

The Village in the City

Urban Experiences through Accounts of Rural Life in Belize

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While conducting fieldwork in Belize City, Belize, I heard many comments and anecdotes about the villages that city dwellers or their parents came from. I initially took these glimpses of the rural as a somewhat nostalgic yet interesting feature of the everyday city conversations that provided me with some ideas about Belizean village life (of which I had little or no experience). However, I came to realise that in talking of the rural, my interlocutors were in fact saying much about their own lives in the city.

In this paper, I show how the village is conceptualised, and how ideas about the village provide an understanding of conditions in the city. By writing of the village in the singular, rather than in the plural, I do not intend to point to a specific geographical entity. Rather, I aim to show how, by referring to specific villages, my interlocutors were also pointing

to a general idea of rurality from the perspective of specific experiences. This idea is open: it is inflected with different meanings which resonate with common experiences of urban life. To show this plurality of perspectives, I treat the village as an 'open signifier'. The term 'signifier', as used in semiotics, connotes the form (the sound and image) which is given meaning by the signified (the concept). These together make a sign. Lévi-Strauss (1987 [1950]: 63, original emphasis) described *mana* as a '*floating signifier*', which can contain the various, even contradictory, meanings attached to it. Apart from semiotic considerations, the term 'open signifier' is used to describe the capacity of a term or idea (for example, 'blackness', Gilroy 1993: 32; 'Chineseness', Ang 1993; '*droit de l'homme*', Piot 2011; 'queer', Kornak 2015) to acquire a variety of changing meanings. My understanding of the term is

akin to this. I make heuristic use of the village as an open signifier: by investigating the different meanings attributed to the village, I shed light on the positionality of those in the city who describe rural life. This also allows for a recognition of the idyllic character that the village acquires at times (Mohammed 2000), while highlighting the rural-urban relationship beyond a utopian connotation of both (Thomas-Hope 1996). In analysing the village as a receptacle of hopes and aspirations, this article contributes to an understanding of these as being partially determined (Jansen 2016) and unequally distributed (Hage and Papadopoulos 2004; Appadurai 2013).

The material presented in this paper was collected in the form of fieldnotes and written and audio-recorded interviews during fieldwork between 2015 and 2016. I carried out participant observation in Belize City amongst Belizean and other Central American builders working in the small-scale construction industry, at worksites, and at after-work gatherings, in public spaces and private dwellings. The imagery of the village was contradictory and varied. Rather than providing a comprehensive account of Belize City inhabitants and their relationships with places and people in the country, this paper focuses on the accounts of six men who spontaneously expressed their ideas about village life. These men had lived all or most of their lives in the city, and their accounts were thus grounded in a longstanding experience of urban life. These accounts were selected for this article because they allow an exploration of how village life is portrayed by men occupying different positions in the hierarchy of work in the industry, thus allowing us to

see a variety of perspectives which, as I explore further below, impact their views of the village.

It is possible to trace two main ways in which village life is signified through its evocation. Firstly, I focus on quietness, a shared sense of tranquillity which relates to common experiences of living in the city. Secondly, I show how the village is seen as offering a different kind of livelihood, which is linked to the occupational conditions of the men.

A quiet place

In discussing the village as an open signifier, its peacefulness is relevant, not only because it is a common feature which highlights a sense of urban physical insecurity, but also because it shows how attaining a 'quiet' life in the village is the only characteristic which is recognised as potentially attainable by all, irrespective of their condition and status in the city.

Dylan was a thirty-five-year-old man from Belize City, who lived in a squatted building with his partner and two of his children who were of elementary school age. He conveyed this sense of village quietness as he spoke in an idealised tone about the village where his mother had come from before he was born, and where two of his siblings were living:

My village ... is a very quiet and peaceful place to live. You don't have no worries, it's the peacefulest [sic] place you could find, you can hear a pin drop at night, you can hear birds singing in the morning, you can hear the sound of every breeze that blows by. It's a beautiful, beautiful place.

