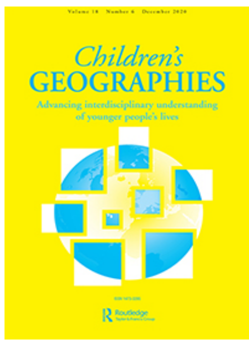

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Tatek Abebe

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Lost futures? Educated youth precarity and protests in the Oromia region, Ethiopia

Tatek Abebe

Department of Education and Lifelong Learning, Norwegian University of Science and Technology NTNU, Trondheim, Norway

ABSTRACT
Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, this article explores the connections between young people's livelihoods, education and visions of the future in Ethiopia. It engages with educated youth's narratives of precarity, dispossession, and 'intimate exclusions,' discussing how development has impacted rural livelihoods. Educated youth protests in the Oromia region reveal how shortages of farmland and education play crucial roles in the conflict about sovereignty and development. Qeerroo (Oromo youth) are particularly active in the protests because they are excluded from a rural future through land grabbing and population growth as well as from a modernist development future that unequally distributes the fruits of economic growth. By politicizing educated unemployment and landlessness and connecting them to neoliberal capitalism, this article analyses the intentions of the Ethiopian state to 'save' its youth through economic development while youths claim to 'lose' their futures to generate grassroots politics. The article also draws analytical attention to why there is a need to rethink concepts like development, waithood, and rural futures.

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1. Introduction

> Oromia belongs to us. We were born, grew up, had children, died and buried here. We have nowhere else to go and we will never leave. Woyane's oppression [referring to the ruling elite led by Tigray People Liberation Front of northern Ethiopia], the barrels of their guns, their bullets, imprisonment and death will never weaken our struggle. We will never rest until we retaliate for murder of our youth, our students, for murder of Laggasa Wagi [commander of Oromo Liberation Army]. If we fail to do this, let the bones of our martyrs become thorns on our body. Let the blood of our children flood us. We take this oath in the name of the blood and bones of our youth, our children, our students; the blood of our teachers, our doctors, our farmers; the blood of Laggasa Wagi, Eebisa Adunya [a young musician who was allegedly murdered for playing 'political' songs]. We solemnly swear to stand with *qeerroo* with all our possessions, energy, and weapons. We will take down Woyane's statues and replace them with statues of our children, our fighters, our students, and our teachers. (fieldnote, April 2017)

Thousands of youths chanted this after the funeral of two young men who were killed during a protest in Oromia Regional State, Ethiopia. These protestors are not only at the heart of the struggle for regime change but – when seen in connection with land grabbing and educated unemployment that this article engages with – their stories also displace dominant narratives of national development. The excerpt demonstrates interconnected processes of displacement, death, imprisonment,

CONTACT Tatek Abebe tatek.abebe@ntnu.no

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oppression as well as lack of political freedom and democracy. It also demonstrates criticism on the government's policy on land, which is a key source of contestation among youths. The right to retain agricultural land has been at the core of the widespread youth protests in the Oromia region – the most populous federal region accounting for about one-third of Ethiopia's 105 million inhabitants (Aynalem Adugna 2017).

Qeerroo, an Oromo term that means 'youth,' engage in ongoing activism for social and political justice. *Qeerroo* also means 'populace for change,' a grassroots organization for 'revolution from within.' The Oromia protestors are largely educated youth with rural backgrounds. They are known as '*qubee* generation' (*dhaloota qubee*) because they are the first generation to have had substantial access to university education after having been schooled using the vernacular *qubee* (the written language of Oromo people), which was introduced into formal education in 1992. The term qubee generation is common in protest songs, but it has also permeated mainstream political discourses. Many youth protestors identify themselves to be part of the *qubee* generation. Contrary to other uprisings (e.g. the Arab Spring in North Africa), a unique feature of the 'Ethiopian spring' is that it stemmed from the countryside where the question of land has never been more crucial. *Qeerroo* movement initially occurred in rural localities of the Oromia region and gradually spread throughout the country, where young Ethiopians protested consistently between 2015 and 2018. These 'years of protests' led the Ethiopian government to declare two states of emergencies, followed by resignation of the prime minister. Commentators on Ethiopian politics suggest that the youth revolution – despite the risk it holds for further conflict – may be transformational (Lefort 2016a).

In this article, I explore the connections between educated youth protests, land and the 'future' in the Oromia region, Ethiopia. Drawing on youth's diverse experiences of 'waithood' (Honwana 2013), I explore how forces of history and political economy – linked to land grabbing and educated unemployment – heighten young people's experiences of uncertain futures. I examine youth's struggle to retain agricultural land against the backdrop of educated unemployment in which alternative futures are either untenable or fading away. I argue that waithood endured by Oromo youth is predicated on, and entwines with, uneven geographies of development that engenders precarious life for them. By politicizing educated unemployment and landlessness and connecting them to neoliberal capitalism, I discuss how the intention of Ethiopian state to 'save' its youth through economic development may have failed, and how youth themselves claim to 'lose' their futures to generate new state politics. Furthermore, I also argue that whereas lack of jobs and dispossession of rural land heighten Oromo youth's sense of displacement from the future, their experiences of waiting are far from unitary.

