Chapter 5

MONEY, MATERIALITY AND IMAGINATION:
LIFE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF VALUE

Andrew Irving

The transformation of waste is perhaps the oldest pre-occupation of man. Man being the chosen alloy, he must be reconnected – via shit, at all cost. Inherent with(in) us is the dream of the task of the alchemist To create from the clay of man, And to re-create from excretion of man pure and then soft and then solid gold

The Patti Smith Group
25th Floor (& High on Rebellion)

Beginnings

From a distance it may seem that the dialogue between money and imagination is located in mind, consciousness and cognitive capacity rather than materiality and body. Indeed, the material body of money is seen as less important than the semiotic value attached to certain objects by way of the brain’s ability to invest substance with meaning and purpose. ‘Money’ – suggests Norman O. Brown – ‘is inorganic dead matter which has been made alive’ (1970 [1959]:245). The discarded bodies of different material substances, often with little practical utility, such as clay, shells, teeth, stones, paper and beads are brought to life by the capacity to reimagine these materials and accord them the status of being valuable. This presupposes a faith in substance, as well
as society, best summarized by Santayana’s discrimination between an object’s essential properties that exist independent of perception (*existents*) and those attributed by the human mind (*subsistents*). As we can never be certain the attributed essence inheres in the object itself – whether it is worthless or not – doubt and scepticism emerge; but this uncertainty is balanced by the type of pragmatic ‘animal faith’ that is necessary to live, act and survive in the world. For Santayana:

> All knowledge, being faith in an object posited and partially described, is belief in substance, in the etymological sense of this word; it is a belief in a thing or an event subsisting in its own plane, and waiting for the light of knowledge to explore it eventually, and perhaps name or define it.

(1955 [1923]:182)

Once named in this way, money (as Simmel observed) reflects and encourages a type of thinking based in both substance and sign, i.e., in objective materiality and mental abstraction. It is an impersonal, quantitative thinking that promotes strategic rationalities to temper ‘excessive’ bodily appetites in favour of accumulating a socially significant material that for most practical purposes is worthless. Money, rather than being the ultimate expression of secular reason and rationality, thus requires faith and imagination; which is to say money is fundamentally *religious* not simply in its origins but in its subsequent incarnations (Brown 1970).

The transubstantiation of matter into money involves the same capacity by which objects are transformed into art; namely the imaginative capacity to invest meaning into materiality and gain a value exceeding the raw substance it is made from, as in Duchamp’s outrageous conversion of industrially manufactured urinals into art. For Sartre, all art involves such imaginative transubstantiations, which are not simply variants of thought or perception but are distinct forms of consciousness encompassing both the act of imagining and the imagined world brought into being:

> When I look at a drawing I posit in that very look a world of human intentions of which that drawing is a product [and for] the image to appear, the cooperation of my consciousness is necessary, but the artist knows this, counts on it; the artist solicits this cooperation. (Sartre 2004 [1940]:35).

Money too requires the cooperation of different consciousnesses to assign shared value to certain material forms. This does not mean all people ascribe the same status to money – for monetary value is constituted by the play and differences between objects and signs – but
nevertheless it requires a shared social context within which relative values are negotiated. It combines animal faith (pragmatism) with religiosity (animism) to ascribe subsistent social and moral values that are not inherent in the substance itself (e.g., ‘as good as gold’). Money, as suggested by John Locke, can thus be understood as an aggregation of mind, materiality and society whereby humankind ‘consents to put an imaginary value upon gold and silver’ (Locke quoted in Brown 1970:218, original italics). Consequently money cannot be understood by only analysing the visible realms of material social exchange but requires an investigation into the human capacity to imagine worth and assign value.