Dylan describes the village in idyllic terms. Mohammed (2000: 199) argues that the 'idea of an idyllic rural Caribbean ... is a dominant one in the popular imagination of the region'. In what Thomas-Hope (1996: 27) calls 'the myth of the city', urban space is seen as a civilised environment offering opportunity and wealth. However, poverty, lack of employment, crime and poor infrastructure turn this into a 'counter-myth to paradise' (ibid.) and the countryside is revaluated in harmonious terms (Jaffe et al. 2008: 7). The city and the countryside mirror each other as their respective dwellers imagine their lives in reference to the other space, as Thomas-Hope (1996: 27) sums up: 'the rural person's belief in utopia as being found in the city is equaled only by the city person's utopia believed to be captured in the tranquility of nature in the rural setting'.

The village is explicitly or implicitly evoked in contrast to the city. Dylan, for instance, lived near to the gang turf where he had grown up. He expressed unease about his children's safety, and often discussed 'the latest' news with me in terms of violence in the city. These themes were brought up often and with concern in my everyday chats with these men, and were often prompted by local circumstances, like the sound of gunshots or a neighbour rushing into his yard after being chased by a gunman. Moreover, Belize has a high homicide rate, and men make up the vast majority of both victims and perpetrators (Peirce 2017).¹ Homicides happen mostly in urban areas, and the majority of homicides and a third of the most serious crimes recorded in the country take place in Belize City (Peirce and Veyrat-Pontet 2013). Thus, the peacefulness of the village in comparison to the city is both literal and constitutive of a mirroring narrative.

This imagery is not the result of a lack of experience of village life, since my interlocutors knew villages at first hand and at times had themselves recently moved to a village from Belize City. For instance, the latter was the case with Alex, a 24-year-old man from Belize City who had worked washing buses for a local company for the last few years after spending his youth 'hustling'. A year before my fieldwork, he had moved to a village and commuted to Belize City up to six days a week. He lived in his stepfather's brother's house, near his girlfriend and his mother, whom he helped financially by buying her medicines for a chronic illness. He enjoyed being in the village in the mornings when he had to take the bus: 'no one in the village at *dat* [that] time, only me and *di* [the] dogs'. Alex's village was 'more quiet' than the city, with 'no[t] much noise'. He further elaborated: 'Nobody *whan* [will] rob yo[u], or sho[o]t yo' in the village, while here [Belize City] *dem wanna* [they want to] rob you *fi one* [for a] little bit of money'. The rural setting allowed for tranquillity: '*Ab* [I] like it now, *da* [the] village, *ab* [I] sleep, eat and smoke'.

Because of the relevance of the experience of the city in shaping accounts of the village, the idea of the rural as a possible escape from the troubled city is not only expressed by born-and-bred Belizeans. William, who was forty years old at the time of my fieldwork, had fled to Belize City from the civil war in El Salvador as a child with his parents and siblings. He used to tell me stories about his encounters with local thieves and petty criminals, stressing how he had managed to get out of many dangerous confrontations. He had neither a partner nor children, and had moved to a village a few months after his father died. He told me:

It's quiet [*tranquilo*], people respect me, I don't have to watch my back when I go to the shop. And I live alone in a house. In the night there aren't noises, you can see the moon and the stars.²

William, who had lived most of his life in Belize City, felt under threat there, as did other long-term city dwellers. The fact that gang violence affects mainly the poorest and people of African descent, though it is not confined to them (Gayle et al. 2016), is also reflected in the ways in which the rural is linked to one's experience of residency, rather than one's national or ethnic background.

Here, I do not address actual life in the village from an ethnographic perspective. Thus, I do not propose an urban-rural dichotomy based on multi-sited fieldwork for comparative reasons, from the perspective, say, of lifestyles and social interactions. However, as Rapport and Overing (2007: 361-362) note, the poor analytical purchase of the urban-rural sociocultural division 'does not necessarily lessen its sentimental or imaginative efficacy as an idiom in common usage'. As I show below, the village is effectively used to denote not only tranquillity, but also economic possibilities in relation to the city.

