zongo community. Rather than developing a master plan to be executed by the government, this human-centered approach creates a sustainable, long-term, community-based strategy for a new water infrastructure through the processes of engagement, education, empowerment, and sustainability.

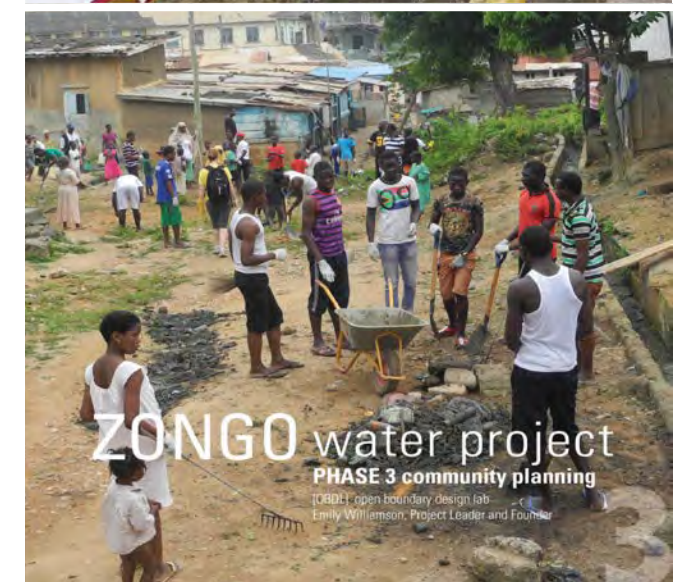
*Authorship (Academic - UVA Thesis and MIT): Emily Williamson in collaboration with local stakeholders in Cape Coast; Advisor: Professor Robin Dripps, Funded by MIT's Public Service Center.*



Cape Coast Watershed > Zongo Watershed > Primary Drain in Zongo



Water Collection, Storage, and Distribution System Axon



Zongo Water Project Reports, Phases I-III

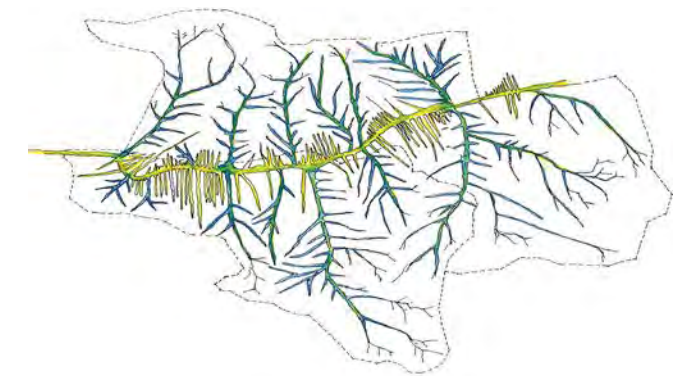


## Inhabiting the Watershed

The site exists at the intersection of buried Meadowbrook Creek and a small stream that runs perpendicular to Route 29 in Charlottesville, VA. At this crossroads, a large retention basin become the major water collection and center for public gathering. It connects into the larger watershed condition by linking to both the Dell and retention basin adjacent to the John Paul Jones arena. Valleys and ridges create the structure for the ground while simultaneously allowing for the passage of water [valley system] and people [ridge system]. Dwellings become the seam between the two and serve to both store water in the structural ribs that connect each unit and distribute water across the units down into the valley below. In addition to this new water and social infrastructure, the shells of the existing buildings remain and become either gardens along the ridges or retention basins along the valleys. Their structure is used to create a complex roof canopy system that performs like a new ground by distributing the water to the dwelling seams and provide opportunities for new public space beneath. Finally, the five interconnected spaces of different sizes and heights formed by the negative spaces between the canopy systems, become open space for gathering while simultaneously providing another layer of filtration for the water before it reaches the largest retention basin. Porosity varies throughout the system depending upon how much water needs to be absorbed and filtered versus be distributed, collected, and stored.

*Authorship (Academic): Emily Williamson, under the direction of Professor Robin Dripps.*

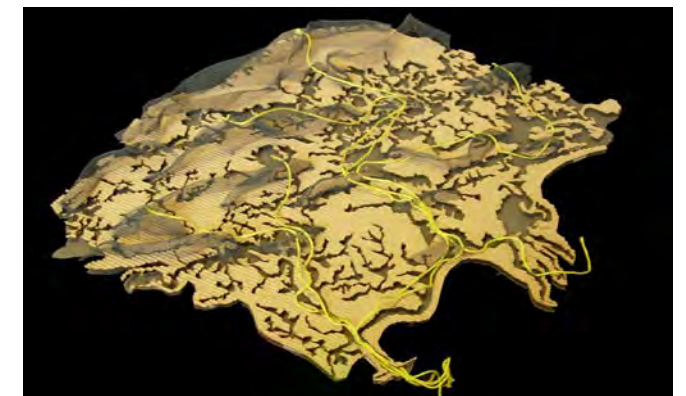
*Left: Model of the Valley and Ridge System*



*Existing Meadowbrook Creek Watershed*



*Diagrammatic Model of Inhabitable Ground*



*Chesapeake Bay Watershed in Virginia*



*Thick Ground of Inhabitable Watershed*

# Teaching Philosophy

"Maybe our mind should be sensitive to the vastness that lies behind all reality, should be open to the winds and whispers of infinity, and should be able – by inkling and intuition – to enter the hidden realism of the blazing Tyger, the robin, the Eagle, the Unicorn, and our mysterious humanity. How can we, in the presence of irreducible being, view life from only one perspective – the Cheetah's, the Tyger's or our own? We have the gift of overview, the tower of Imagination. We can place many perspectives side-by-side, we can even inhabit them simultaneously."

~Ben Okri. *A Way of Being Free*.

I draw inspiration from D.W. Winnicott's theory of play in developing my teaching pedagogy. This is not a form of play that is entertaining or frivolous, but rather one that is serious as a vital tool for learning. I see play-based learning as a multi-faceted approach that inspires students to look at subject matter from unfamiliar, wide-ranging perspectives. Interweaving play into every assignment and class session helps not only cultivate a collaborative environment in which students feel comfortable to take risks, but also promotes active participation, facilitates a more meaningful connection with the topic at hand, and stimulates the imagination. To accomplish this, I engage in four modes of play - *exploratory*, *symbolic*, *role-play*, and *inside-out* - each of which consists of strategies that encourage students to try out different viewpoints.

In *exploratory play*, students use all of their senses to explore the meanings and functions of the physical environment around them. For example, in a cultural geography course at RISD, I invite students to step into a world where their familiar routines in the city of Providence take on new, surprising meanings by slowing down and looking curiously at the material world around them. Drawing on approaches and concepts in course readings such as Jane Jacobs' *Eyes on the Street*, E.B. White's *Here is New York*, or Annette Miae Kim's *Sidewalk City*, students keep a daily sketchbook exploring curiosities and hypotheses (written and drawn) that arise from their observations. They might for example, address questions focused on how people make groups in a park, where the smell of a wood-burning fire is coming from, or why there are so many cracks in a sidewalk. As their thoughts accumulate, students look across one another's observations for socio-spatial patterns and cultural meanings. In addition to these peripatetic investigations, in my course *Lessons in Making*, my "Black Boxes" assignment calls upon students to draw through touch a collection of objects hidden in a black box. Without immediate visual recognition, the activity compels students to get to know these objects in a new way - revealing other aspects of their corporeality

that the sense of sight might obscure. Lastly, drawing on recent pedagogical adaptations to "cultural jamming," I further inspire exploratory play by bringing seemingly dissonant "texts" into conversation with one another. In my course on West African storytelling for example, I combine different genres, voices, and media such as Philippe Lacôte's Ivorian film, *Nights of the Kings*, the Ewe oral tale, "The Jealous Twins," and Ruth Finnegan's book, *Oral Literature in Africa*. Such a multifarious set of materials helps students think more expansively and diversely about major questions in the course such as: "What is oral literature?" or "How do stories help us live?"

Another mode of play that I infuse into my teaching is *symbolic* - the use of objects, actions or ideas to represent others. When introducing Bourdieu's influential concept "bodily capital" for example, I use metaphors such as an artist's kinetic drawing performance in Wuhan to help students viscerally sense how the body produces and accumulates worth within structural limits in relation to the social environment. In addition, following my own examples (see: [emilywilliamsonibrahim.com](http://emilywilliamsonibrahim.com)), I urge students to translate complex theoretical concepts and readings into diagrams comprised of hierarchical relations, densities, and symbols. This process not only helps students more easily recall the material by visualizing it, but also, in converting words to drawings, compels them to further develop parts of the concept that the text alone might have only implied or even left out. I also employ symbolic play as a foundational element in my assignments to help loosen student thinking - encouraging them to consider how different orders of reality relate to one another. For example, I have challenged students to consider how a green pepper becomes a lighting system, what a city would look like if it operated like a watershed, or how a 10-minute multi-sensory walk transforms into an 8' long, foldable abstract sculptural representation of that journey.

Further, I regularly integrate *role-play* - thinking, writing, and/or acting out as if the student is another person or character - in my teaching practice. At the beginning of my courses for example, I use role-play to help students get to know one another and create a sense of community. Working in pairs, students interview one another and prepare short introductions for the next class wherein they introduce themselves as if they were their partner. Beyond the fact that most students find this activity amusing, it invites them to get to know one another on a more personal, empathetic level. I also use role-play in peer-to-peer feedback workshops by inviting

students to try on different roles (ie: skeptic, enthusiast, professor of sexuality and gender, advisor, publisher, etc.) when critiquing one another's work. This activity helps students make evaluative comments through the lens of another - propelling them to consider how, given that person's interests and goals, they would respond to a piece of writing in different ways. Moreover, this method can alleviate anxiety because everyone is "playing a part," thereby disassociating person and feedback. Lastly, I extend the role-play approach to assignments and exams. For example, in a writing exercise, I ask students to adopt the perspective of an anthropologist whom they read over the semester and write a first-person email home to a friend or family member describing a puzzle with which they have been wrestling. These kinds of role-play exercises do more than simply reposition the self on intellectual terms. I have learned that occupying a different world-view, character, or person entails a certain amount of emotional upheaval that can lead to deeper, more embodied forms of knowledge-building.