Money might be invisible because we may not have any of it but also because there is no independent, objective access to a person’s mind or imaginary to see how value is attached to certain substances. We observe practices of exchange and theorise how these might condense, displace, substitute and sublimate meanings, but no matter how sophisticated the divinatory techniques and theoretical models, the animating capacities of imagination remain beyond vision. When we actually see money being exchanged it soon disappears into pockets and banks and enters a deferred system where there is no ultimate object of guaranteed worth, no gold standard: simply an endless exchange of abstract signs. And even when money is exchanged for an object, its ‘existence as a material thing is put out of sight’ (Marx 1999:15):

[A commodity] must quit its bodily shape, must transform itself from mere imaginary into real gold, although to the commodity such transubstantiation may be more difficult than to the Hegelian ‘concept’, the transition from ‘necessity’ to ‘freedom’, or to a lobster the casting of his shell, or to Saint Jerome the putting off of the old Adam. (1999 [1867]:63)

It seems however one conceptualizes it money is unsightly and of late increasingly lacks conventional material forms. However, whenever we try to reconcile visible practices of exchange with the invisible, interior world of intentions and imagination that bring money to life, we have no direct access to mind and brain, only indirect access, for example, through speech, brain-imaging and fMRI scans.

Complexities of Mind and Money

The complexities of mind are such that Locke, Hegel and Collingwood offer a line of philosophical thought whereby the impossibility of
defining what mind is has shifted the focus from definition to function by not asking what mind is but rather observing what mind does. This removes us from presupposing an essence and ontology of human thinking and instead invites an investigation into observable action. Such a study of mind involves two methodological renunciations:

First, it renounces with Locke all ‘science of substance’. It does not ask what mind is; it asks only what mind does ... Secondly, it renounces all attempt to discover what mind always and everywhere does, and asks only what mind has done on certain definite occasions (Collingwood: 1992 [1942]:61 italics in original).

When Locke extended his analysis from mind to money, he sided against ascribing an essential materiality to money and argued that its substantive form was irrelevant. The nineteenth-century economist Francis Walker applied Locke’s reasoning by arguing that social theorists need not investigate the ontology of money because ‘money is what money does’, which is serve as ‘a medium of exchange, store of value, means of unilateral payment (settlement), and measure of value (unit of account)’ (Ingham 2004:19). Walker is clearly not trying to get inside people’s heads and instead observes the monetary practices that happen outside them, thus avoiding the thorny problem of understanding people’s motivations and desires. By doing so Walker set the tone for economists and sociologists to abandon the complex metaphysics of mind and money by reducing people’s actions to simple descriptions of function (Ingham 2004). Monetary value here is seen as self-evident: a substance that can be exchanged, stored and whose meaning is negotiated between rational humans. However, as with most functionalist explanations, this leaves many essential questions unanswered and necessitates that we go beyond assumptions of universal rationality insofar as human ‘nature’ always amounts to more than acts of reason alone, as Charles Taylor affirms:

Man as a living being is not radically different from other animals, but at the same time he is not just an animal plus reason, he is a quite new totality; and that means that he has to be understood on quite different principles. (1979:19)

Psychoanalysis promises an alternative method for digging beneath observable, public behaviours to uncover the unconscious motivations and desires of the person. Here, attachments to money and/or goods are rarely seen as acts of rational calculation and utilitarian interest but are symptomatic of deep-seated insecurities and irrationalities rooted in the human condition. To be human is to be unfinished, incomplete
and to be implicated in a series of irresolvable paradoxes (e.g. Self/Other; Id/Ego, Life/Death) that are expressed through symbolic social acts, including accumulation, spending and exchange. However, while people’s behaviours and attitudes towards money take a social form, they cannot be judged in terms of society’s own standards as these are symptomatic of the exact same problem. Instead a person’s relationship to money is taken to represent a universal, existential unease and discontent, variably expressed through a range of identifiable, often unhealthy, obsessive or irrational behaviours.

Like all signs, money is neither neutral nor objective as it is understood within a specific interpretative framework. When we encounter contexts where the polysemy of a sign is reduced to a dominant interpretation, we must look at the power operating behind it, be that social, political or economic (Volosinov 1973). Although in theory a sign possesses multiple meanings, in practice it tends to coalesce around certain interpretations whereby Western perspectives are universalized (Crapanzano 1992). The meaning of money in psychoanalytic and economic theory – including the two different faces of desire, the rational and irrational – often betrays a universalization of Western values that is of limited use for understanding money in a global context.\(^1\) This does not make Western interpretations about money wrong but it does make them socio-historical, and reveals more about certain disciplinary presuppositions than an understanding of human beings per se. Characteristically, Nietzsche warned against such over-generalizations by declaring: ‘I mistrust all systematisers and avoid them. The will to a system is a lack of integrity’ (1990 [1888]: 35). But if integrity cannot be found in systematization, is it any more likely to be found in the biography of a specific body? The scale of such a task is substantial in that one must first reclaim people’s bodies from universal abstraction and then recast the relationship between body and money through an ethnography of particular life stories and bodily experiences, in their daily phenomenological and existential realities.