Independence

Where the images of village life diverge is in the kind of livelihood envisioned there. In this respect, the village is linked to a person's experience of and in the city, and in particular the experience of urban livelihood; even more specifically, the occupational conditions in the

construction industry. The positionality in this sector of the six men whose village accounts are discussed here can be broadly defined within an ascending hierarchy of expertise, pay and control over their labour in their roles as labourers, tradesmen and contractors. Beyond this broad categorisation, their working, familial and economic conditions were differently nuanced.

Dylan described an idea of village life as self-sufficient, in contrast to a life of dependency in the city. A rural life does not suggest social and economic mobility. Rather, the village is a place where autonomy can be attained. Dylan's intermittent employment as a day labourer meant that his earnings were limited, both because of the low hourly wage and the highly casual terms of employment. He and others like him had to engage in other intermittent income-generating strategies and odd jobs that ranged from, for instance, selling clothes and small items for an informal merchant, asking kin, acquaintances or passers-by for small sums of money, or asking politicians for cash. While these men were conscious that they were actively seeking out their own means of subsistence, they had a sense of being constantly dependent on someone else's goodwill to obtain it: contractors, potential buyers, politicians, kin, generous passers-by.

Thus, both within the context of employment in construction, where labourers are at the bottom of a skills-based hierarchy of work organisation and pay, and within their other economic activities where they must ask others for help to make ends meet, day labourers feel constantly dependent. In Dylan's description of a possible future village life, he would not necessarily be socially mobile or become wealthier per se.³ However, he would be able to eat what he could

cultivate, he would not be dependent on someone else to survive. He made direct comparisons between 'being dependent on all these people in the city' and the possibility of living an independent life in the countryside based on subsistence agriculture. The village therefore represents a place where one can fulfil an autonomous life, in the sense of not having to depend on others. In this context, the idea of personal autonomy, of being your 'own boss', plays a pivotal role in positive self-evaluation.

In the Caribbean, the significance of personal autonomy is historically linked to the institution of slavery (Lowenthal 1972: 9). Ethnographic studies have highlighted autonomy as an important value for many Caribbean people with reference to different economic practices (Safa 1986; Sampath 1997; Prentice 2015). An example of this is what Browne (2002; 2004) has described as 'creole economics' in Martinique: a set of culturally-informed and informal economic practices which rest on cross-class values that emphasise cleverness, intelligence and success. Tracing the relevance of creole economics as grounded in history, beginning with slavery and underlined by the necessity of the then poor Martiniquais to make use of a system not under their control, Browne (2002: 383) argues that beyond economic rationalities, creole economics responds to the need for 'personal autonomy, for freedom from an employer's rules, for the satisfaction of having an activity of one's own'. Below, I trace some aspects of the historical significance of slavery in Belize City, and the contemporary significance of personal autonomy, particularly in reference to work-related positionalities.

An *actual* move to the village does not necessarily correspond, however, to becoming more autonomous.

Alex had recently moved from Belize City to a village. While he enjoyed the quietness, he also reflected that his new life in the village 'is still a ghetto life, but *Ah* [I] stay righteous'. He still lived 'one day at the [a] time' and saw 'no way from here': being able to find different or better employment was only possible '*if ib drop inna my hand*' (if it drops into my hand). In a sense, while it is possible to attain a quiet life in the village, escaping from the grip of the city is difficult, and is generally understood as being outside of one's control. Alex depended on a low-income job and occasionally supplemented his wages through low-skilled labour in construction. He continued to depend on the city for this income, as he had done for most of his life when he was living in Belize City. Alex's description of village life was positive, while the negative elements of his life were associated with the urban environment which he frequented daily, in particular through his reference to 'ghetto life' (see, for example, Jaffe 2012). While he did not speak of his possible future livelihood in terms of a future in the village, he did point out how, by commuting every day to the city, he endured its grip, its life – which he could nevertheless escape from, from evening to early morning.