2. Research context and approach

2.1. Questions of land in the Oromia region

Oromia Regional State is the largest of Ethiopia's nine federal regions. Its inhabitants – ethnic Oromo people – account for 35% of the country's population (Aynalem Adugna 2017). Oromo people inhabit lands surrounding Addis Ababa and west, central, and south Ethiopia. Mass protests in the region broke out after primary school students in *Ginchii* town (60 kms west of Addis Ababa) contested the Addis Ababa Integrated Development Plan. They believed this plan for the expansion of the city endangers peasants' livelihoods. They also contested that, as a federal state, Oromia regional state should be autonomous to administer its land without heavy-handed interference of the central government. Due to its proximity to Addis Ababa, land in Oromia region is, 'a fresh pie, and everybody wants a piece' (youth participant). Land grabbing by the government has been rampant in Oromia zones adjacent to Addis Ababa. Because of rapid urbanization, there has been a continuous encroachment of the city boundary over Oromia region where land for establishment of industrial parks and real-estate development targeting middle-class residents are in high demand. Both local and international investors participate in large-scale land grab deals. Leasing rural land to attract foreign direct investment and for commercial farming also comes at the expense of peasant

agriculture (Lavers 2012; The Oakland Institute 2016). Youth contest such revanchist policy as well as the legal mechanisms designed to back a capitalist system of accumulation by displacing peasants (see Harvey 2004). They claim that due to agri-investments, small-scale agriculture – the basic means of subsistence for rural communities – suffers. The process of dispossession of land has also 'created the conditions for a workforce dependent upon the sale of their labour power in return for a wage in the market' (Bakker, 2007: 544).

In addition to land rights, the youth protests are related to broader questions of corruption, inequality, lack of political freedom as well as the right to self-rule (Merera Gudina 2016). In the past decade, there have been growing tensions between Oromia regional state and the federal government over the right to Addis Ababa city. Although the administrative seat for Oromia Regional State is presently Addis Ababa, which is also the federal capital; its seat was relocated to the town of Adama in 2007. This decision was seen as an act of denying Oromo people's right to their city (see Section 4.2). Oromo people have an uneasy relationship with the Ethiopian state. They have a longstanding question of sovereignty from highland Ethiopia where state power stayed for centuries (see Markakis 2011). The 'Oromo question' also relates to the lack of recognition of Oromo identity, and development of its language and culture as well as democratic governance in ways that reflect genuine federalism (Merera Gudina 2003). As Gudina (2016) argues further, 'while the extensive land grab and displacement … is a triggering factor,' the underlying social ferment of the youth revolution is the 'historical marginalization of the Oromos as well as the continued marginalization, … maladministration and the discrimination thereof [and] youth unemployment.'

A key dimension of *qeerroo* protests is that it is led by unemployed educated youth. 'Educated youth' refers to young people who have completed secondary (technical and vocational) education as well as those who are enrolled in or have finished tertiary education. Unemployment rate for university graduates in Ethiopia is one of the highest in Africa, estimated at 50%; and 'improvements in labour market opportunities for them appear to lag behind economic growth' (WIDE 2016, 2). Ethiopia aspires to become a middle-income country by 2025 but, as I argue in this article, the modernist development model has locked educated youth out of hopeful futures. Educated youth are frustrated not only because their expectations have grown but also because 'growth has yet to bring the broader prosperity promised by the government in return for their political obedience' (The Economist, October 13, 2016).

2.2. Fieldwork approach

This article is part of a larger study that documents the generational implications of development on children's lives, rights, and social transitions to adulthood in post-socialist Ethiopia. My longitudinal research began in 2005 with boys and girls, who are now young adults; focusing on the spatiality and temporality of their livelihood activities (e.g. agricultural work, trade work, informal work, care work, migrant labour) (Abebe 2012, 2013), and how these are shaped by the changing political-economic contexts of the country (Abebe 2017). The ethnographic fieldwork for this article took place intermittently in 2015 (two months), 2017 (three months) and 2018 (two months). It involved in-depth interviews with 14 youth (4 women 10 men aged 21–32 years) and four singers (1 woman, 3 men), three mixed-gender focus group discussions, six interviews with government officials (1 woman and 5 men), three telephone interviews with protest organizers (men), and one skype interview with a blogger (woman). Interviews and focus group discussions were carried out in the language research participants chose, including Afaan Oromoo (of which I have a working knowledge) and Amharic (my native tongue). Data were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Elsewhere I have discussed the socio-ethical, and methodological dimensions of engaging young people in ethnographic, participatory research (Abebe 2009, 2018) . The specific location where youth participants live is not revealed, and pseudonyms are used to preserve their anonymity.

Three 'types' of youth were interviewed about their life prospects. The first category of youth are those who aspire to stay on their families' farmland if they can inherit enough land to make a living.

These youths have familial support and access to household resources when they are unemployed or studying. The second types of youth aspire to leave agriculture either because they have no land to farm or because they want to pursue further education and secure employment in cities. Many youths in this category are either enrolled in university or have completed tertiary education. However, most of the youth, the third type, believe that they have 'no options' – they neither have land to cultivate nor access to formal jobs. Whereas nearly all unemployed young men in the third category were active in the protests, several women informants who were not studying worked as wage labourers in construction sites, flower farms and industrial parks.

Narrative interviews with young musicians were meant to explore 'miktivism,' singers using music and microphone to highlight questions of social justice including land and identity in the Oromia region (Abebe 2019). In Section 4.2., I analyse an example of such miktivism, a music video, in order to exemplify youth's narratives on land grabbing and how they conjure up the protests. Music videos are useful source of data and powerful strategies of activism. Music is a common medium in which (educated) Oromo youth convey social justice issues, not only because it is connected to their community's oral traditions but also because it affords them to weave politics into it. Youth also use songs and music videos to circumvent dominant discourses in mainstream media and politics. They employ these artistic expressions both to re-create and heal themselves – giving them hope and enabling imaginative articulations of their present and future lives.