Money, Materiality and Imagination

The material effects of living with disease without any money are made explicit in the bodies and imaginations of HIV+ persons who are unable to access antiretroviral medications because of their economic position, ethnicity and national identity. There are estimated to be more than forty million HIV+ persons worldwide (UNAIDS 2006). For every person infected there are tens, even hundreds, of others,
including children, spouses, family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, neighbours and medical staff, whose lives are affected on a daily basis, thereby forming a massive population of infected and affected persons that crosses genders, religions and cultures, and constitutes a large proportion of the entire global population.

In Western countries antiretroviral medications have stabilized people’s health by increasing their immunity and t-cell count, staving off infections and reducing the viral load in the blood. When used in combination, antiretrovirals can markedly reduce the virus’s effects and have opened time and space for hundreds of thousands of people, triggering a massive shift of consciousness, body and emotion away from death and back toward life. People and their families are learning how to ‘live’ again. However many people find it impossible to return to their previous lives and are now living with irreversible decisions and medical side-effects, and having lived under the shadow of death are now questioning how to forge a future. In contrast to the West, throughout most of the world, including Africa, many people are unable to access antiretrovirals and are dying from treatable opportunistic infections. People experience illness and anticipate death knowing about life-saving medications, freely available in the West, that are restricted through their ethnicity and economic status. Accordingly, the advent of antiretrovirals in the late 1990s has fundamentally altered and exacerbated differences between persons, illustrating how experiences of HIV/AIDS cannot be understood unless placed in a global comparative context.

HIV/AIDS is now often called a chronic rather than acute disease in that access to medication allows for long-term living. However, for many of the world’s citizens HIV/AIDS betrays a different meaning of ‘chronic’, namely chronic inequality and a chronic lack of money. More accurately HIV/AIDS should perhaps be referred to as a critical disease insofar as it not only places much of the world’s population into crisis but current mortality rates offer a critical perspective upon global-political inequality. It is critical because it makes visible the presuppositions about the relative value of life in wealthy and non-wealthy countries. It is critical because it exposes the historical relationship between money and people’s bodies whereby life in Africa, Asia and South America is devalued and people’s daily experiences of suffering are largely rendered invisible. Most critically of all, the story of impoverished people living with HIV rarely ends with their death but continues through their children who are often denied an education through a lack of school fees, thus emphasizing the intergenerational effects of a disease responsible for the continual severing of familial relationships – between parents and children, husbands and wives,
brothers and sisters, friends and friends, and also between the rich and the poor – that is occurring on a massive scale throughout the world.

What follows is just a single familial severing from Africa, presented in the form of a collaborative visual ethnography. The location is Kampala, Uganda, where one out of ten people lives with HIV/AIDS and it affects almost every family. I got to know the family, Yudaya Nassiswa and her four children, in the 1990s. Yudaya’s husband was a wealthy man who worked in the Ministry of Finance and had three wives who lived with him in a large rented house. The house was full of life, as the husband, the three wives and all the children lived there together. However, by 1993 Yudaya’s husband and both her co-wives had all died from AIDS. Yudaya was herself infected, struggles with illness and has no real independent income, so after her husband died she had to leave the house and now lives in a mud-brick house with no water or electricity, that consists of a living room and one bedroom that they all sleep in. Here follows a brief description of Yudaya’s circumstances during the late 1990s taken from a piece published in 2005 (Irving 2005:322).

Yudaya frequently suffers opportunistic infections and last Christmas had her first ominous bout of tuberculosis, which is morbidly significant in Uganda where it is the main cause of death amongst HIV+ persons. That Yudaya fell sick at Christmas was hugely significant for her and the children, not because Yudaya, although born into Islam, raised her family as Christians, but because her husband died on December 25th. Moreover, in Uganda children are present to most that life offers and get caught up in the voluminous atmosphere whenever there is a dying person in the house.