Moreover, moving to the village can itself be seen as something that is out of reach, because it requires capital and land. Many are excluded from the possibility of financially investing in land, and accessing it for residential or agricultural purposes is also difficult, as many city dwellers complained to me. An official report (GOB and CDB 2011) also highlighted that access to land (which is mostly state-owned) is tied to the recommendation of political representatives, and necessitates a knowledge of national regulations

which applicants may lack. In Dylan's case, any potential move to the village on his part was frustrated by family quarrels over land, and a lack of the basic capital needed to settle. 'If I ever win the lottery' was a phrase that suggested the rather ideal character of a possible move away from the city. This expression particularly highlights the unlikeliness of such an unexpected and fortuitous event, considering that one has to play four numbers in the 'lottery', in comparison to the more popular 'Boledo' lottery draw, which takes place every weekday, which consists of only two numbers (though the prizes are also much lower). The probability of winning the former is exponentially lower in comparison to the latter: winning the lottery is so improbable as to be close to impossible, while playing and winning the Boledo is an everyday practice among many Belizeans, and is used to bolster their wages through luck (Bradley 1973).

These expressions of deference to the improbable and the fortuitous run parallel to a similar fatalistic orientation that leaves the future to God's will and knowledge ('if God wants', 'only God knows'). I do not intend to conflate these two – chance and divine will – in terms of their relevance in relation to human agency. Rather, these expressions are recognitions of the limited influence that one has over the possibility of attaining a future different from the present. A sense of dependency and immobility emerges from comments about the 'system' designed to reproduce poverty, or what is at times referred to as the continuation of the days of slavery – often by labourers when speaking of their work.

At the same time, the slavery imagery is evoked in remarks about the condition of 'mental slavery'. I found

this concept to be widely used. For instance, when chatting with a friend in her front yard, she pointed out that she wanted to move to a new house, not least because of a bad relationship with her neighbours across the street. Her son, in his mid-20s, had had to learn the hard way that he should have listened to her repeated warnings not to hang his laundry outdoors before leaving the house. The clothes went missing one day, and she blamed the neighbours, whom she said had never worked in their lives and resorted to theft because they were under 'mental slavery'. By stealing, she reasoned, they were taking something they thought they had a right to, instead of working and earning what they needed.

'Mental slavery' is generally used to refer to Belizeans being trapped in a paralysing mentality, according to which they are owed a livelihood. The idea of 'mental slavery' comes from a speech by the Jamaican Pan-African political leader Marcus Garvey (Garvey and Hill 1990: 791). Garvey visited Belize, then a British colony, four times (Ashdown 1990), and his speeches have been popularised and given resonance by the Jamaican singer Bob Marley, whose 'Redemption Song' reproduced Garvey's speech, and is popular in Belize.

Interestingly, this vernacular understanding of one's conditions in the city, and in particular in the former colonial capital and currently the country's largest urban centre, parallels the historical significance of the rural. In Belize, the interior was historically a place of forced labour, from the time of the British settlement in the seventeenth century, when slaves were brought to work in the timber-extraction-oriented economy (Bulmer-Thomas and Bulmer-Thomas 2012). However, the

interior was also the main avenue through which to seek opportunities for freedom. Compared to the slaves living in what is now Belize City, or in plantations elsewhere in the Caribbean, those working in small crews in mahogany camps were more likely to be able to escape towards Spanish territory (Bolland 1977). Moreover, the rural interior was a locus of independent communities of runaway slaves (maroons) from the colonial centre in Belize (Bolland 2003: 46, 72-73) and the Caribbean more widely (Carnegie 1987; Besson 2015; Price 2015). As Johnson (2019) has shown, for contemporary *rural* Belizeans, the village represents freedom in contrast to life in Belize City, and the possibility of working at their own rhythm and time without a boss. Thus, while the conditions in the city are expressed through slave imagery (its continuation both in contemporary forms of livelihood and exploitation) and in mental terms (as an attitude towards the world and others), the country's interior continues to hold a sense of freedom for city inhabitants.