The article presents contextualized analysis of narratives to elucidate how youth tell stories, create their own version of social reality, and construct something for themselves (Phoenix 2008). Narratives enable the documentation of social and political changes as they unfold in place and time. They offer youth opportunity to put words on social phenomena, thereby connecting ideas on what has happened with visions of the future. As Di Nunzio (2015) points out, narratives also lend 'scholars with interpretation tool to consider how people translate the indeterminacy of existence into a sense of possibility and, ultimately, seek to connect what has been with what could be' (149). Through narrative, it is not only possible to account for the messiness of reality and the multiplicities of life trajectories but also unpack meanings, contest contradictions and paradoxes; and reinterpret what Mills (2002) calls a clash of narratives. By analysing complex processes of narration in specific instances 'we learn about the kinds of narratives that are possible for certain groups of people, and we learn about the cultural world that makes their narrative possible – and problematic – in certain ways' (Mills 2002, 108).

In the remainder of the article, I will first engage with theoretical debates on youth, waithood and the future. Second, I situate youth's experiences of marginalization and protests in the Oromia region in the wider context of national development. This will be followed by an analysis of a music video on land grabbing and a discussion on youth's stories of waiting and educated unemployment. Lastly, I offer reflections around development, waithood and rural futures.

3. Contesting 'Waithood' and youth's 'Future'

While it is recognized that young people are both living embodiments of history and prospective agents of social change, in development they are an 'absent presence' (Valentine 2008, 2098). Young people are mainly seen in terms of how and why development can benefit them but rarely acknowledged as actors who can contribute to positive social change. In Africa the 'youth bulge' – denoting the sheer size of young people relative to the total population – poses an array of concerns for development and social policy (Kelly and Kamp eds 2015; Oinas, Onodera, and Suurpää 2017). The term youth bulge is laden with the belief that young people – particularly young men – are not only potentially at risk but also, often more so, a risk to social and public order (Fuller and Pitts 1990, 10). However, recent debates within geographies of youth have shifted away from mere demographic concerns to instead illuminate and value the contribution that young people make – and have the potential to make – to development in their societies (Ansell 2016; Huijsmans 2016). Youth are not only breakers of social order but makers of various structures and systems of social reproduction.

They ‘undergo, express, and provide answers to the crisis of existing communitarian models, structures of authority, gerontocracy, and gender relations’ (De Boeck and Honwana 2005, 3–4). Yet, as Huijsmans (2016) argues, changing terms of social reproduction brought about by development not only reconfigures young people’s generational positions and responsibilities but also intensifies their poverty, producing, to quote Standing (2011), ‘the young precariate.’ The youth bulge and instability thesis fail to consider complex factors related to instability like inequality and multiple forms of exclusions, thus making structural/systemic violence synonymous with young people committing or perpetuating violence. In many African countries, for example, youth involvement in conflict is connected to their marginal social position in the post-colonial political order of the nation-state, illicit trade of weapon and social inequality prompted by control over key resources by few (Utas 2007; Vigh 2006).

Research on geographies of youth in Africa often focuses on urban youth, although most youth either live in rural areas or have rural origins (Panelli, Punch, and Robson 2007). An exception to this is Katz’s (2004) study in rural Sudan, which demonstrates the ways in which youth contest and rework ruptures in social reproduction caused by state-sponsored agricultural development project (for more recent work on marriage and youth transition in rural southern African contexts, see Ansell et al. 2017). The lives of African youth are also framed by a disjuncture between expectations of progress and social advancement and a lack of opportunities to achieve social goals; a stable job, marriage, and parenthood (Di Nunzio 2015, 151). Studying social becoming in Ghana, Langevang notes that ‘adulthood is achieved when a person has a household independent of their parents, is married, and has children’ (2008, 2044). As Jones and Chant (2009) argue, many Ghanaian youth who are unable to marry because of poverty and lack of steady employment remain on the fringes of the adult world. Vigh (2006, 96) conceptualizes youth as a ‘social moratorium’ and as being imprisoned in a socio-spatial time of limitations and marginality. He argues that failure to be considered ‘adult’ by society is experienced by many youths as a ‘social death.’ Likewise, Honwana (2013) uses the term ‘waithood’ to refer to the extended transition period during which young people wait for pieces of their lives to come together. I argue that waithood is a stultifying process that denies young people opportunity to fulfil their potential. The unsettling paradox of waithood in urban Ethiopia is captured by Mains (2011) who examined the aspirations and hopes of young people who are unable to attain their desires for the future and expectations of being educated. Mains characterizes the problems unemployed young job seekers confront – in contrast to their previously busy lives in school or college – as ‘the problem of passing excessive amounts of time’ (Mains 2007 , 659). From these perspectives, youth have been described either as being ‘stuck’ or ‘hopeful.’ They are stuck because their present experiences are far from their goal, yet they are hopeful because while they wait to achieve these goals, they figure out the future: they elaborate new identities, discourses, visions and ways of getting by (Di Nunzio 2015, 151–152).

Waithood entwines with anxiety about the future but, as this article demonstrates, it is not necessarily a passive act. It is an active anticipation of and engagement with the future. Waithood signifies young people’s embodiment of uncertainty as they navigate the tensions between constraints and possibilities, the past and the present, the immediate and the imagined, and the material and the intangible. As Hansch, Kroekerand, and Oldenburg (2017) describe, waithood and ‘hope’ are prominent characteristics of uncertainty: while ‘waiting’ can be understood as a way of ‘coping’ with indeterminate life situations like unemployment; it can also be a dynamic, anticipatory practice that links possible futures to the present. The common evocation of ‘waiting’ as ‘sitting’ and ‘being idle’ is problematic because it runs the risk of masking the fact that waiting is productive (Stasik, Hansch, and Mains 2020). I argue that although educated youth report being ‘unemployed’ or ‘in timepass’ (e.g. Jeffrey 2010) doing odd jobs while looking for what they consider appropriate employment (e.g. White 2012); they are also engaged in various kinds of casual, short-term jobs, or helping parents in family enterprise to earn ‘small, small money’ (youth participant). These ‘working unemployed’ youth (Standing 2011) are on the lookout for opportunities and take actions – they plan, scheme,

talk, play, hustle and work as well as build much required networks that provide a foundation for transforming their lives (Stasik, Hansch, and Mains 2020, 2).