Finally, I engage in a mode of play that I call *inside-out* wherein conventional social norms or rules that typically govern the physical and social world do not apply. A simple way I do this is by making transformations to

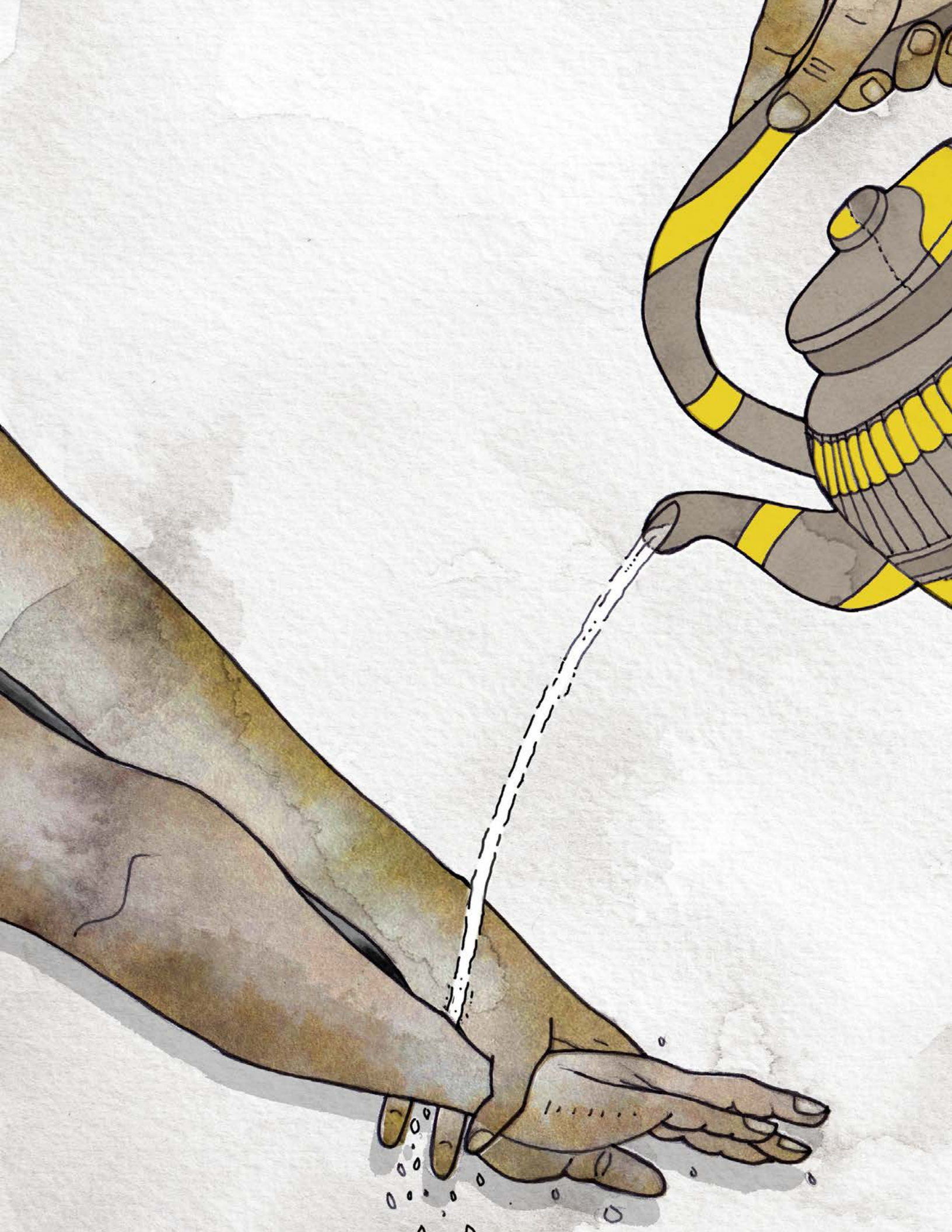
the physical environment in which I teach. While the conventional classroom arrangement typically comprises of chairs facing towards the front of a room, I play with not only reconfiguring its design to cater to our class needs on a particular day, but also meeting elsewhere - whether it be outside or at community venue. I also integrate inside-outside play in course assignments. For example, in my "Norm Violation Exercise" students write an ethnographic description of their experience violating a social norm and explore what that reveals about themselves and the wider socio-cultural reality in which they are embedded. Because the students feel the discomfort of occupying a social space or engaging in an activity that otherwise lies outside their purview, it obliges them to see it anew - both the breadth, mystery, and diversity of possible experiences and the narrow passageways we typically inhabit. By taking a play-based approach to learning, students are motivated to invest a fuller version of themselves into their learning and in doing so, can more nimbly apply this knowledge beyond classroom walls.



"It is not impossible for a lizard to ride on a housefly!"

~Nicholas Wayo, Nima Artist, Accra-Ghana.





# Diversity Statement

My teaching is inseparable from my commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Conversations about diversity are often limited to the United States and would greatly benefit from a broader global scope showing how race, racism, and power are deeply entangled in a complex set of transatlantic socio-historical processes. By putting texts such as Chimimandah Ngozi Adichi's *Americanah*, Roopali Mukherjee's *The Blackening Factory*, and Ira Baskow's *The Meaning of White Men* into conversation, I challenge students to interrogate the construction of race from African and other cross-cultural perspectives. By comparing and contrasting African narratives with those of the US, students not only gain a more nuanced understanding of how US racial categories work, but also a more expansive view of the myriad ways race can be constructed across cultural contexts. In addition, through *Zongo Story Project* workshops in Ghana, I teach students to tell imaginative stories textured by their own life experiences. I also work with the UN Sustainability Book Club, non-profits, and teachers in the United States and Ghana to not only disseminate these important stories, but also to use them as entry points for cross-cultural dialogue. Finally, on a theoretical level, my dissertation offers another way to understand the existential quest for freedom. In contrast to a conventional US version of freedom that relies upon the construction of the other as an antidote to racial exclusion, my interlocutors taught me that "feeling free" among zongo communities is less of a state of being than a fleeting disposition in which one can, at a moment's notice, pivot to try on another perspective.

In addition to bringing voices from the African continent into conversation with those of the United States, I address issues of inequality, racism, and power through my deeply phenomenological approach to anthropology. To gain rich insights into the boundless diversity of the human condition, my practice of anthropology's core methodology – participant observation – has enabled me to engage in immersive fieldwork through which I have investigated how an urban environment, primarily defined by comings-and-goings, shapes one's moral imagination. For example, it was only by immersing myself in inhabitants' everyday movements – their pushes, pulls, and swivels from one activity to another – that I could see how these to-and-fro experiences condensed into paralleling dialogic communicative strategies such

as folded speech. Extending this method to the classroom, I create assignments that encourage students to critically reflect upon the environments in which they live, create, and sustain. For instance, in Anthropology 101, students use all of their senses to study a place nearby over the course of a week. The process requires them to: slow down, pay attention to seemingly mundane observations such as how oranges are arranged in a market stall, and reflect upon the wider set of values, systems of exchange, and power dynamics that shape the organization of our material environments. And, because we inevitably view the world from a particular position, the assignment further impels students to reflexively consider how their own personal history, class, status, gender, race, and ethnicity shape their findings.

Finally, I am dedicated to making exclusionary practices and ideologies more visible, and therefore easier to grasp and ultimately address. In my research on the Cape Coast Zongo, one of the oldest Hausa settlements in Ghana, I investigated how a combination of historical and social factors contributed to its spatial and material marginalization from 1823 to the present. Because voices from zongo inhabitants were sparse in the local archival material, it required delving deeply into how these groups were represented as "other" through colonial descriptions and silences, but also incorporating as many missing stories as possible through life history interviews. In my cultural geography courses, I incorporate a parallel approach whereby students, through graphic representation, not only bring to life the diverse voices of cities, but also reveal the deep contours of systematic inequality that have structured them. Lastly, when teaching study abroad programs in Ghana, I bring these approaches of making and analysis to bear upon one another. Working in the city of Cape Coast for example, students study the physical environment to gain an understanding of how people use their spaces and what values are important to them. Accompanying these observations, students engage in discussions, workshops, and everyday activities with residents to develop short and long-term community-based strategies to address needs such as access to clean water, public space, and education.

Left: "One Hand Washes Another." A Hausa Proverb

# Sample Course Proposal

## “Drinking the World” Lessons in Sensing, Performing, and Narrating Place from Africa

What do we make of the places we inhabit? How do we render our environments meaningful and endow them with social and cultural significance? How do we put these meanings to work towards revising our attachments to both our material worlds and one another? In this course, we will address these questions through a deep exploration of sensing place from diverse perspectives across the African continent. Drawing inspiration from Keith Basso and Steven Feld who define sensing place as “the experiential and expressive ways places are known, imagined, yearned for, held, remembered, voiced, lived, contested and struggled over [...],” we will delve into this multi-faceted activity that my friends in Ghana call ‘drinking the world’ (*sha duniya*). To do so, we will move through five modes of knowing place: sensing, moving, performing, constructing, and narrating. Organizing our learning in this way helps us move away from more static modes of analysis focused on people *or* place towards a relational approach that forges meaning between the two.