Every Christmas the atmosphere in Yudaya’s house is thick with memories of her husband’s illness and death. This last Christmas was even worse as Yudaya’s tubercular breathing mixed with her children’s anxieties about the future. The suffering and uncertainty caused by HIV/AIDS has a ‘volume’ that extends out from the person and fills up the entire house and seeps out into the neighbourhood. If you ask Yudaya’s children they will tell you how it felt to dwell in the midst of their father’s death; they’ll talk about how this atmosphere descends every Christmas and how this last Christmas they kept imagining their mother’s impending death. They’ll tell you they are worried about the future, about who will look after them and remind you how two of them have stopped attending school because of lack of money. They will talk about how they thought they were going to be orphans with no one to pay their school fees, and about their relief once their mother began to pull through. Now all the children hate Christmas.

The family home looks like many houses in Kampala. It is built from the same earth that it stands on. The earth is scooped up, mixed with straw, stones and water and moulded into large bricks fired in neighbourhood kilns. Wood and mud-plaster are added, while the ground from which the
bricks were extracted creates a compact floor alongside the characteristic trenches found outside people’s houses. Yudaya did not do the work herself but it is tangibly her place – a house mixed out of earth, straw and personal history – and that wouldn’t exist without Yudaya or her husband’s death from AIDS. The house is just two rooms with no electricity. Water is fetched from the public tap and boiled on an open charcoal fire. The mud-plaster walls are covered by children’s drawings, magazine pictures, old newspapers and Manchester United posters. Three beds take up all the space alongside everyone’s shoes and clothes. Round the back is the vegetable plot, where Yudaya grows sweet-potatoes, matoke, yams and other staples to feed the family. It used to be a wilderness but when Yudaya is well enough she makes an effort, and so do the children. Together they get by.

Yudaya’s children were young in the 1990s but by the time I returned to Uganda in 2004 her two sons Denis and Jeremiah had grown tall and at fifteen and seventeen were on the verge of adulthood. No longer in primary school, they were attending the secondary school and venturing out into the world, which necessitated a very different type of relationship not just with their mother and the local community but also with myself. Denis and Jeremiah told me how life had been a constant struggle for their mother to raise four children alone with no husband, little money and amidst frequent episodes of illness. They were too young to remember their father or the large house they lived in as infants and instead had spent their entire remembered life in the unfinished mud-brick house. Despite never knowing their father, he remains a dominant presence in their life, who reinforces his presence through his absence and non-appearance (Sartre 1996 [1943]:277–80). In death their father’s absent presence is reiterated by things such as a lack of financial support and his not being around to give advice or teach the boys football. However, perhaps the most constant mnemonic is the family’s mud-brick house insofar as it has no electricity, no television, no cooking facilities and the family has to walk to the well to collect water.

What follows is a collaborative visual ethnography of the imaginative worlds that Denis and Jeremiah inhabit as a consequence of their father’s death and impoverished circumstances. It attempts to do justice not only to the material facts of life – the lack of money and materiality – but the imaginative processes against which that life is understood, framed and interpreted. The radical disjuncture between the actual life a person lives and the multiple possible lives they can imagine living were it not for the contingencies of existence, is constantly made explicit by the family’s impoverished circumstances and the types of everyday practice that comprise their daily life. With no money or sense of what the future will bring, Denis and Jeremiah
imagine their life of poverty against the more comfortable, stable existence they would have lived but for their father’s death, recalling Clifford Geertz’ assertion that ‘One of the most significant facts about us, is that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end up in the end having only lived one’ (1973:45). Representing the relationship between the two lives – the one they could have lived and the one they ended up living – presents a series of epistemological and methodological problems, best addressed through a collaborative ethnography that allows people to represent their selves in the manner of their own choosing. To this end I trained Denis and Jeremiah in how to use a basic Digital Video Camera and the essential techniques, conventional framings, narrative devices and so forth that are used in ethnographic film. I explained that they would need to edit ‘in camera’ rather than using an editing suite or programme; that is to say they would be telling their story using a straightforward linear chronology of events in the same order they were filmed rather than employing non-linear approach whereby the story is constructed through editing. We spent a few days working out the main ideas and practicing, with the aim that the boys would then take full control of the filming and choice of subject matter. Once we had discussed the main ideas and they were technically competent I was not involved in the development of the film or present during the filming.