Waithood is as much about material reality as it is about temporality. As I argue in this article, young people's visions of the future are carved out in the context of systemic inequality of the neoliberal economic orthodoxy that produces precarious life for them. For youth in the Oromia region, precarity engendered by structural processes is experienced on a personal level. Precarity is a 'politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks' (Butler 2009, 25). It implies not only how structural forces impinge upon young people's life trajectories but also the ways in which they amplify marginality. This article draws on the above debates and critiques to explore the differentiated ways in which educated youth navigate waiting as well as a struggle to hold on to rural livelihoods against the backdrop of limited job opportunities in cities.

4. Development, dispossession and educated unemployment

4.1. Whose development? Youth experiences of marginalization

A common narrative of development the youth contest is the idea of monolithic growth that is presumed to benefit all people. During focus group discussions, youth stated that Ethiopia's economy is booming only in certain sectors, in certain parts of the country and for certain people. Debele, 25 years old, is a migrant labourer. He is part of an initiative for small-scale employment generation for youth and he collects and disposes garbage from the relatively new, middle-income neighbourhoods. He said: 'we are people on the side-lines who watch when others enjoy what they eat and discard.' His friend, Abiyot, who is a manual labourer earning approximately US $2 for a long, back-breaking workday – splitting stones, mixing sand with cement, and moving water and other construction materials – explained that several of the construction sites he is employed in are 'owned by people who are agents of the government.' A young woman who sells food to labourers at a real estate construction campsite used a proverb to describe development as a 'dream': 'I have a cow up high in the sky but I neither see nor drink her milk.' Explaining how development bypassed them, she used the metaphor of a river that flows beyond its bank: 'the wealth in this country is like a flood that comes from and goes elsewhere.' Instead of this wealth being invested in creating jobs for youth, she stated, 'the course the flood has emptied them off right from the start.'

Young people in Oromia region contested the dominant portrayal of Ethiopia as 'Africa's fastest growing economy' (e.g. The Economist, October 13, 2016) that sustained double-digit economic growth for over a decade. In a focus group discussion, one youth participants asked 'whose development are we talking about? Who benefits from it?' International media considers Ethiopia to be 'the last development frontier' (Financial Times, July 3, 2017) and is defeating poverty and 'riding an economic boom' (The New York Times, March 3, 2015). A common expression of this 'Ethiopia rising narrative' is also the subtle, yet very pervasive, local discourse about immense development. Yet, as many youths point out, the 'economic miracle' is visible only in Addis Ababa – and not in the rural peripheries – where five-star hotels, luxurious apartments, and condominiums seem to 'spring out of nowhere, overnight' (youth participant). Within this dominant narrative of development, the 'youth crisis' – epitomized by continuous protests – is considered to be a 'temporary problem,' not a systemic one. According to Ethiopia's minister for communication, Getachew Reda, the protests were merely 'a hiccup'; 'a transient issue,' that is surmountable (Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporation (EBC), March 2016). Given the progress the country has made, he argued; 'setbacks here and there' are unremarkable and inevitable on the path that will undoubtedly culminate in the nation catching up with developed countries. The role of Ethiopia's developmental state is to ensure 'confidence in public service delivery and capability of the state' as the prime 'source of development … that has been consistent in delivering its promises to the people' (EBC, March 2016). Lefort (2016b) critiques such a unidirectional take on the huge and hugely complex tasks of achieving progress where the state controls who benefits from it, where and why. Other scholars have also argued that the

extensive 'developmental state apparatus' is used to legitimize tight governance of the population, including agrarian life (Aalen 2011; Clapham 2018).

Youth's experiences of marginalization underpin the simmering unrest and instability that preceded the protests. In my fieldworks, I realized in informal conversations with people that they were left behind because of their inability to benefit from development. A government official in the Oromia region told me that the mass uprising has been 'a long time coming' and violent clashes between government security forces and youth protestors are the outcome of a long-standing 'political fever' in the region. Despite Ethiopia being a federal nation, decentralization rarely happens and 'policy-making is often top-down' (youth participant). My youth informants feel forgotten because they neither have access to employment nor 'space for decision making' on issues that affect them, including land. According to another government official in Oromia Bureau of Agriculture and Rural Development, educated youth's protests are linked to resistance against development projects that have been implemented over the past decades. 'The region [Oromia] has been boiling' and the decision that the government took to expand Addis Ababa's masterplan was 'the last straw' that intensified youths' frustrations.

4.2. Dispossession: land grab as 'Future grab'

The outcry to retain agricultural land in the Oromia region epitomizes the desperation of youth being locked out of livelihood options in the context of stifling urban unemployment rates. In rural Ethiopia where 80% of the population live, land is not only a basic means of production, but it also affords hope for youth. As I have argued above, the 'immediate' cause that triggered youth protests was the federal governments' proposal for expansion of Addis Ababa's administrative scope into adjacent districts of Oromia region. This Integrated Development Plan – locally known as 'master killer plan' – is perceived to squeeze out rural inhabitants from their landholdings, making them landless.