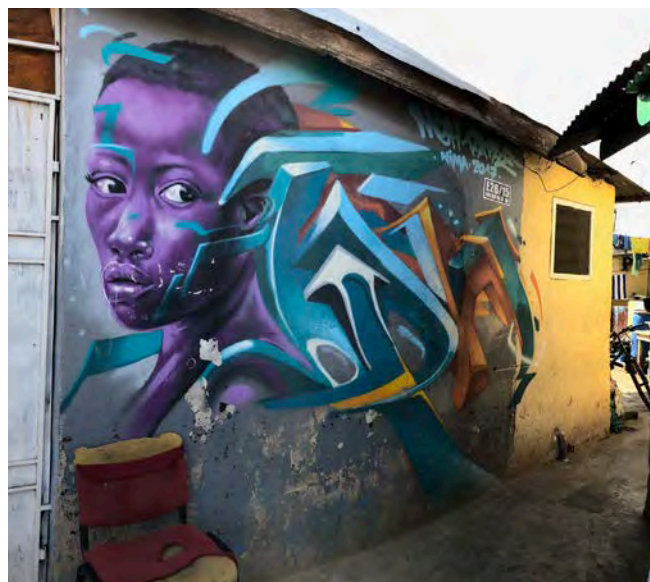
Taking seriously Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nutall’s call that scholars need to pay more attention to the practices of meaning-making in Africa’s urban contexts,

the course opens with broader questions about how to link critical conversations about the political economy, colonial legacies, citizenship, and development to phenomenological, place-based concerns. Starting at a small scale, the first unit explores how communities in various parts of Africa have made sense of place through cultural conceptions of the body, spatial orientation, and sensing. Next, we turn to how people have generated senses of place through everyday, seasonal, or transnational kinds of movement. Bringing ethnographic accounts into conversation with scholars such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and Doreen Massey, we ask what these narratives steeped in the texture of everyday urban rhythms can illuminate about (or even impel us rethink) theoretical concepts such as “deterritorialization” or “time-space compression.” In the third unit, we look into what performance and ritual (broadly defined) can tell us about how spaces become animated with meaning and significance. What for example, might the ritual of “hanging out” at Fadas (a space where young men gather) in Niger tell us about how place comes to matter for them? Fourth, we turn our attention from more direct experiences and perceptions of place to how various stakeholders (ie: citizens, governments and NGOs) construct it in relation to wider structural social forces and categories such as race, gender, and status. Finally, we investigate what narrative can tell us about how people make meaning out of the world in which they live. How, for instance, might storytelling from the African continent

complicate Hannah Arendt’s contention that stories mediate the space between private and public realms? Despite long-term commitments to sense of place in disciplines such as philosophy, architecture, urban studies, geography, history, and anthropology, when it comes to the African continent, sense of place has often been left off the map. Reflecting this trend, course syllabi pertaining to urban Africa tend to focus on topics such political economy, citizenship, colonial legacies, social justice, post-colonial geographies, or development and planning. While these dimensions are of course critical, our understandings of how these larger processes work would be greatly enriched by a deeper understanding of how Africa’s cities come to matter for the people living in them. As Mbembe and Nutall observe about the scholarship on urban Africa, there is “an overwhelming neglect of how the meanings of Africanness are made.” This course seeks to bridge this gap on a number of levels. First, by focusing on how people sense place in and from urban Africa, the course introduces students to new and emergent literature of urban life in Africa that attends to meaning-making practices. Second, it brings these accounts of lived urban experiences in Africa into conversation with Euro-American phenomenological approaches with the aim of developing as Comaroff and Comaroff put it, “theories from the south.” Further, this course questions and challenges categories such as rural and urban, physical and virtual, center and periphery. Ultimately, we probe a fundamental question about

the role of place-making as a universal aspect of the human condition. To accomplish this, the course draws on written, oral, and visual texts ranging from (but not limited to) oral tales, phenomenological theory, art, novels and poetry, political philosophy, public radio, psychology, classic and contemporary ethnography, and narrative journalism (see ‘mini syllabus’ on next page).

Students will complete three main assignments for this course. First, students will write a 300-word response to the readings for each session. I ask that they find current examples such as events, music, images, news articles, films with which to think through the readings: either as illustrations, counter-examples, or openings into new directions. The second assignment is a 5-page paper. Inspired by Keith Basso’s contention that in addition to ordinary talk, relationships to places find their expression through ‘conceptual and expressive instruments’ (e.g. song, art, social media, architecture, clothing), I ask students to bring the analytical tools discussed in class to bear upon the analysis of an ‘instrument’ of choice. Lastly, each student will develop a final project focused on an ethnography that takes place seriously. Students will design a project (e.g. short film, podcast, web-based installation, photography, creative writing, etc.) and write up a short discussion (2-3 pages), in which they articulate how their ethnography sheds light upon theoretical concepts, case studies, and/or readings from the course. *Note: See “Mini-Syllabus” next page.*



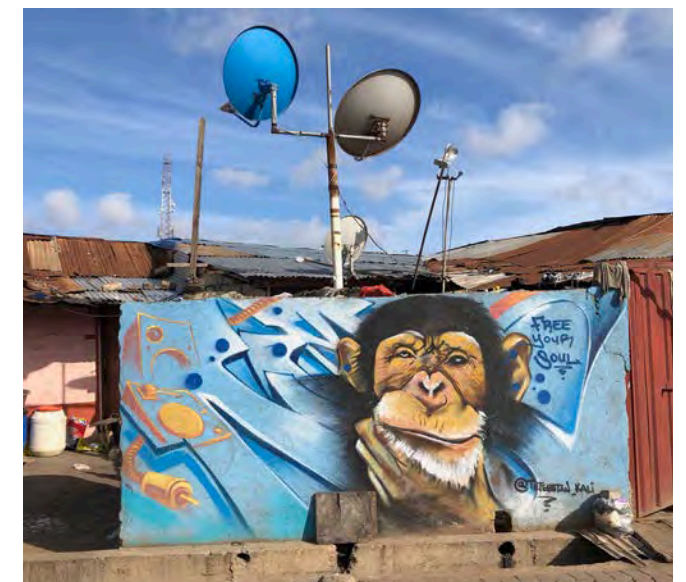
Wall Art - By Nima Artist



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Wall Art - Artist Unknown



Wall Art - Tetebotan Kali



Nima Street Life on Wood - Musah Swallah, Nima Artist

## 'Mini-Syllabus'

### Introduction and Course Overview

Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall. *Writing the World from an African Metropolis.*"

Unit One:

#### Sensing and Embodying Place

Yi Fu Tuan. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience.* "Body, Personal Relations, and Spatial Values."

Steven Feld and Keith Basso. *Sense of Place.* "Introduction."

Martin Heidegger. *Poetry, Language, Thought.* "Building, Dwelling, Thinking."

Kathryn Linn Geurts. "On Rocks, Walks, and Talks in West Africa: Cultural Categories and an Anthropology of the Senses."

Paul Stoller. *Sensuous Scholarship.* "Introduction: The Way of the Body"

Rene Devisch. "Body and Affect in the Intercultural Encounter."

NPR: *Sense of Place*, South Africa: Sol Gems. Radio.

Unit Two:

#### Moving In and Through Place

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. "Treatise on Nomadology." In: *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*

Doreen Massey. "A Global Sense of Place."

Hans Lucht. *Darkness before Daybreak: African Migrants Living on the Margins in Southern Italy.* "The Maghreb Connection."

Abner Cohen. *The Migratory Process: Settlers and Strangers.* Custom and Politics in Urban Africa.

Mary Smith. *Baba of Karo: A Woman of the Muslim Hausa*

Ivor Kopytoff. *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies.* "The Internal African Frontier."

Abdoulaliq Simone. *City Life from Jakarta to Dakar: Movements at the Crossroads.* "Intersections: What Can Urban Residents Do for Each Other?"

*The Atlantics.* Directed by Mati Diop. Film.

Unit Three:

#### Performing Place

Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life.* "Performances."

Bruce Kapferer. *Anthropology of Experience.* "Performance and the Structuring of Meaning and Experience."

Adeline Masquelier. *Fadas: Boredom and Belonging in Niger.* "The Writing on the Walls: Ma(r)king the Place of Youth."

Brad Weiss. *Street Dreams and Hip Hop Barbershops: Global Fantasy in Urban Tanzania.* "Introduction."

Sasha Newall. *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Côte d'Ivoire.* "Masculinity and the Performative Success of Waste."

Jenna Burrell. *Invisible Users: Youth in the Internet Cafés of Urban Ghana.* "Youth and the Indeterminate Space of the Internet Cafe."

*An African City.* Directed by Nicole Amarteifio and Dickson Dzakpasu. Series.

Unit Four:

#### (Re)Constructing Place

Tim Creswell. *Place: An Introduction.* "Working with Place: Creating Place."

Maurice Bloch. *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space.* "People into Places."

Danny Hoffman. *Monrovia Modern: Urban Form and the Political Imagination.* "Finding Urban Form: A Coda."

Filip de Boeck. *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City.* "Introduction."

James Ferguson. *Expectations of Modernity: Myths and Meanings of Urban Life on the Zambian Copperbelt.* "Rural Connections, Urban Styles."

Caroline Melly. *Bottleneck: Moving, Building, and Belonging in an African City.* Selection. "Inhabiting Inside-Out Houses."

Deborah Pellow. "Landlords and Lodgers: Socio-Spatial Organization in an Accra Community." "Everyday Life."

Unit Five:

#### Narrating, Imagining, and Remembering Place

Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition.* Selections: pp. 50; 181-188; 197-199.

Michael Jackson. *The Politics of Storytelling: Variations on a Theme by Hannah Arendt.* Selection: "Introduction" (pp. 31-53)

Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places.* "Talking with Stories."

Liisa Malkki. *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory, and National Cosmology Among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania.* "The Mythico-History."

Janet McIntosh. *Unsettled: Denial and Belonging Among White Kenyans.* "Unsettled."