Growing up without electricity and never having owned a television, let alone used a video camera, and editing in camera, the boys produced an extraordinary hour-long film. The film represents a day in the life of them and their family. It is not just any ordinary day but Christmas Day, the day that their father died and which perhaps more than any other day of the year exposes the alternative life trajectory they could have lived. Denis and Jeremiah begin the film by visiting their auntie who is also HIV+ but lives in a house with electricity, lights and music. Then they return to their own home to give us a sense of how Christmas day is lived there, and interview their mother and older sister about the difference between Christmas day as they spend it now and how they used to spend it when their father was alive. They ask their mother to describe the house where they used to live; and once they have constructed a mental image of the house, they journey to the house and film the garden where they would have been spending Christmas Day were it not for the contingency of their father’s death. Then to finish they return back to their own house and film an extended interview with their mother, Yudaya, about the personality of their father and the circumstances and consequences of his death, including most significantly Yudaya’s infection and the day of her HIV test when she found out she was HIV+.
My name is Denis Bete, son of Yudaya. I am the third-born in Yudaya’s family. I would like to share with you some views about AIDS and what it has done to our family. Right now, we are going to the home of our auntie, the sister of our mum. Let’s go inside. That’s their sitting room. They are lucky, they have electricity. They watch TV. They have a radio. The big boy is preparing for lunch. It is their lunchtime. That’s the aunt we have been telling you about, the sister to our mum. Auntie is also HIV+. The child who you can see sleeping is sick. She is the daughter to our auntie and is also HIV+. Auntie brings drinks for her daughter. She is saying ‘wake up, wake up, have a drink’. Auntie, how old is she? [Auntie replies 12] And which class is she? [Auntie replies Primary 6]. And so now we are in Auntie’s bedroom. You see, her husband had two wives. Can you imagine! Two wives staying in one house! The husband died, also of HIV. But they never realized when he was living that he was HIV+. They thought that people were bewitching him. They never got a message from him that he was HIV+.
Scene Two: Remembering Christmas Day

Mum, Mum. How did we use to spend Christmas when our dad was alive?

By this time we used to be having a drink.

You mean you didn’t have to work on Christmas Day?

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

Our big sister Diana is preparing today’s meal. Ahh, Diana. What are you cooking?
Diana: This is meat for Christmas.
Denis: Eh! That’s a surprise! What do you remember about this day Christmas?
Diana: Our dad used to take us out. We used to have sodas, but now Mummy cannot afford so we are just here at home. Our dad used to take us out to the beach, but now we are going to just eat and sleep. We used to get new clothes.
Denis: Can you remember where we lived when we were still young?
Diana: Yes I can still remember, it was before the floods.
Denis: About the house, when you compare the other house with this one. Which one is better?

Figure 5.4:

Diana: The other one. It was self-contained, it had a bathroom, a kitchen, we used to cook inside the house but now we cook outside. I used to have my own room, even Mummy and Daddy had their own room. But now in this house, we all live in one room.
Denis: The other one had power and electricity or not?
Diana: Yes, we had electricity. We used to own a TV. We were watching good movies. But now we are without electricity.
Denis: What about the compound?
Diana: The compound was very nice. We had a garden, flowers.
Denis: So it really was an admirable house?
Diana: Yes
Denis and Jeremiah travel to the other house

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

Scene Three: Back Home

Figure 5.5:

Figure 5.6:
Jeremiah  So, we have returned to where we live from the other house where we used to stay. There you can see Denis. You can see Denis is very tired.

Mum  Welcome back Denis and Jeremiah!

Mum  How was your journey?

Denis  It was … the house looks so nice!

Mum  Jeremiah, have you seen it?

Jeremiah  Yes, nice house.

Denis  Yes, yes. Very nice.

Mum  Very nice.

Denis  Yes, I wish I was there.

Mum  You were there when you were young.

Denis  I cannot recall. When was it? I can’t remember.

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

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

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

Figure 5.7:

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

Mum  Yes I will. I’m not going to die, Denis. I’m not going to die.

Denis  Let’s assume. Let’s assume.