Determinate presents, determinate futures

In order to look comparatively at the different inflections by which the village is signified in relation to the present working and material conditions in the city, I borrow from Jansen (2016: 464), who highlights 'uncertainty of outcome' as a condition for hope. Jansen discusses how people deal with and valorise indeterminacy in relational and historical terms in post-Yugoslav, Europe-oriented Bosnia and Herzegovina. Here, I interrogate how the differing meanings attributed to

the village can be traced to whether understandings of one's position as dependent or autonomous in one's present life are seen as indeterminate or not. I argue that material circumstances determine the kinds of hopes and aspirations that people have for a potential move to the village. Moreover, the lack of indeterminacy perceived in city life limits the extent to which these hopes and aspirations are seen as being attainable. The determinate present condition is voiced in terms of the continuation of the history of slavery into contemporary labour relationships and working conditions. The village represents a possible discontinuity from these conditions, a potential attainment of autonomy, but it is limited by the relationships traceable in the city and often voiced as being beyond one's control.

The extent to which future endeavours are beyond one's control should not be mistaken for an impossibility or an inability to imagine, as reality and experience do not hinder imagination as a faculty. For instance, Wardle (1999: 534) shows how, in severe social conditions, it was possible for ordinary Jamaicans in the capital city to pursue the meaning of freedom through 'imaginative displacement' which 'mirrors a practical experience of movement'. In a different context, Fumanti's (2016) work with young artists in post-apartheid Namibia shows how imagination opens up possibilities for freedom. Imagination entails 'the capacity to relocate oneself in the world' through intentionally engaging with the real, yet going beyond its constriction (ibid.: 125-126). Indeed, experience and imagination are deeply linked, and my aim is not to argue for a severing of the faculty of imagination based on experience, or that the village is the only place imagined by my interlocutors in the construction industry or the

inhabitants of Belize City. Rather, I aim to show that the commonly evoked images of the village represent a reflexive engagement with an experiential (and existential) condition, which is thought to be determined to a certain extent, given by one's positionality within the urban environment and in the labour market.

Those who see their future as defined by a lack of indeterminacy are not short of imagination; rather, their aspirations and hopes, which are projected onto the imaginary surrounding the village, are limited, and are dependent on their economic and social conditions. Both the 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai 2013: 179-196) and to 'hope' (Hage and Papadopoulos 2004) are argued to be unevenly distributed within society. The village, as an open signifier, indexes the differential distribution of these hopes and aspirations. By this, I mean that by looking at the different meanings of village life, it is possible to trace '*what makes possible (particular kinds of) hope*' (Jansen 2016: 460, original emphasis) for those who hope for a different life in the village, within particular historical terms and occupational positions. Understanding the village as an open signifier allows one to see that frustration with the conditions of life in the city can be so high that it limits one's aspirations for what would be possible to achieve in the village. This is particularly relevant when thinking of the village as a place one could move to from the city. Hage (2009: 98) notes that for migrants, physical mobility runs parallel to 'existential' mobility. The latter is an 'imagined/felt movement' (ibid.): 'when a person feels well, they actually imagine and feel that they are moving well'. The migrant is physically mobile because he is pursuing existential mobility. However, 'as there is an imaginary existential mobility, there is

an imagined existential stuntedness' (ibid.: 99), a sense of 'going nowhere', which is increasingly normalised in the current context of permanent crisis.⁴ Belizeans refer to a sense of crisis because of a normalised lack of change (Vigh 2008: 11). This sense of stagnancy, ranging from the societal to the psychological, is evident in the accounts of what moving to the village means, also in existential and socioeconomic terms. In light of this, I argue that tranquillity is seen as an attainable condition, since 'quietness' is an assumed feature of the village. Having a quiet life is determined only by one's actual relocation to the village, in contrast with the kind of productive life which is determined more heavily by the felt control over one's fate.