*Night of the Kings.* Directed by Philippe Lacôte. Film.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. "The Danger of a Single Story." Ted Talk.

### Conclusions and New Trajectories

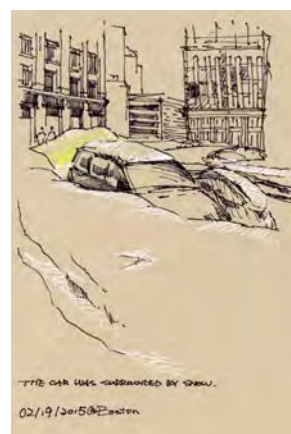
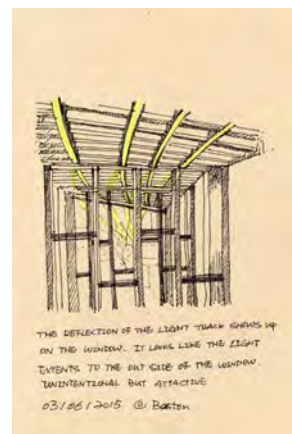
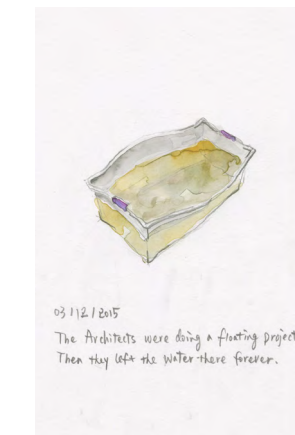
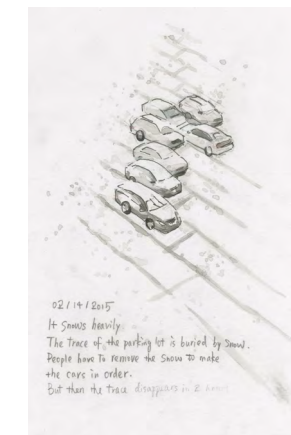
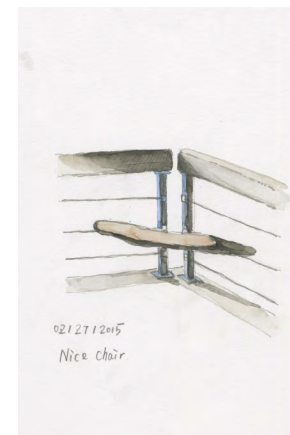
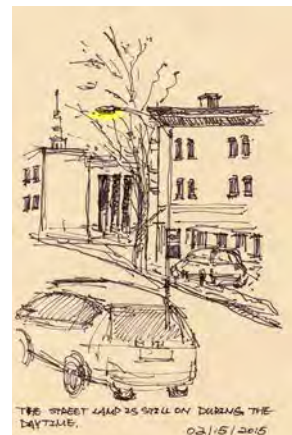
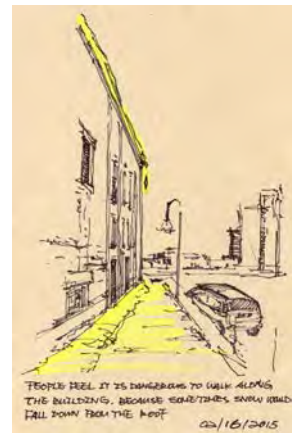
# Student Work

## Urban Observations

In his book *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes, “We never look just at one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves.” Building upon the idea that we are always seeing the world in relation to our own biographical history and social positioning, this assignment invites you to both reflect upon the position through which you observe the urban environment, but also to encourage you to de-familiarize yourself with the conventional ways in which you see and make meaning - to discover the surprises, patterns, and curiosities embedded in everyday life. Over the course of the semester, you will make one observation a day to explore senses of place in Providence. We will begin the semester with an exploration of many different ways in which to understand and record a place, but after the mid review, you will focus on a particular issue, subject, and/or method to delve into more deeply.

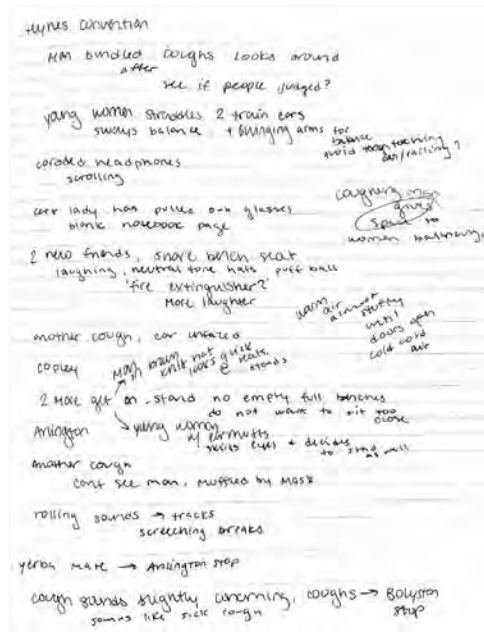
Sample 1:  
Edges, and Thresholds (left)

Sample 2:  
Multiple Temporalities (right)



# Writing Ethnographic Descriptions

Doing ethnography requires us to pay close attention to the places in which people live and how they interact with them. As Keith Basso reminds us, “Places, we realize, are as much a part of us as we are part of them, and senses of place – yours, mine, and everyone else’s – partake complexly of both.” Over a sixty minute period, you will observe a social space, taking detailed field-notes in a notebook that includes sensorial details (smell, sounds, temperature, light...), people, animals, plants, activity, conversations, spaces, events, tone, textures, bodily postures, lighting, and architecture. Take note of your presence within that setting, how others respond to it, how you feel. After completing your observations, you will write an ethnographic description of 1000 words that includes a short reflection (one paragraph) on one class reading from weeks 1-3 that inspired your observations, methods, and writing. The purpose of this assignment is to practice slowing down and getting to know a sense of place through careful observation, ethnographic note-taking and narrative description.



Sample Field-Notes

## Sample 1: Giving and Taking Space on the MBTA

February’s dry cold nipped at exposed cheekbones as the commuters waiting at Harvard Ave prepared to board the B train to Park Street station. The older woman ahead of me dragged an olive green fabric cart at her heels, thumping up the three steps towards the conductor’s booth and fare collection. Only the thin and blueish skin under her eyes was visible, the rest of her face hidden under a floral mask, brown textile scarf, crocheted hat, and rectangular sunglasses. Behind us filed in two college students, bundled in knee-length down jackets, and a middle-aged man sporting dress pants with freshly pressed front creases and a wool coat. I settled into one of two single seats facing towards the center of the car, positioning myself to better observe my fellow travelers. The older woman wedged her cart between her right foot and the protruding wood-paneling in the open space between the double doors. Above her hung multiple signs with steps to stay COVID-safe: wear a mask, socially distance, and maintain good hygiene. A younger woman was already settled into a bench with two seats, her tote bag occupying the aisle seat and stuffed with thick books. She sat relaxed, leaning her chrome headphones against the car window and watching her phone screen through hexagonal gold-rimmed glasses. The well-dressed man took a seat on the opposite side of the car. He sat sideways with his right knee bouncing up and down. His feet were angled towards the aisle, as if to be ready to jump off and exit the T at a moment’s notice.

It was nearly one in the afternoon on a Wednesday, an awkward time in the work day, and yet I counted ten people in our train car to start. At each stop heading inbound, the breaks squealed along the tracks and the train stopped to exchange a passenger or two. The mostly silent commute was accompanied by loud screeching from the small section that connected our car to the neighboring one. Oftentimes a newcomer entered the car and surveyed the available seats, selecting the open seat farthest from another passenger. We were spaced out as much as the arrangement of seats allowed. The two-seat benches were left to parties of one or for those traveling together like the college students whom boarded at Harvard Ave. They shared a bench, with their legs and arms touching briefly as they exchanged stories in animation, an unsafe closeness for strangers in the time of COVID-19. Words from their conversation – Valentine’s, Thursday instead,

he said? – periodically punctuated the loud humming sound coming from the air ventilation system.

As the car filled, seating strategies seemed to adjust accordingly. At St. Paul Street a man with a blue surgical mask below his nose boarded and moved towards the center of our car, stopping behind the older woman and her cart. Each time the doors closed an announcement rang from above reminding that “Passengers are required to wear a face covering on all MBTA vehicles and in all stations”. The man with his nose exposed stood directly under one of the speakers breathing heavily through his mouth over the targeted announcement; maybe he was out of breath from running to the station so not to miss the train. The older woman glanced behind at the man breathing in her direction and hurriedly thumped her cart up the two steps towards my seat. She claimed the empty bench in front of the young woman leaning against the window. A few stops later, the man with his nose exposed exchanged places with an older man, bundled in a heavy parka and a surgical mask layered under a black fabric one. I was looking in the opposite direction when the bundled man let out a grumbling cough; I turned, expecting to see a reaction by those in his vicinity. I catch myself often looking in the direction of a cough in public, likely a form of pandemic-paranoia; and yet my fellow passengers appeared unbothered, too busy scribbling in notebooks or captivated by screens and whatever played in their ears. While coughing did not seem to grab the attention of those around me, most people still seemed to physically navigate the shared space carefully. At the Hynes Convention Center station another young woman boarded the train and looked around. Every other seat was taken and benches were full. Instead of sitting or standing directly next to someone, the woman stood in the circular space connecting the two train cars. She wore black leather boots with thick soles that were grey and chalky, probably from road salt and recent snow. The woman stood with her feet farther than shoulder-distance apart, shifting weight between each foot for balance as the screeching T picked up speed again. The bundled man began walking towards her. She momentarily stepped out of the vestibule and gave space for him to pass through into the next car at a safe distance before returning to her balancing act.