Rural land is a site of political struggle in the Oromia region, not the least because of its proximity to the capital city where land for investment is a premium. Although the government claims that land belongs to the state and cannot be bought or sold, in practice, its apparatus has created a system of compensation for farmers to lease rural land to wealthy investors. The activism of young people marginalized by land grabbing also reveals how the combination of capital mobility and a legal measure designed by the state to support it is an important concern. My informants explain that government's allocation of rural land for development projects is an act dispossession, arguing that it favours local elites and foreign investors. Land brokers who have connections with the Department of Land Administration – that dispenses agricultural land in the name of investment – have 'sealed several deals'[1] (youth participant). To 'seal a deal' is a term young people use to describe making 'fast money' and becoming wealthy. Such stories of corruption, and expropriation of land with nominal compensation of indigenous farmers are not uncommon among youth and reveal how development manifests itself in what Schoenhals (2003) terms the 'intimate exclusion' resulting from local processes of accumulation by few.

4.2.1. Maalan Jira? /Do I exist?

In what follows, I discuss a music video titled 'Maalan Jira?[2]' (meaning: 'Do I exist?') to demonstrate the history and geography of land grab and how it connects with educated youth's notion of 'future grab.'

> Look my Galoo, Gullallee belonged to Tufaa, Abbichuu was on the hills, Galaan farmed Finfinnee [Addis Ababa].
>
> We, the lovers, should have never been separated, but those people separated us.
> They dug that hill, a hill that should never have been dug/destroyed.
>
> They separated us; the people who should never have been separated.

Little by little, they cut us apart.
My dear Galaane, I cannot stand the discomfort of this time.

I want to rest under your neck.

My dear Galaane, Sululta cannot let the cattle to graze freely; they have to fence them.
My dear Galaane when can I come and see you?

I feel I am too far away from you.
Do I exist Galaane?

No, I do not exist; I was broken up and eaten.

No Galaane I do not exist; they chopped and ate my liver [vital organs].
My dear Galaane, man ploughed and ploughed the land and sow the seeds.

My Galaane, one who depends on a stranger cannot have good night sleep [cannot trust the ground/land he sleeps on].
So Galaane, I do not exist, I am broken up and eaten.
My dear Galaane, it has been long time since they alienated us.

But I cannot stop thinking about you just because you are far away from me.
What is left of me Galaane? They broke up my bones and ate them.

No, I do not exist Galaane, they chopped and ate my organs.
My dear Galaane a man who is hurt inside [has pain in his gut/stomach] does not show sign of it on the outside.

But I do not exist Galaane, I was broken up and eaten.

No, I do not exist - they chopped and ate my organs.

I am broken up and eaten.

Maalan Jira is a social-political song veiled as love song. It was released in 2015, when the youth protests started. The music video for the song is shown on public screens in several parts of the Oromia region, and is popular on YouTube with nearly 8 million views. The song is played everywhere, online and offline; at home, in bars, in public transport, at wedding ceremonies and so forth. The main protagonist in the song is a woman named Gelaanne who is affectionately referred to as 'Galoo.' Gelaane was also the name of the queen of one of the Oromo clans that lived in central part of Ethiopia. Emperor Menellik II conquered Gelaanne's clan during his expansion in the twentieth century and, in the process, her land became incorporated as part of Ethiopia's capital. The song historicizes how the expansion of Finfinnee – the original name for the settlement before Emperor Minellik II renamed it 'Addis Ababa' in 1887 – involved a gradual pushing away of indigenous Oromo clans. The singer, Hacaalu Hundessa, recounts how – through land grabs and displacement – people are losing not just their land but also their rural mode of life. He mentions several localities like Gullelle, Abbichuu, Galaan, Sululta, etc. where Oromo clans lived for generations – settlements that have now become either part of Addis Ababa or are suggested for incorporation into Addis Ababa's Integrated Development Plan. The song reifies the history of *neftegna-gebar* relationship (a form of settler-colonial structure) that underpinned Ethiopia's contested nation building project, and how contemporary land grab deals have contributed to the erasure of geographies of indigeneity. The lyrics in the song and the music video's visual portrayal of the physical environment, farmlands, new settlements etc., triggered wider debates on the connections between the government's programmme of rural land and claims to land in Oromia region as it relates to erasures of indigenous geographies.

Maalan Jira also shows the ways in which Ethiopia's historiography takes the form of a single story told from the vantage point of 'victors' while simultaneously exemplifying how Oromo youth create counternarratives that are silenced by historical events. It does so by engaging with historical references, as well as demonstrating Oromo identity, way of life, livelihoods, and land that are engendered by the practices of development and nation-building. The music mobilizes several powerful metaphors to express social critique on development. One such example is when the singer

alludes to the separation from his protagonist lover. 'Separation of lovers' is euphemism for the alienation of Oromia region from Finfinnee through allocation of its land for the development metropolitan Addis Ababa from which 'rural people seem to benefit very little' (youth participant). It also stands for ethnic-based federalism, which amplifies differences rather than shared interests, wedging rifts among citizens based on linguistic boundaries. Moreover, separation of lovers is interpreted as the use of ethnicity as a system of oppression – to divide and rule – that the government is allegedly culpable.

The lyrics further evoke themes of loss, alienation, and longing for a life together. The 'loss' here has a dual connotation. It signifies the falling-out of the relationship between the singer and his protagonist lover, characterizing the life they had before separation – one they neither can retain nor go back to. However, it is also taken to mean how Oromo people have 'lost' because of development – mountains dug, resources extracted, land grabbed. One of the song's key phrases 'little by little they cut us apart' imbues the social distance created between the lovers owing to people meddling in their private affairs. Yet, it also implies how the process of marginalization in the Oromia region is deep and systemic. Furthermore, queen Gelaane, who is shown in the music video in the context of the countryside, symbolizes Oromia – a home one 'cannot live far away from.' This is evident because popular discourses construct 'country' and 'nation' using words that invoke affection to a female figure such as 'queen' (mootitti) or 'mother' (harmee). In this sense, the desire to 'become near Gelaane' is emblematic of Oromo people's daily struggle to stay put in their nation.