Mum  I will, I will, I will. You never know, I might get friends to help me. I might get money. You never know. Did you know that I was going to live this long?
Denis  About our father. Can you recall what our Dad liked to be? What things would happen if our father was still alive?
Mum  He had a car. He would drive you around. He had many, many things. But I am wondering. Are you good at playing football?
Denis  Of course!
Mum  Well, he had plans for you. Whenever he was looking at you, it was as if you were the only boy he had, even though he also had elder boys! He was encouraging me to have more children. I would have stopped at your sisters, Diana and Victoria. But he liked children. When I was in hospital after giving birth to you, you could see him happy, you could see him driving, bringing me all sorts of things and meat for the baby. People would look at me in the hospital. I was among the big ladies in the hospital! As if the wife of a minister he used to pay a private room for me. I was a big woman there! [Laughs] Ooh, those days!
Denis  And about this lifetime which we are now?
Mum  This life time? I can’t say much.
Denis  Do you think that our Daddy wished to be here with us in this life?
Mum  If he can see it. If it is true he is down under the ground watching us, he is crying.

Figure 5.8:

He’s regretting. You know why? He left us in a house which wasn’t his own. You saw the house ... it wasn’t like this one. It had a kitchen and the toilet was inside. Your Daddy was working in the government. He never ever thought about this life we are living now. He was only thinking about the other life. Your Daddy was an old man. He was not of my age but he was alive ... he had money – whereas now here we are staying here! This one! I’m sure it would be different if he was still around. I wonder where right now would we be?
Scene Four: The HIV Test

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

Figure 5.9:

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

Denis Did you realise before that you might be HIV+?

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

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

Mum It was the blackest, darkest day. The year was 1991. OK, the first day they took my blood and then after two weeks I had to go back for the results. But in those two weeks I had already lost 5 kilograms by the time I had to go back to collect my results. After leaving the room, I cried all the way back to our house.

Denis I can remember that.

Mum You remember?
When you came in the bedroom and you covered yourself.

Ah, yes, you know the things.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It's because you are sick

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

Denis and Jeremiah’s words and images reveal just how different their life would have been had their father remained alive; they draw attention to the fact that there is no such thing as a pure life experience, only experiences that are imagined in relation to the other possible lives one could have lived. By representing themselves in the manner of their own choosing and by comparing and exposing the radical discrepancy between their actual and possible life trajectories they call attention to how the contingencies of being are experienced and played out within a particular social and practical context. The alternative, imagined life they could have lived offers a type of ever-present moral framework for interpreting their current life circumstances and understanding how their father’s death affects not just their past but also their future. As such, imaginative life-narratives are not abstract or wishful fantasies but are constitutive of people’s material lives, embodied experiences and being-in-the-world. This means that
rather than thinking of a person’s life biography as possessing an essential, factual content and material and social context, for a true understanding of their circumstances it is necessary to take account of the lives of the imagination that they reconstruct on a daily basis, alongside the accompanying emotions and actions. Moments of crisis, such as illness, disruption or death often create the circumstances for reflecting upon and seeing beyond conventional surroundings to other worlds and lives. By recognizing the contingency of one’s situation and what may seem as constituting a fixed material and ontological reality, people are able to creatively reimagine the world through acts of the imagination that defy determination.

Throughout Western history the imagination has been seen as a threat to reason, rationality and certainty due its ability to transform objective reality, not to mention its enduring association with the unreal, material alchemy, the fantastical, the primitive and the oriental (Casey 1991). The imagination’s surpassing of social, cultural and other institutional categories presents a serious problem for social-scientific epistemologies and methods and it is neither coincidental nor innocent, therefore, that the imagination, like consciousness itself, is often actively excluded within social science. Interior perceptions are understood as the property of singular subjectivities and are seen as too ephemeral or unreliable to be accorded wider validity by external, third-party observation. The imagination is defined as ‘immaterial’ and subordinated to scientific abstractions that are no less immaterial but bolstered by the strategic use of metaphorical language such as ‘structure’, ‘context’, and ‘habitus’.