This pattern of taking and giving space appeared again as I commuted to campus the next morning. There were already more than ten people in the first car when I boarded. I quickly took the nearest open seat to get out of the way of others behind me. As a rummaged through my backpack for my notebook, I noticed the man sitting

directly across from me looking at the gentleman two seats to my right. I glanced around and realized there were still a few empty seats to my left and I could move over to give more space to the gentlemen next to me. I shifted over one seat. At the next stop, a woman wearing an auburn coat boarded and moved to sit down between the gentleman and I before noticing she would have to sit directly next to one of us. She briskly walked down the aisle towards the other cars before the T could jerk back into motion. The man across from me looked in my direction at the remaining empty seats. I immediately felt foolish as I recognized I could have sat all the way to the left against the wall and left space for others. Sure enough, at the next stop, a woman rolling a small black suitcase sat in the space I opened by moving towards the wall.

During both rides I observed and participated in this interesting balance of commuters giving and taking space on the MBTA. Masks, signage, and automated announcements serve as constant reminders that public spaces must be navigated with caution. Many people I observed, like the older woman and her cart or the young woman balancing between the two cars, appeared to assess the risk of their surroundings before coordinating their own movements, almost like a dance. This exercise was extremely interesting, especially because I was just another commuter also trying to navigate the dance of space and safe distancing. Like Abu-Lughod, I was embedded in my observations, unable to separate my own presence from the happenings around me. Where I chose to sit influenced how the people around me moved. At the center of this is the importance of positionality. In “Guest and Daughter” Lila Abu-Lughod acknowledges her positionality; she was a daughter in her host family’s household, an American student, and a Muslim (Abu-Lughod 1986: 13). This uniquely situated her within the world of the Bedouin people she hoped to come to understand. Abu-Lughod’s positionality affected her fieldwork; her travel and whose conversations she could be part of was managed by the head of her host family, Haj (Abu-Lughod 1986: 14). One of my favorite excerpts from Abu-Lughod’s writing describes the importance of how she belonged to the Bedouin community; “This sense of ‘us versus them,’ so central to their social interactions, had become central to me, too, and I felt pleased that I belonged to an ‘us’” (Abu-Lughod 1986: 20).

The beautiful details of scenery and tradition throughout “Guest and Daughter” and Abu-Lughod’s position integrated within her Bedouin family inspired my own research. I wanted to select a place for my observations that I have recently become part of. I only began

commuting to campus this past January, but it has become a central part of my daily life. Although on a typical day I absentmindedly gaze out the window with headphones in, this assignment challenged me to pay closer attention to those around me and how they interacted, as well as how my presence played into their behaviors. As much as I felt like an outsider, sitting with my notebook open and looking around – trying to avoid awkward eye contact – my second morning of observations served as a reminder that I was very much part of the commute, also navigating the dance of giving and taking space.

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My Overall Feedback (not including in-text):  
*Thank you so much for this elegant piece on “Giving and Taking Space on the MBTA.” Your descriptions are so vivid that you really make your environment come alive. What’s more you do a beautiful job of artfully shifting our attention from relations among objects, people, and clothing to the train itself and then into a wonderfully detailed discussion of social interaction on the train. I also thought it really effective the way you included yourself in these exchanges (ie: shifting to another seat in response to another’s needs). I think Lila Abu-Lughod would be in awe of the way you subtly folded in your own positionality. I’m curious if you had more time, what you would want to know more about ... Again, great work!*

## Sample 2: Finding Nostalgia in the Mundane

I tend to avoid the study room found on the first floor of Rich Hall, a residence hall on Boston University’s West Campus. I prefer to do my assignments in my room, away from the distractions and anxieties of a room filled with other working college students. This is how I knew that this location would be ideal for my observations -- a location that was not only unfamiliar but uncomfortable to me. After spending an hour with my focus on nothing but the room and its occupants, my view on the space has changed completely. While writing my field-notes, I found nostalgia where I least expected it. When focusing on the people in the room, I realized how much I missed my own friends and family and was brought back to being home with the people I love the most.

Upon entering the room, I situated myself at a rectangular table close to the door. Immediately, I noticed the deafening silence of the room. Every noise seemed to echo throughout the space, making even the smallest sounds extremely prominent. A table in the back of the room grabbed my attention, as the whisper of three

people filled the space -- inaudible but noticeable. The individual closest to me had long straight black hair and was wearing black Nike slides that made a dragging noise against the carpet every time she entered and left the room. I watched them pause their conversation and get up to walk toward the door behind me. Another person followed, their shoes making the same dragging noise but at a slower, less anxious pace. The carpet was polka dotted and reminiscent of early 2000’s decor, much like the rest of the room’s decorations, and the sounds that came from it were consistent with each person’s steps.

Every time a new person entered the room, or another person left it, the scratching noise echoed off the walls. The background murmurs of cars passing outside the window were also audible but inconsistent. A quiet hum from an unidentified source filled the room as well, occupying the space inconspicuously. The chair underneath me was another noticeable noise while I was in this room. The polka-dotted university furniture was uncomfortable to sit on, and I found myself shifting my weight periodically. The sound of my cotton leggings against the cloth stuffed chair made a brushing noise. My attention was then brought to a crinkling chip bag, its owner sitting in the back of the room at another rectangular table. A blue surgical mask hung from one of his ears and I watched as he fiddled with it before dropping his hands onto his Macbook’s keyboard. I recognized the inconsistency of the movements around me -- a car would pass outside, a person would shift their movements, a phone notification would go off, but seemingly nothing occurred in a predictable pattern.

I found consistency in my physical presence in the room. It was noticeably warmer than the rest of the building, and my palms were sweaty as I was writing my field-notes. With my attention to my hand on the paper, I heard every stroke of my pen across my notebook page. At the same time, I became aware of how little I could smell in the room. When wearing a mask, smell is always more difficult to detect and the scent of the room was replaced with the aroma of my previously chewed (and very stale) mint gum. As I sat there, I became increasingly more aware of my presence in the space, specifically in correspondence with those around me. People were talking to friends at their tables or chatting with them over the phone and I became cognizant of my own unaccompanied presence. I watched people laugh and share conversation and I started to miss my friends from home, craving the people who I know the most and love the most. I became nostalgic of the times when I was the one doing homework and

laughing with my best friends, and I began to look at my surroundings through a different lens.

Every so often, however, the squeal of the opening and closing door would break me from my thoughts and I would be brought back to my environment. A new person entered the room and sat at a circular table behind me. They were talking on the phone, possibly video chatting someone, explaining math homework. Their voice was deep and deliberate, and something about it felt familiar. I thought of, and missed, my brother at this moment. This is when I began to reflect more on the effect of my, and everyone else’s, presence in the room. Not many people -- if any at all -- acknowledged each other in the room. Most heads were down and working or up and consumed in conversation with friends. The room seemed to be a place of work or quiet conversation -- nothing else. The people outside of the study room also unknowingly contributed to the room’s experience. The muted sound of people talking and laughing outside the doors faded out as the shrill and abrupt ding of the elevator forced them to leave. I heard the group say their goodbyes and separate into their respective elevators. From the window, a car horn let out a short and startling honk, causing me to jump in my seat in response.

As the minutes passed by, everybody continued life as normal in that study room until, eventually, people started to leave. The dragging noise of shoes on the dense carpet and the slow squeal of a closing door became a more common sound. The group of friends parted ways with a high-pitched “bye!” and a wave. Then it became time for me to leave too. I closed my laptop, shut my notebook, stood up from my chair, and walked out. Undoubtedly, those who remained in the room were unaffected by my presence. Yet, I was personally affected by theirs in ways that were both unexpected and gratifying.

Lila Abu-Lughod took a very personal approach to her ethnography, as she described in her book, *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*. Abu-Lughod described her presence with the Bedouins as an immersion of herself into the society, as she writes “I became the person I was with them” (Abu-Lughod 1986: 19). I was inspired by this closeness when performing my own fieldwork and when crafting my essay. I noticed myself taking my observations more personally than I would have expected, especially since I was in a simple study room. Previously, I had always imagined fieldwork to be strictly observational and definitely not intimate. Yet, I felt extremely nostalgic when focusing on the interactions within the room and I decided to embrace

this feeling. I referred to Abu-Lughod’s experience when doing so, accepting my nostalgia and using it to further my own experience. Although I was not participating hands on with the others in this room, like Abu-Lughod was in her ethnography, I still felt the same personal connection to the experience and the people in the space. I believe this furthered my understanding of the interactions between the people in that room and, consequently, my ethnographic writings regarding the study room of Rich Hall.

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My Overall Feedback (not including in-text):  
*Thanks so much for your thoughtful, intimate paper. I love your title because it catches the reader off guard - causing you to wonder how one could possibly feel nostalgia for the mundane. You start off really strong with why you chose the space in the first place - not only unfamiliar, but also uncomfortable. This sets you up nicely for likely meeting surprises in your observations. Your description is detailed and diverse and I especially thought it effective how in making observations about others, you also noted things about yourself (ie: being alone). Indeed, you do a wonderful job making us feel so up close and personal to such an uncomfortable space. I wonder how you would feel in this space a year from now? Nice work!*



of distraction to uncover and analyze patterns of norm compliance and violation.

Most Wednesdays I work from home with a desk lamp strategically placed to bounce warm light from the wall onto my face, a water bottle within arm's reach, and a thick oatmeal sweater across my shoulders to counteract the draft from my building's ill-fitted windows. It is the one day each week I do not make the trip to campus, instead Zoom connects me to virtual classrooms where I laboriously maintain attention towards a computer window rather than those funneling light into my quaint studio apartment.