4.2.2. Land grab as existential threat

Reflecting Oromo youth's precarity and concerns for future livelihoods, the lyrics in *Maalan Jira* present land grabbing as an existential threat. This is done by drawing an analogy between the human body/anatomy and land. Hacaalu Hundessa repeatedly utters body pain – his 'bones are broken up,' bit by bit – in order to exemplify how agricultural land is slowly becoming a scarce resource for peasants. Phrases like 'vital organs chopped away' and 'eaten up' also epitomise the violent ways in which rural land is taken away and sold. These existential metaphors resonate with one of the most popular chants during youth protests: 'lafti keenya lafee keenya,' which means 'our lands are our bones.'

The music video shows a lot of grass, fodder for cattle that has important livelihood and symbolic value among Oromo people. Thach grass is also used for building huts and making household materials, but the video also shows how grass is being sold in markets. The monetization of grass is the new face of poverty experienced by rural people. Both the music video and the lyrics in the song demonstrate how peasants are compelled to fence their cattle because of the shortage of open pastures. This is an important point because Oromo people have a tradition of letting their cattle unfettered in the field – cattle is brought home only when they are to be milked or slaughtered. Like the protestors, the song and music video also evoke stories of how several generations of farmers went on to cultivate vast areas of land, yet the present generation does not even have 'ground to sleep on.' Furthermore, they allude to systemic dispossession, how the political economy alters the material grounds of life as well as the ways in which people struggle for control of social reproduction. In so doing, the song and music video contextualize and produce a narrative on the ways in which intensified land grab – in the name of development – is experienced by local populations not as a mere change in livelihoods but as a rupture to what it means to be Oromo (Figures 1 and 2).

Rapid change in the agrarian economy is leading to unprecedented transformation in rural livelihoods. During fieldworks I observed how, as large-scale commercial farms expanded, the pasturelands for cattle have become more concentrated and more vulnerable to drought. The change in traditional practices of farming has also become detrimental to the agricultural landscape and changed how people see rural life. Land leases for export crops such as palm oil, flower, and sugarcane have caused alienation of rural people from their traditional forms of land use. The gradual disappearance of agriculture as a way of life is also evident in the accounts of research participants. Alemu,

Figure 1. Artist Hacaalu Hundessa in Maalan Jira?/Do I exist?

32 years old, spent his childhood in a village that is now one part of the 'rural cities' near Addis Ababa. He works as a daily labourer, producing concrete block during the day and as security guard of a flower farm at night. He is married and has three children but, unlike himself, his children are likely to grow up in a different world. He explains his family's loss of identity as farmers:

Figure 2. Protagonist 'Galoo' in Maalan Jira?/Do I exist?

> When I was growing up, we had plenty of cattle. We plough the land, grew 'teff' [local staple]. This is no more! Whatever we had, we had to sell. We simply call ourselves farmers, without any plot to till, without any herd to tend. Our way of life is disappearing.

Rural people I interviewed share the estrangement and sense of loss of culture expressed by youth protestors. An elderly woman who had to give up her farm for a meagre compensation by the government explains the deep attachments Oromo people have to their ancestral land:

> Land is your home, you use the soil to make mud and plaster your wall; you grow grass on it to feed cattle, and for the roof of your house. You raise your children on the land, their world is there. When you die, you are buried there. Land is what consoles you, in sadness and happiness.

The gradual termination of access to agricultural land affects the life prospects of rural people, including youth. Youth speak of their experiences of development as one of state-sponsored dispossession. The disappearance of agricultural land through large-scale land grabs have foreclosed rural futures for youth. Yet, as I will discuss below, whereas the mass uprising stems from the countryside where the question of land has never been more crucial, it is also inseparable from educated youth unemployment that is rampant in cities.

4.3. Frustrated educated youth

As noted above, youth unemployment in Ethiopia is high, and educated unemployed youth are at the epicentre of the protests. University graduates routinely complain about how they receive degrees to find employment in 'breaking cobblestones' for pedestrian sidewalks. They had expected to land a white-collar job after graduation. The only available job these days, said one youth, is to be a police officer, but: 'nobody wants to become police because then you have to fight with your own brother on the streets [during protests].' My informants explain that it is 'a must' for them to prove party allegiance to EPRDF to obtain employment in public institutions or a loan for start-up entrepreneurial activities. They highlight how party membership is more decisive for securing employment than the quality of education or skills they have. It is also not uncommon to hear government officials speaking during college graduation ceremonies about how important it is that graduates be creative entrepreneurs and job creators rather than job seekers.

Olana, whom I have known since 2005, 'rents' his BSc degree in Engineering to an entrepreneur who has a construction firm and who uses it for bids and construction contracts. As educational qualifications are required to obtain licenses and as many firms do not have such qualifications, they rent degrees from university graduates without employing them. Olana said that gaining employment depends on having good connections, which he lacks. He explained that what he earns from renting his degree barely covers his 'tea expenses.' However, while he is looking for employment, his degree will 'work for him' to gain experience as an independent contractor, not through applying his knowledge in the real-world, but from the years that his credentials have been 'in service.' Youth like Olana who lack formal jobs despite having completed higher education are commonplace and a growing category of precarious youth.