I would argue, following Vincent Crapanzano (2004) and Iain Edgar (2004), that to be concerned with the imagination is not to be concerned with the ephemeral, the intangible or the immaterial but to take seriously a much neglected aspect of the human experience that is constitutive of body, action and practice. It is especially interesting that the imagination has rarely been linked to the body, except indirectly through things such as desire, fetish and sublimation. Even Sartre’s sustained exploration of how mundane everyday experiences are mediated through the imagination (1996, 2004) largely locates the imaginary in mental activity rather than the body. However, if we trace the etymology of imagination back we see that the Latin words *imago* and *imaginem* derive from *imato*, to copy or imitate, linking the imagination to notions of *mimesis*, *mimos* and *mime* which are bodily movements and practices. This suggests that in its originary meaning the imagination was already, in part, a physical, bodily phenomenon located in action, mime and dance, which involved transformations and exchanges of meaning through bodily movement. And just as mime occupies a physical volume that extends out from the body into the
world, one might suggest that people’s embodied imaginations extend out into the world where they become intertwined with a global and cosmopolitan imaginary. It is precisely this capacity of imaginative acts to transcend social contexts and national boundaries by acting through the body and into the world that creates lived possibilities and meanings. As such a person’s body becomes the means by which they are linked to the outside world and through which imaginative and existential possibilities are made material.

The radical disjuncture between Denis and Jeremiah’s lived circumstances and the alternative life trajectories they creatively imagine, reveals an existential relationship between contingency and one’s fundamental being and place in the world. The first, and often most enduring, contingency is birth itself, especially the ethnicity and economic status of one’s parents, the country of birth and its position in the global-political economy. There is no necessary ontological relationship between land and the value of life – in fact it is a completely arbitrary relation – but in the current global-political climate a strong correlation between national identity and the value of life is actively maintained through an erroneous, yet politically powerful, pathological identification of a human being’s worth with the land where they (or their ancestors) were born.

Without money those born on African soil are often unable to afford life-saving antiretroviral medications that are freely available in the West. There are currently estimated to be more than twenty-five million persons living with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa (63 per cent of all persons infected worldwide), with an estimated 2.8 million adults and children becoming infected in the region in 2006 (UNAIDS 2006). Antiretroviral medications cost little to manufacture and yet are sold at hugely inflated prices. Although there are more than forty million HIV+ persons worldwide, only a small proportion currently receives treatment. Many families confront illness and death in the knowledge of a ‘cure’ that is freely available elsewhere in the world but that is denied to them. As such, many Africans are able to imagine the healthy life that they would be leading were it not for the land of their birth, their national identity and their marginal economic position, but they are unable to live that life. This means that while people’s imaginations can transcend social, economic and national borders so as to imagine a healthy life in the West, their bodies cannot, for they are designated as waste, thereby denying the originary etymology of imagination whereby body and psyche are linked in mimesis and movement. Here, the fear of touching the diseased or economically impoverished body extends out into the topography of the world and is translated into international boundaries and borders designed to
allow money and certain goods to cross but prevent bodily movement, well-being and health.

The possibility or denial of movement across national and economic borders reveals how different institutional regimens ascribe a particular classificatory status to people’s bodies alongside a specific moral, political and economic relationship to the land. While the impoverished, unmonied individual is fixed to their terrain and bounded by national and economic borders, the healthy, economically viable world citizen glides over space and transcends national and classificatory borders with relative ease. Movement, identity and economic status thus represent the iconic modes through which individuals and groups become known and defined. The control over how, where and when one moves reflects who you are and is enforced through a nexus of political power, economic impoverishment and ethnic categorization that determine the relative status and value of the person (Rossi 2009).

Unfortunately, a further consequence is that it is not just identities that are mapped onto land but people’s capacity for enduring suffering. Suffering, like the imagination, is rarely confined within an individual body but extends into the lives of families and communities. Institutional attempts are made to contain suffering within national, ethnic and economic borders and thereby limit the chances of witnessing or being contaminated by the economically unviable or suffering body. This legally enforced restriction of movement among impoverished people provides a macabre twist to Marx’s comments on the relation between the earth, imagination and value:

The idea of value is not only completely obliterated, but actually reversed. It is an expression as imaginary as the value of the earth. These imaginary expressions, arise, however, from the relations of production themselves. (1999:310)

I would argue this reversal of value actually represents a confusion of relations, not only between the material and the imaginary (which I hope to have shown are in part mutually constituted), but between the moral values accorded to different bodies, namely the living human body and the discarded, deathly body of money. Such a drastic reversal, whereby living bodies are accorded a lesser value than excess profit, is symptomatic of a deep uncertainty, where belief in the substance of money is taken as self-evident and the value inherent in the living, corporeal body is called into question. It is a confusion of the inanimate over the animate, of death over life, of prestige over humanity that presents itself as a misunderstanding between the
body of money and the body of persons, resulting in unequal access to bodily health.