This week, I joined the link for my Earth & Environment class a minute before the scheduled start, prepared to violate Zoom norms by keeping my camera on while physically disengaging from class. Our small boxes with profile pictures and colored initials suspended in grid formation waited for a class to begin. The professor, an older man in a wrinkled pinstripe shirt, sat at a table with his glasses low on his nose, perhaps to prevent the ever-annoying foggy side effect of mask-wearing. He began by going over our most recent writing assignment. With the Zoom window in full screen I could see six of my classmates had their cameras on, the rest remained hidden. Four of my peers sat at desks, with familiar furniture in the background suggesting university housing. One girl sat on top of her bed, leaning against a wall covered in polaroid photographs, while another sat at a kitchen countertop. The professor was going over our final presentations when the girl sitting on her bed began talking to someone out of frame. Her eyes widened and her eyebrows raised – as if she had learned something shocking. She glanced back towards our class and quickly shut off her camera. More cameras shut off as the professor shared his screen and began lecturing. Only four profile boxes were visible next to his PowerPoint – the rest of us, cameras on or off, were invisible to him.

After an hour of lecturing, our professor stopped sharing his screen and returned to grid view. His request for “folks” to turn their cameras on revealed more lounging students. As he began asking group discussion questions, I got up from my desk without turning off my camera. I remained in frame as I walked to the refrigerator and pulled out ingredients for my afternoon iced latte. My headphones continued to transmit the discussion while I stood at the counter with my back to the class. I did not hear any reaction to my unconventional departure. When I returned to my desk almost six minutes later, the conversation was wrapping

up. Only eight faces were on my screen. My face flushed with embarrassment – most people had turned their cameras off while I was gone. And yet, my professor seemed entirely unfazed. Even the Zoom recording failed to reveal any visible reaction to my norm-violation.

My norm-violation failed to elicit a reaction in a class of nearly thirty, thus I repeated this during a small lab meeting. Our weekly meetings host a mix of undergraduates, graduate students, and research fellows. Typically, cameras remain on and microphones muted unless speaking. However, this week I left my microphone on. My noncompliance went unnoticed until I adjusted positions at my desk and my chair squealed. A green box outlined my profile square, indicating the microphone picked up the sound. No one visibly reacted to the chair or the subsequent sounds of my occasional movement. Conversations continued with cameras on and the recurrent clicking of “Mute” and “Unmute”. One of the graduate students was unmuted when her dog began barking. She quickly apologized, muted herself, and shut her camera off briefly to tend to the needy pup.

As one undergraduate began sharing about a recent project, I got up and walked to the kitchen. Green glowed around my profile as my chair wheeled across the floor. My headphones did not relay any response to my absence as I placed a slice of banana bread in the microwave. I remained in view of my camera, preparing an iced oat milk latte and waiting for the microwave to beep. When I returned with my snack and beverage my Zoom square was glowing green again. One of the graduate students called out, “Victoria! Whatcha got there? Plan on sharing?” Although others on the call were mostly muted, their cameras displayed smiles and light laughter at my response that I needed a “pick-me-up.” Our meeting continued with its usual turn-taking, storytelling, and light banter about the news and research-relevant memes.

The lighthearted response of the lab group to my norm-violation differed dramatically from the indifference of my professor and classmates. This contrast parallels to themes of identity and intimacy within Shamus Rahman Khan's ethnographic work on class and privilege at a prestigious boarding school, and Aimee Meredith Cox's investigation of the contemporary ideas of young Black women regarding race and entitlement. Khan's research, at his alma mater, explores how students navigate various levels and degrees of intimacy with the adults that teach and care for them (Khan 2012: 69). According to Khan, teacher-student relationships exist within unspoken boundaries that vary depending on social context and are not equally transferable

(Khan 2012: 70). While our lab members vary in status within the academic hierarchy, our shared identity as a lab group fosters a sense of openness and intimacy, creating space to question disruption. Analogously, while cultural capital separated Aimee Meredith Cox's from the women at the Detroit homeless shelter, her identity as a Black woman served as a point of convergence where knowledge was shared and complex relationships formed (Cox 2015: 4).

I chose my Earth & Environment class because our professor is often aloof, too busy lecturing to notice the happenings within a small Zoom square. Such inattentiveness corresponds to the set of complex relationships of varying faculty formality and intimacy that students learned to navigate in Khan's work (Khan 2012: 71). Furthermore, the physical and hierarchical academic distance between professors and students contribute critically to Cox's ideas of identity formation and the construction of social roles (Cox 2015: 34). Learning in a digital domain thus confounds the establishment of relationships among classmates and closeness with professors. Contrarily, relationships among our lab members preceded our virtual meetings and are strengthened by a shared identity. Without an overtly obnoxious norm-violation, like unmuting myself to scream, my classmates likely did not feel the need to or feel comfortable commenting on my behavior. Overall, the observed camera-use patterns reveal that in both formal and casual Zoom settings, participants are expected to mute and/or turn their cameras off when their actions or surroundings have the potential to distract. However, key differences emerge in the awareness of and response to norm-violation within each situation. From this analysis, patterns of response to harmless norm-violation within the Zoom-iverse appear to be rooted in the degree of intimacy and closeness among the individuals present.

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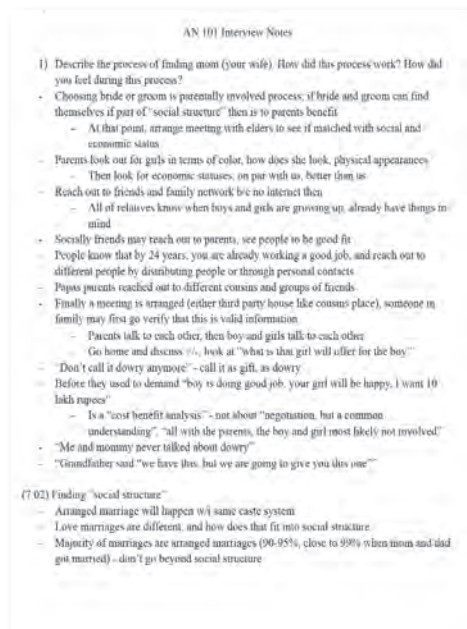
My Overall Feedback (not including in-text):  
*Thanks so much for your paper, “Intimacy and an Iced Latte.” As you point out, your topic on Zoom norms is incredibly challenging to pin down. In part, this is because many are new, require a certain amount of technological savviness, and still interpreted in diverse ways. And, further complicating this, are the various exceptions to compliance, that are in a sense also compliance (ie: turning off your screen if you would distract the group). In short, this is an incredibly complex and constantly evolving set of rules/behaviors. I commend you on your efforts to begin unpacking it. Your introduction is elegant, precise, and offers the reader a scenario with which can all identify.*

*I thought your choice to compare two different Zoom classroom environments was an effective one and I appreciated your rich detail throughout (ie: who had their camera on, where people were sitting, etc.) I'm also relieved you didn't offend your Earth & Environment professor. Next time, you might consider choosing a norm violation that you could elicit a response more of surprise than disapproval. I thought you did a nice job describing each classroom situation though through detailed comparison, all the while, offering us your own analysis of why you received particular reactions as enriched through the Khan and Cox course readings. As you point out, I found it fascinating that even though the social norms in both of your case studies are the same (ie: stay muted unless talking, turn cameras off when they might distract), that your violation of that norm elicits different reactions. I think your hypothesis about social intimacy and distance is an interesting one and certainly likely contributing to the way in which each group responded to you. That being said, if you had time to develop this further, I would encourage you to try a comparison between two groups that were much more similar to reduce your number of variables. For example, you might compare and contrast two different labs or classes of a similar size. I wonder how these norms will continue to linger and shape our classroom experience next fall when in-person classes begin again. Great work!*



# The Anthropological Interview

What do we learn by listening to other people? How can their stories enrich our understanding of their own experiences, a particular topic, and the human condition at large? This exercise asks you to conduct a 30-minute-long anthropological interview and to then write a 1000-1500 word essay that puts your interview notes into conversation with an anthropological theme of your choice, engaging readings from the course. The purpose of this assignment is to practice the art of listening, interviewing, and linking this dialogue to some of the themes that we have addressed in class. Think small, and go deep.



Sample Field-Notes

## Sample 1: The Yaya and Her Alaga

When I was a baby, my first word wasn't "mom" or "mama." It was "ya-ya-ya-ya..."

A Yaya is a Filipino word for a nursemaid or caretaker. From the moment I opened my eyes to the world, Yaya Amy (ah-mee), with her thick, long black hair and morena skin, was living under our roof. Me, being her alaga (a child she cared for), she bathed me when I couldn't do it on my own, woke me up for school before I had phone alarms, and waited for me in the ballet studio during my five-hour rehearsals. Beyond chores involving me, Yaya Amy does the laundry, cleans the rooms, and when the household's chef retired, she took on the mantle of cooking our meals. In the Philippines, having a Yaya is extremely common. The context of which is that a large portion of the Philippine population consists of lower-class people looking for income. With not a lot of higher education available, the jobs suitable for most are ones that are for domestic work. For example, cleaning rooms, cooking meals, doing the laundry, and taking care of children.

When I arrived in Boston, I had trouble describing to my roommate what a Yaya is. Yaya Amy doesn't take the role of a parent, for both of mine have been nurturing, loving and distinct from other relations. That does not disregard the fact Yaya Amy has been just as loving and nurturing. But when explaining to people what she is employed to do, my fear is that I sound like a privileged international who owns a slave. And there are moments in my life where I question the particularities of our relationship, where me being the daughter of her employer puts me at a higher place in the social hierarchy. However, the notion of a Yaya and their relationship amongst the family members they work for are more complex than meets the eye. Thus I want to investigate the theme of kinship and how much Yayas blur the lines between employee, companion, and parent.

Shamus Rahman Khan's ethnography touches on the relationship between students of the elite class and staff of St. Paul's Boarding School. Khan writes that the staff "are some of the most intriguing and most overlooked people on the campus," (Khan, 2012, 52). The students, who looked to the staff for consolidation, knew little to nothing about them as an individual. Similarly, I didn't

know that Yaya Amy's surname was Brellante until middle school. So when I messaged Yaya Amy that I needed to interview her for school, she was both surprised and reluctant in a sense where I never delved into her backstory before.