John's and William's views illustrate these points. Both were tradesman in the construction industry and their income was based on this activity. By virtue of their skills, they commanded a higher hourly rate of pay and had a more stable employment pattern compared to labourers, although broadly speaking their work was still casual and far from constant. John was a welder who mainly worked independently and William was a mason who was employed by others but, because of his skill set, had the potential to become self-employed. Their livelihoods in the city were more autonomous, in comparison to the labourers and they had more established networks on which they could rely in terms of securing work. As John, a 32-year-old welder from Belize City, told me: 'I did everything, you know? I know how to do this'. He proudly showed me how his knowledge had permitted him to add an extra floor to the cement house of his partner, where the two of them were living with her child from a different relationship. Even though he had worked on his city dwelling,

however, he made it clear to me that he would have liked to go to the village where his family was from, a quiet place in comparison with the city, in which he had just recovered from a shooting. Stressing his skills as a worker, he also emphasised how proud he was of working independently. He highlighted his autonomy, saying that he was doing his 'own thing' and being his own boss.

In their accounts, William and John do not discuss the economic aspects of a potential move, and because of their employability, they would be able to continue in their present work by commuting to the city. In fact, labourers must actively seek work on worksites, thus they need to be physically present in the area in order to find employment, and they are rather interchangeable as a workforce from the perspective of their employers. By contrast, tradesmen need to be trusted because of their knowledge and role in the sequential nature of construction work (Thiel 2013: 77). They are also directly employed by contractors or customers who know them by their reputation. Thus, for John and William, the village mainly represents a 'quiet' place in which to live, and not an envisioned detachment from the relationships dictated by their livelihood. While they would have preferred a more economically rewarding occupation, their position was *relatively* more autonomous, both in terms of occupational relationships and relationships of dependence on others due to material scarcity.

Autonomy is an aspirational or positively valued condition, and the degree of autonomy one has can be compared with that of others. By looking at workers' positions within the industry, and the social and economic consequences of these positions, it is

possible to trace a continuum between dependency and autonomy. The former is clearly embodied by labourers, who like Dylan and Alex depend on others: for their wages (contractors); in terms of receiving instructions while labouring (tradesmen); and to make a living (kin, acquaintances). In the middle, tradesman like William and John depend on contractors for employment, but on the worksite they also direct others (labourers) and, by virtue of their skills, have a certain autonomy in respect to contractors when it comes to work rhythm and organisation. Moreover, they can also accept smaller contracts on their own, becoming autonomous for some time, and by virtue of their higher earnings are less in need of others when it comes to making ends meet. At the other end of the continuum are the contractors. They are not employed by others, they direct workers on site, and they have a higher economic position, which makes them autonomous, as is discussed further in the final section.

Opportunities

For Afro-descendant populations, a rural lifestyle represented independence following emancipation from slavery (Johnson 2005), but the colonial administration legally discouraged landholding, as it would have severed the supply of wage labour (Bolland and Shoman 1977). The practice of cultivating land for self-sufficiency by slaves continued after emancipation, and the few who had the means became small planters (Shoman 2011 [1994]). The development of agriculture has been slow in Belize due to a variety of internal and international political and economic factors hindering

self-sufficiency (Wilk 2006). Land has been monopolised by a few big owners (Bolland and Shoman 1977), although the land for smallholders is relatively more available than in neighbouring countries (Moberg 1997). Commercial farming on a small scale thus represents a possible avenue for profit in contrast to wage labour (Johnson 2019), while being restricted in terms of access to land, and the environmental factors and market fluctuations which have played a key role in reproducing unequal relationships since colonial times.