**Conclusion: A Life on the Other Side of Value**

This chapter presents a deathly confusion between the body of money and the body of persons, as mediated via contemporary political conditions where the contingency of birth and identity is perpetuated through unequal health and the incessant severing of family relationships. It reveals how the relations between the body and money is formulated in the current moment whereby African families can imagine a life of health elsewhere but whose bodies are devalued and whose suffering remains mostly absent within global policy. It is a highly polythetic absence, which encompasses the absence of medication, the absence of money and an absence pertaining to the value of African lives. It is instructive therefore that humankind is characterized by Nietzsche as ‘an animal that can promise’, for money is itself a promissory note and the capacity to promise always implies the capacity for lying and deceit. The often empty promises and lack of sustained commitment by the international community to effect any lasting change on poverty, health and inequality can be juxtaposed with every single instance of familial severance to tell another story. The bodily needs and desires of families seeking health are subordinated to an irrational faith in accumulating excessive profit. Tellingly, Norman O. Brown argues that ‘the morbid attempt to get away from the body can only result in a morbid fascination (erotic cathexis) in the death of the body’ (1970:257). For Brown:

> The desire for money takes the place of all genuinely human needs. Thus the apparent accumulation of wealth is really the impoverishment of human nature, and its appropriate morality is the renunciation of human nature and desires-asceticism. The effect is to substitute an abstraction, *homo economicus*, for the concrete totality of human nature, and thus to dehumanise human nature. In this dehumanised human nature man loses contact with his own body, more specifically with his senses (ibid.:211).

Consequently,

> What the elegant laws of supply and demand really describe is the antics of an animal which has confused excrement with aliment and does not know it, and which like infantile sexuality, pursues no ‘real aim’. Having no real aim, acquisitiveness, as Aristotle correctly said, has no limit. Hence the psychological premise of a market economy is not, as in classical theory
of exchange, that the agents know what they want, but that they do not know what they want. (ibid.:227)

Here lies a confused uncertainty and misunderstanding about the moral status of material substances that is played out with tragic consequences across a world in which human beings are surplus: unnecessary and unneeded, and certain types of human body are accorded the status of waste, of excrement, of shit.

Denis and Jeremiah’s film bears poetic witness to life on the other side of value. Their images and personal narratives negotiate the complex tension between an exploration of their social and existential circumstances and a critical statement on the contingency of illness and suffering. Their family’s story – one of millions across Africa – simultaneously transcends and exaggerates the social and cultural borders between the West and non-West. Here, following Levinas’s elaborated sense of our ethical responsibility for other persons, I would argue that (like national and epistemological borders) these borders can be a rich source of interaction and understanding rather than simply being seen as barriers to knowledge or action. This creates a type of awareness and appreciation that cannot be defined in terms of objective rational truth or shared, hermeneutic understanding but nevertheless offers a basis for engaging with, learning about and responding to the experiences of other people. The sharing of life that occurs in Denis and Jeremiah’s film is a step towards recognizing, reorganizing and securing the rights of others. However, as their representation of life on the other side of value demonstrates, it is not simply a case of making visible experiences of illness, suffering and poverty but also their contingency.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost my thanks go to Yudaya, Denis, Jeremiah, Diana and Victoria, without whom this chapter would never have been possible. I would also like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for funding both the original and subsequent research; Sarah Green and the Centre for Research and Economic Change (CRESC) for inviting me to think about these themes and present an earlier version of this essay accompanied by the film at the Money, Location and Visibility conference hosted by CRESC at the University of Manchester in March 2007; the Concordia Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies, at Concordia University, Montreal, for offering a welcoming and stimulating environment for writing up this piece in May 2007; and the Uganda Nation Council of Science and Technology and the
Office of the President for their assistance and support in carrying out this research.

Note

1. Voltaire suggested that ‘when it’s a question of money, everybody is of the same religion’. Likewise in the action-comedy Heist, Danny de Vito’s character persuades another crook out of retirement with the words ‘everyone needs money, that’s why they call it money’. However, Camus alerted us to the error of mistaking such intensities of feeling for a universal characteristic of all humankind. For Camus, no matter how strongly a particular perspective—be that concerning money, religion, politics or death—dominates our thoughts and shapes our worldview, it does not mean it has any wider or universal validity.

References