Late in the evening, Yaya Amy was seated on the chairs of the patio at the front of my house. The patio is where she usually goes when she wants to be alone from the rest of the maids in their quarters, seeing that most of them are new and always changing, Yaya Amy's face is wrinkled and aged with the same black hair I've always known. But despite knowing me for almost two decades, it was evident that she was reluctant or shy. It mostly had to do with her thinking about the possibility of an American professor watching her, compelling her to wear her glasses and talk in English until she completed the questions I sent to her in advance.

The first goal of the interview, on a surface level, is to grasp the basic history of Yaya Amy's employment life in conjunction with my family. Something I vaguely remember from before was that she used to work in Cebu at the bakery of my late Nai Nai (grandmother on my mother's side). So when I asked about when she was employed by Nai Nai, it came as a shock when she revealed it to be the year 1984, putting her at the age of twelve. Till now, it has not registered in my mind that she's been with our family for roughly thirty-seven years more than half her life. She even joked about the time she moved to Manila, saying that "when I [was] applying for you, I [was] a virgin." At that, we both laughed.

An outside viewer could see this as simply loyalty between employee and employer, but Kate Weston's study on kinship amongst the queer community of San Francisco argues that the longevity of being around someone that aids in the formation of attachments similar to that of a family (Weston, 1997, 115). This brings me to my second, and more important, aim for the interview: Uncovering the ways in which Yaya Amy much like other Yayas blends the distinctions between work and family relations.

It was halfway through the call when I said "I just want to make kwento lang," translating to "I just want to gossip," did the very nature of Yaya Amy change. She switched from English to Tagalog, laughed more, and started asking me questions. For example, "Kamusta ka?" (how are you?) or "you eat already?" She also expresses her worry over the rise of Asian hate crimes and warned me about not going out too much because of Covid. The dialogue is easily a replica of what my mom would ask me

during our calls, highlighting Yaya Amy's embodied role of a mother caring over my wellbeing.

As mentioned previously, I am my Yaya's alaga. The name's direct English translation is care and is often used as a verb. The second meaning is a title given to and embodied by kids like me. Distinct from anak, which is for her own children, the bond between Yaya Amy and I is a complex subset of kinship that goes beyond a best friend but is not quite a blood relative. For example, she, alongside my mother, held me during my baptism. She was also the one I talked to when I started crushing on my ex-boyfriend and the one who I rant to whenever I was stressed about school work. At the same time, she is still a worker and she still gets paid for her services.

Nonetheless, the janitors and cafeteria workers in Khan's ethnography go beyond the menial tasks they are paid to do. These people take pride in the "emotional work for students, lifting their spirits, listening to them complain about the latest adolescent debacle, counseling them about a breakup or an overeager parent," (Khan, 2012, 57). Yaya Amy's case is similar in the sense that I know she takes pride in who and what she works for.

When I asked about who her favorite family member was, "ikaw talaga yun," (it's really you) she responded without hesitation,

Meron pa ba iba? Siempre naman, ikaw ang alaga ko. Walang favorite na iba. (Is there anyone else? Of course, you're my alaga. There's no other favorite.) In other words, my love for Yaya Amy is reciprocated. But of course, I knew about that in more ways than one. For example, she was the one crying during my high school graduation and when I left for college, which is a contrast to my dry-eyed older brother.

I had no idea that thirty minutes passed by till I checked the timestamp on my iPhone's recording. Although I needed to leave for class and she needed to sleep for her early morning the next day, I desperately wanted to stay. I wanted to hear more about how things are at home from her perspective. As well, I wanted to tease her more on how Paul John and Paul George, her toddler twins, occupied her phone and started messaging me random things (which is the reason why this paper is turned in late). Alas, good things must come to an end eventually. But for now and forever, Amy Brellante is my Yaya and I'm her alaga.

\* \* \*

My Overall Feedback (not including in-text):  
*Thanks so much for your delightful paper, “The Yaya and Her Alaga.” I thought your introduction was lovely. You offer the reader first something we can all relate to (first word - mama) and second, your own different first word, Yaya. This single sentence does so much work - both inviting us in and urging us to learn about another way to think about kinship that blurs employee, companion and parent. Your connections to the readings are elegant and subtle - not taking away from your carefully crafted ethnography. Perhaps what I appreciated most were your thoughtful explorations of local concepts and how they helped you make sense of this fascinating kinship puzzle. I hope that you will share this elegant piece of writing with your Yaya! Excellent work!*

## Sample 2: The Nuances of Dowry: Analyzing an Anthropological Interview with My Father

My father is an Indian man in his late 40’s, balding considerably at the top. Several wrinkles are perpetually present on my father’s forehead, as if to indicate the depth by which he analyzes everything around him. While his body may be starting to show signs of aging, everything else about him reveals his youth. He plays tennis for several hours a day multiple times a week and loves working with his hands outdoors. I consider him one of the most open-minded adults I know, but perhaps most importantly, I consider him to be a rock of confidence amongst our extended circle of family and friends. He is a wise man whose advice always carries weight, and his word is respected no matter where he goes.

For this reason, I was surprised to hear my father’s initial reactions to doing this interview. When I asked my father if I could talk to him about his marriage and dowry, he made me promise that his answers would not be judged. As his son, it was clear from my initial conversation with him that he was worried I would view his answers as “unwestern,” but I reassured him that there were no wrong answers. Before even asking my first question, this exchange made it abundantly clear that arranged marriage and dowry were sensitive topics for my father, and that I would have to continually emphasize my cultural relativistic approach to him throughout the interview. To ensure his comfort, I conducted this interview over the phone with him in my apartment room.

My father began by explaining the process of finding his

wife (my mom). For him, his arranged marriage was a familial process, where “parents look out for girls in terms of color, how does she look, [and] physical appearances ... [and] then they look for economic status, to see if they are on par with us [my father’s family] or better than us”. Caste is also an important factor to consider, as my father emphasized to me multiple times that finding a partner “that fit into [his] social structure” was imperative. To find possible mates, my father had to “reach out to [a] friends and family network because there was no internet back then,” revealing how the process of first forming a new kinship bond involved numerous associates first screening through, and then approving, possible matches. After seeing just three other girls six months prior, my father met my mother with Govinda Reddy Nannamma (my uncle’s mother) acting as a liaison.

All of this I had already heard from my father and mother many years ago. I knew that their arranged marriage was a multi-step process that required authentication from several family members and friends. But what I did not know before this interview was that my paternal grandfather Aga Thatha had initially cast my mother’s dating bio sheet aside, even though both her and my father were from the same caste.

As I inquired my father about this further, the importance of socioeconomic status on arranged marriage became clear. Because of my maternal grandfather Sudhakar Thatha’s high socioeconomic status as a doctor, Aga Thatha had felt that this match would be too high for them. It is important to note that this difference in socioeconomic status was not large, as Aga Thatha was the head instructor at his school and informally considered to be the leader of his village; still, the difference was large enough in his eyes as to consider this match unattainable. My father did not agree with this judgment, and therefore decided to approach my mother and her parents himself. His strong educational background and likelihood of a successful future led Sudhakar Thatha to accept this match. In Andrea Wright’s ethnographic account Making Kin from Gold: Dowry, Gender, and Indian Labor Migration to the Gulf, marriage of women from lower socioeconomic status to men of higher status is shown to be a method of upwards mobility. In the case of my father, it seemed to be the opposite - by marrying upwards, my father was able to elevate himself to my mother’s economic level, even within the same caste. This flipped relationship of upwards mobility resulted in a contrast with Wright’s work in the way that my father’s family handled dowry.

In the several questions that I asked my father about dowry, it was clear that using that word was taboo. My father emphasized that they “didn’t call it [a] dowry” twenty years ago, but rather that they “called it a gift”. This is congruent with Wright’s account, where Indian “migrants did not regularly use the word dowry” but rather described it as a way to “help their sisters marry” (Wright 440).

Yet, the portrait Wright creates about dowry amongst Indian labor migrants does not seem nuanced enough to account for my father’s experiences. According to Wright, “men working in IT ... have seen the largest increase in the amount of dowry they are able to obtain” because of their ability to migrate to the United States (Wright 445). My father graduated from BITS Pilani, one of the top IT schools in India, before coming to America; however, he repeatedly argued that dowry was not a large factor for him in finding a partner. He told me that his criteria for marriage were that the “girl was reasonably good looking and the girl had a good education,” explaining further that “me and mommy never talked about dowry”. Placing Wright’s ethnography against my father’s words, a dichotomy appears between how dowry is expected to be exchanged and how the exchange actually happened for my father.

All of this is not to say that there was no talk regarding dowry before my father’s marriage. When I inquired about Aga Thatha and Nannamma’s (my paternal grandmother) beliefs about dowry, my father explained that he “wouldn’t say [expectations] were zero”. This was most clear when my father told me about Ada Pillalu Katnam, which is an extension of dowry where the bride’s family is expected to give some gift to all of the groom’s sisters. Though Aga Thatha had asked for two lakh (200,000) rupees for each of my father’s two sisters, Sudhakar Thatha said he would only give 1.5 lakh rupees for each. My father remembers that “there was some going back and forth” about this matter and that it “was a little bit sticky,” which is similar to what Wright describes happened with Asma’s marriage where “the dowry was ... openly negotiated” (Wright 447).

However, other than Ada Pillalu Katnam, my father’s dowry was quickly settled. Sudhakar Thatha had bought a plot of land several years prior and set it aside as the dowry for my mother’s marriage, and Aga Thatha unquestioningly accepted it. My mother’s brother, who was unmarried and working at an IT company at the time, had no part in helping fund the dowry. Unlike the migrant workers Wright interviewed who felt that “demands about the [dowry] ... seemed impossible ... to meet,” dowry in my father’s case had nothing to do with my mother’s brother (Wright 436).