In Ethiopia, formal education is bound up with notions of modernity. Schools are seen as a means of modernization and significant resources have been devoted to the construction of schools and universities. A belief in the transformative power of education also exists at a popular level and extends across boundaries of ethnicity, religion, gender, and class (Mains 2011, 9). Many young Ethiopians see formal education as a path 'to progress,' 'to climbing the ladder' and 'fixing the future' (Mains 2011). Narratives of development rely on hopes for schooling and employment in urban, non-agricultural jobs. Proliferating images of success based on prolonged participation in schooling have also encouraged parents to invest in schooling (Jeffrey 2010; Abebe and Kjørholt 2013). Yet, young people's efforts to obtain well-paid professional jobs that match their aspirations are disintegrating, not only due to the shrinking of formal employment but also the 'explosion' in the number of university graduates (Mains 2011). Ethiopia had 31 public universities in 2011 and the government

approved the establishment of 10 additional universities in 2012. In 2018, the number of public universities rose to 42. According to FRDE Ministry of Education (2011), the number of university students enrolled at the undergraduate level increased from 203,399 in 2006–447,693 in 2010 whereas the statistics for graduates per year rose by almost threefold, from 29,845 in 2006–75,348 in 2010 (p 60-61).

From youth's point of view, hope in formal education as a pathway out of poverty is disintegrating. This rupture is captured in the ways in which my informants talk about schooling. The Amharic proverb 'The one who eats and learns will never fail'[3] expresses a powerful belief in the value of education. The expression in Oromo language 'There is nothing like an educated person'[4] also highlights the unique place given to educated individuals. Moreover, proverbs like 'Let an educated person take a verdict on me'[5]; or 'An educated person has a bright future'[6] signify the widespread social respect for educated people. However, youth holding degree/diploma are unlikely to find guaranteed employment which is expressed in a proverb routinely uttered: 'Degrees will not take you across the river.'[7] They describe that it is far more rewarding to get a small plot of land than becoming university graduates, even with multiple postgraduate degrees. They often use an expression *ke hulet masterate ande ye'Sebeta merate* (meaning 'Better to have a small piece of land in *Sebeta* [outskirt of Addis Ababa] than two master's degrees'). Although education is perceived as a pathway to non-rural livelihoods, its promises to fulfil youth's aspirations for city life proved unrealistic.

The problem educated youth face, however, is far wider than finding employment after graduation. Education alters young people's aspirations and, as Proctor and Lucchesi (2012) argue, aspirations are not just about economic opportunity – status is important too. Many educated youths alluded to how difficult is to go back to rural villages with limited infrastructure; 'no electricity, and no water' (youth participant). Schooling presents youth with a worldview that is an antipode to rural ways of life. The downgrading of farming and rural life as well as the chronic government neglect of small-scale agriculture are critical reasons for many educated youth's reluctance to pursue agriculture-based livelihoods (White 2012, 11). Yet, as Tadele and Asrat (2012, 38) argue, the main problem educated youth face in considering a 'life in agriculture as a possibility was the lack of access to farmland.'

A related concern that heightens the problem youth face is 'deskilling' whereby young people are separated from the physical environment in which they come of age.[8] Geographers have long noted how, for example, a shift from subsistence farming to commercial agriculture contributes to a decline in young people's skills for resource extraction and environmental knowledge (Katz 2004; Abebe and Kjørholt 2013). This is not only because youth have limited access to land, but they are also learning about land in a socio-historical context that is characterized by rapid population growth, deforestation, and environmental degradation. Erasure of the physical environment heightens young people's sense of displacement from the future and makes their knowledge and skills redundant. As Katz (2004) argues, deskilling of youth is a consequence of rural communities' insertion into a capitalist system that separates economic production and social reproduction. For example, young people learn farming or herding but have no land on which to do it – they attend school only long enough to learn skills that are inadequate for non-agricultural employment; or they may learn to work with and use local resources, most of which are disappearing.

5. Revolution to save the future?

As noted in the introduction, a key feature of the protests is the massive turnouts by educated youth who often sing and show what is now a world-wide renowned 'Oromo protest sign' (i.e. arms crossed held above head), symbolizing the quest for an end to state-led oppression. Protest organizers urge youth to 'rise up,' and not to back down until they have freedom and sovereignty. The youth ask the Ethiopian state to stop violence and evicting them, claiming 'Oromia is ours.' One youth told me: 'we were born in Oromia; this is where we buried our umbilical cord.' Another youth asked; 'Where else can we go?' Youths protest the ways in which government's policy excludes peasants from having direct ownership of their own land. During interviews, they stated that to save rural land is 'not a

task that they will leave for tomorrow' because they and their families are unfairly excluded from any possibility of farming as a livelihood option. A burning issue in our protests, said one university graduate, is the question of land – the right to agricultural land is at the heart of their revolution. The youth chanted: 'Oromia is not for sale.' They are concerned for their right to a rural livelihood that they can rely on against the backdrop of stifling unemployment. Yet, what young people contest is also that local structures of power exclude them. They contest the politics of policymaking because it is skewed to the elite. They contest the politics of land administration, which has marginalized them. They contest why they, their families, and the future generation pay the cost of land grab deals.

Young people's sustained protests highlight the urgency of locating their struggle at the heart of the crises engendered by practices of land grabbing and unemployment. It draws attention to how the intention of the Ethiopian state to save its youth through economic development might not only have failed but is also countered by youth who wish to fight for grassroots democracy, 'with all their energy and possessions' (youth participant). The youth castoff state's narratives of development, noting how its promises of a better tomorrow are untenable, as it has resulted in 'nothing but their imprisonment and death' (youth participant). They claim that their future is yet to be borne out of the social and political justice that ensue regime change which they helped to bring about. A way forward in the struggle to a more just future could also involve – they suggest – losing themselves through revolution.

6. Reflections on waithood and rural futures

This article explored educated youth's precarity and protests in the context of dominant narratives of economic development. Educated unemployed youth in the Oromia region spearheaded the protests. Their narratives reveal that development has resulted not only in displacement from rural livelihoods but also to complex forms of dispossession. The youth contest the deep transmission of capital into rural life, what Katz (2001) terms 'vagabond capitalism' as well as the 'global squeeze of farmland' (White 2012, 12), which closed off – rather than opened – opportunities for present and future generations. The analysis of the music video and the interviews with my informants demonstrate the relationship between Oromo identity, rural livelihoods, and the aspirations of educated young people. Although some educated youth recognize that farming may not be their future livelihood pathway, they are engaged in activism for land rights because they associate agriculture and land ownership beyond their economic or material value. Young people connect ideas of what it means to be Oromo with traditional livelihoods and recognize the interdependence in familial livelihood strategies, as well as the significance of land for their communities' rural futures. Their activism is, therefore, not just about preserving rural livelihoods but it also hinges on the idea of resisting the destruction of local environment and expropriation of communal means of sustenance in the name of promoting development.

My informant's stories of waiting in an uncertain and precarious present is engendered by the unfolding historical geographies of development and its relationship to rural land. Their stories reveal how development is experienced as dispossession and 'intimate exclusions' as well as how forces of history and political economy amplify their experiences of uncertainty. This uncertainty is characterized by anxiety around the gradual disappearance of the means of production the youth had known and hoped to fall back on, especially as alternative futures are untenable or fading away. It is also the result of what the youth consider dispossession through stealth in which government's policy restricts them from earning a living off their land in ways they see it fit for their present and future life. In this sense, educated youth's protests are about lost futures as much as they are about precarious existence. They are realizations of unmet prospects of development and the futures it generated in the present. The protests epitomise visions of development that are not shared by all and – contrary to what majority of rural people previously imagined or hoped for – brought material significance only to few political elites. They also represent what youth view as livelihoods displacements, a no return to past ways of life, as well as experiences of being disjointed from the future and

from development itself which, according to one of my informants; is like a 'dream' to be caught someday.

Corbridge (2007, 202) argues that although development is seen as a 'desired end point for all societies, [it] inescapably […] supports a series of interventions that disempower the poor.' Becoming a middle-income country is a long-term development goal that Ethiopia aspires to achieve. The paradox is that this goal seems to have taken a form of an assault on rural culture, livelihoods, and way of life. The practice of leasing rural land has resulted in the production of proletariat underclass youth that is dependent on wage labour. Farmers who used to be self-reliant in food production have become dependent on outside support for survival. These crises underpin the deprivation of rural people. They also reveal ideologies of development – assumptions about how, where, and by whom the burden of social reproduction is to be borne, under what circumstances, and with what consequences.

The ethnographic observations further demonstrate the interconnectedness of challenges that rural and urban youth face, rural-urban linkages in livelihood strategies, and how those generate 'unconventional' visions of the future. In contrast to scholarly narratives on educated youth and waiting, young people in the Oromia region aspire to rural livelihoods, in part due to lack of access to economic opportunities in urban areas. However, this aspiration is also shaped by symbolic and familial dynamics linked to land, agriculture, and rural life. This is interesting because previous studies on waithood and youth's 'future' tend to focus on urban, middle-class imaginations, often revolving around white-collar jobs and life in cities. Yet, young people in the Oromia region struggle for 'return to the rural' and they imagine the coordinates of the possible and the future in ways that do not necessarily mirror dominant, linear expectations of modernity (Ferguson 1999). I argue that debates on waithood need to be nuanced to appreciate youth's multiple experiences linked to indeterminacy and openness, and critique prefigured visions of desirable futures. This is necessary because although the notion of waithood has received traction within the literature on youth, waiting is not a default position for many youths. Unemployed youth – educated or labour migrants in cities – continuously 'move around' to navigate opportunities for the future and enhance possibilities for making ends meet (Di Nunzio 2015). The experiences of waiting and the landscape of opportunities available for youths like Olana, who rent their educational credentials out until they obtain white-collar jobs, is not the same as those of wage labourers who eke out a daily living by the sweat of their brow. Youths who are in a state of waithood are those who can wait, having the necessary resources and assistance, as well as anticipating certain visions of the future to be realized. Moreover, whereas waiting can be one of the many modes of existence for youth, for some unemployed youths in the Oromia region, it is a luxury that they simply cannot afford. For these youths, waiting manifests as a daily struggle for survival, revealing the importance of seeing waithood in context, and the variegated ways in which it is experienced by youth in different social geographies.

Notes

1. bachir gize mezgat
2. The music video can be accessed here at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wv3he6CGF3E
3. Yebelana yetemare wedko aywedkim
4. Kan barate maaltu fakkaata
5. Yetemare yigdelegn
6. Yetemare sew tesfa alew
7. Yetemare yet derese, or degree wenz ayashagerem
8. In Oromo culture, the term 'beekumsaa' which translates as 'knowledge/wisdom/skill' encompasses education and is an essential 'virtue' for a good life.

Dedication

As this article went to press, singer and songwriter Hacaalu Hundessa was shot dead in Addis Ababa. Hacaalu's songs were the voice and soundtracks of the Oromo youth revolution, paying heed to

Oromo people's freedom and rights. I dedicate this article for his youthful commitment to music activism. Rest in peace Hacaalu!

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