My father’s case is a clear outlier of the many interviews Wright conducted in her research where dowry is seen as a burden and an unassailable nuptial factor. In my father’s eyes, “dowry, the name itself, has a negative meaning, but [the] intentions are in a good way.” Urging that both him and his parents were similar in this belief, he saw dowry as a gift for the benefit of the bride, who oftentimes in Indian culture is viewed to have separated from her blood family after marriage. My father told me that “every parent has the intention to put their child in a better place,” and that dowry is a way to start a newlywed couple on a path towards economic success.

Just as I look up to my father, my father sees my paternal grandfather as a “social reformer [who] wouldn’t mind not getting” a large dowry. According to my father, Aga Thatha showed this sense of compromise towards dowry by contributing 50,000 rupees each out of his own pocket to get the Ada Pillalu Katnam up to what he had wanted his daughters to have. Reflecting upon the economic exchange that took place during my father’s marriage, dowry seemed to me to be a kinship forming behavior just as Wright described it. But rather than be a burden and point of worry, dowry in my father’s marriage was a symbolic gift exchange, where the bride’s family gave a small portion of their wealth as a token for thanking the groom’s family for taking care of their daughter for the rest of her life. Whether my dad’s remark that his “case is a Disney movie and a good ending” only applies to him or not, simplifying dowry to be a forceful and unpleasant exchange as Wright sometimes does takes away from the power it holds in unifying families and creating meaningful, lasting, and mutually positive kinship bonds.

\* \* \*

My Overall Feedback (not including in-text):  
*Thanks so much for your thoughtful paper “The Nuances of Dowry.” Your paper flowed easily and elegantly interwove your ethnographic data with Wright’s work. Your sharp focus on marriage and dowry allowed for a deep exploration of how your father understood dowry as related to other themes such as reciprocity and kinship bonds. What I thought was particularly compelling about your essay was the extent to which you were able to compare and contrast your own ethnographic data with Wright’s. I think she would be incredibly impressed with the way in which you at times aligned your data with hers and at other times, pointed out the differences. If you had more time to work on this paper, you might even make a conjecture as to why your and Wright’s findings diverged. Your paper is an exemplification of what we try to accomplish in anthropology. Wonderful work!*

## Zongo Story Project

Sample Activities:

### My World Exercise

*Prompt:* Draw a world for your story. What is the name of your world? Who lives there? What kinds of objects do you find there? What does it feel like? What happens in it? (See bottom left.)

### Interacting Characters Exercise

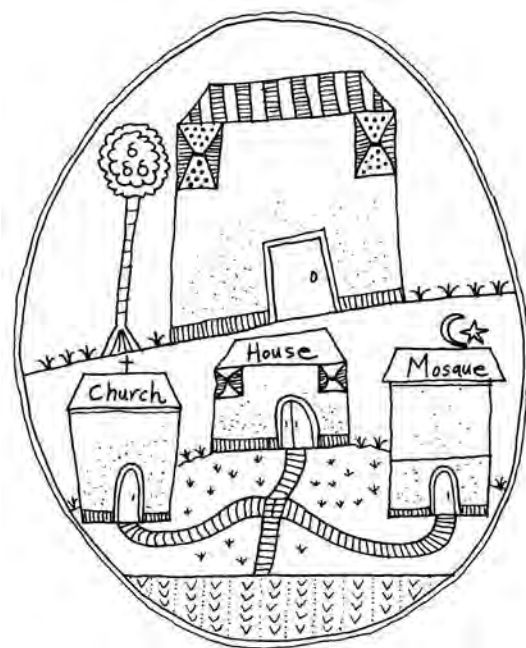
*Prompt:* If a beautiful bird met a jealous cow ... What do you think would happen? (See immediate right.)

### About My Character Exercise

*Prompt:* What is your character's name? What does your character look like? How does your character behave? What does your character like to do? What are their dreams? (See far right.)

### What if... Exercise

*Prompt:* Prepare and Write a Skit about what happens when a thirsty monster comes to Nima. (See far right.)



## Beauty and Jealous Cow

Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful bird called Beauty. Everyday Beauty would wake up and get out of bed. She would take her bath. She would put on glamorous clothes and go for a walk. When she would come back, she would toast some bread and butter in a frying pan. Afterwards, she would eat some grapes. She was beautiful, but she was also lonely. She wanted a friend. Sometimes, she would go into town looking for a friend. People would point at her saying, "That bird, she is so beautiful!" But, she had still not found a good friend who cared about her.

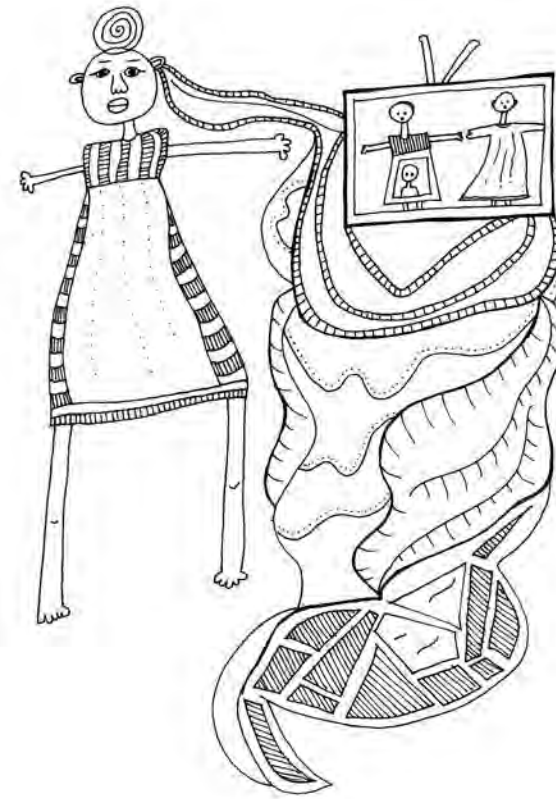
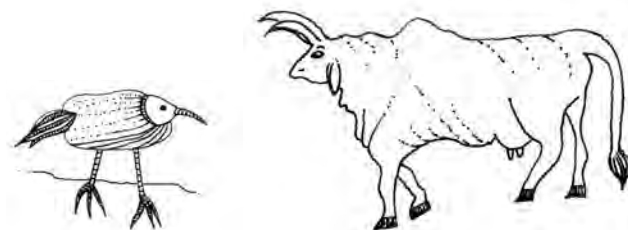
One day on her walk into town, she saw Jealous Cow. Cow looked at her scornfully and said, "You are a very ugly bird. I am so much more beautiful than you." The bird felt sad, but she did not say a word. It was the first time someone had told her she was not beautiful. The bird went quietly home.

Meanwhile, Jealous Cow knew how beautiful Beauty was. She wanted to beautiful like her. Cow got an idea. She went to the market and saw some beautiful feathers. They were just like Beauty's feathers – light, fluffy and so many colors. Cow bought all of them.

In the morning, Cow super-glued the feathers to her body and walked proudly into town. All of the people in town were cheering for Cow. But inside their hearts, they were laughing, "How funny she looks!," they thought. As Cow was walking home, she saw Beauty on the road. Cow said scornfully, "You are ugly! Look how beautiful I am!" This time Beauty was not silent. She told Cow how she was feeling. She said, "Cow, I feel sad when you call me ugly. And you know something? You do not need to dress like me to be beautiful. There is no need to be jealous. You are a cow and I am a bird. We are different, that is all."

Cow looked at the ground shyly and responded, "Beauty, you are right. I am sorry." Beauty happily jumped on the cow's back. They lived together happily ever after. Beauty had found a true friend.

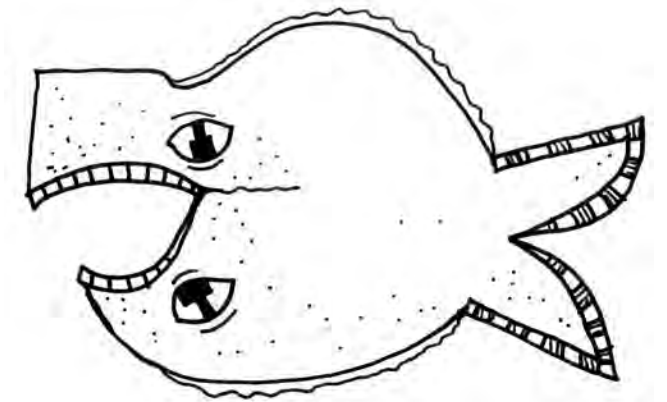
This is why today, you always see birds sitting on cows' backs.



They jumped on his belly. All of the dirty water poured out of his mouth and back into the gutter.

Finally, they had their water back, but it was still dirty. Hajia Hadiza taught them how to keep their water clean.

The people of Nima became free from monsters and dirty water forever!



## The Thirsty Monster of Nima

Once upon a time, there lived a terrifying monster who lived in Nima. Everyday, he would gulp down the dirty water from the gutter. He didn't care if rubbish, goats, cows, or even people got stuck between his big, pointy teeth.

One day, the monster was seriously thirsty. As the monster started drinking, his actions brought about a fight with the people of Nima. They were tired of his disrespectful behavior. They started slapping him and throwing stones at the monster. He ignored them and drank all of their water. The people were very upset. "His actions have to stop!," they cried out. Led by seamstress Hajia Hadiza, the people of Nima made a plan. They sewed a big net.

At dawn, Hajia Hadiza and her people gathered at the cave in Maamobi where the monster lived. Hajia Hadiza pretended to scream in order to get the monster's attention. "Eeeeeeeeeeel," she cried out. The monster thought a second monster had come to Nima. He became jealous and so came out of his cave to fight the enemy.

The people caught him with their big net. Next, they dragged his enormous body to the gutter.