Because of their knowledge and means, for the contractors Pete and Juan the village represents a possible avenue for starting a business venture. These two men recognised the difficulties of working in construction at the time of my fieldwork, and thought about the village as a possible place in which to reinvest since they had the means to do so. As I show below, these contractors see the village as possibly profitable and take a different stance on village life to that of the workers (either labourers or tradesmen). I argue that they see their autonomy as resting upon the indeterminacy within which they can act. As such, their view of the village is a continuation of an autonomous position made possible because they have the means, and they see themselves as able to exercise control over their actions in both the present and the future.

Pete was a contractor in his late forties, the father of a son and a daughter in their teens. He came from a village, where he had helped his parents by selling food and cultivating land for subsistence, before moving to work with his father as a carpenter for a citrus company. He moved to Belize City in the early 1990s, where he worked as a labourer and, after various jobs, as a building contractor. He told me that '*t[h]ings* are slow

now': it was difficult to keep up with the rising bureaucratic standards for construction and the availability of the big companies, so he would 'have to stay *pan de* [on the] move too'. While there were people asking him to work, he often had to go back to piecemeal work and to ask for work from others, thus partially losing the autonomy he had acquired: 'At my tender age of 47, I am deciding to quit, you know? I *gat* [got] enough too because you know it's too much trouble. Because we have a lot of competition...'

Indeed, if Pete had been able to sell his house, he would have happily moved to the United States with his spouse, with the help of his brother-in-law. Alternatively, he was thinking about moving to the village where his parents had also moved thirteen years ago. They had bought machinery and a van in order to farm 'at a better rate' and to sell their products at the local market. Therefore, Pete also thought about moving to the village as an alternative to joining the considerable Belizean diaspora in the United States (Babcock and Conway 2002). To cultivate the land, 'you have to be smart', he remarked to me, hinting at the knowledge of agriculture he had acquired while helping his family in their field as a child, as well as while working in citrus plantations as a young man. Thus, the transition from construction to farming was a tangible possibility for him, since he had a good understanding of both fields.

Juan, a 51-year-old contractor and the father of two sons in their early twenties, also thought of moving away from Belize City. Tired of the slow market and of working with 'irresponsible people', and feeling like a change after having worked in construction for twelve years, he wanted to go back to the farm he owned. 'Sometimes you don't see people for days!' he

said with satisfaction, echoing the importance of the village's quietness. Since he had a property in the city, he was thinking of the possibility of opening a café or a juice shop, where he could process and sell his own produce. He even asked me if I wanted to participate in the business, since I told him that I had worked on and off in the catering industry while studying. He was aware of how he could use his current resources to shift from construction to agriculture and catering, while at the same time being aware of the positive 'quietness' of the rural setting.

For both Pete and Juan, the village and agriculture were a place and an activity in which to invest, to change their current source of income while retaining control over their economic actions. Therefore, this imagery of the village, which has a quiet character that is evoked in different ways, is also influenced in its formulation by the conditions and possibilities available to subjects who are differentially positioned in socioeconomic terms, in particular within the hierarchy of the construction industry. For contractors, the autonomy they have in terms of moving and working, hiring others and managing resources, means a degree of freedom and the recognition of being their 'own boss'. A slow market might prompt the consideration of a possible exit from the construction industry, in order to invest in other kinds of endeavours. As Juan and Pete say, the village is where they might be able to reinvest and eventually relocate, taking advantage of more profitable business niches. This is a continuation of their entrepreneurship and their position as being in control of their livelihoods which, especially in the case of Pete, potentially corresponded to a loss of autonomy, as he was shifting from employer to employee. On

the contrary, especially for day labourers, the volatile occupational conditions and the constant search for opportunities rather suggests dependency.

Contractors do not see themselves as directly dependent on others for their business, because it is their abilities and skills that make them marketable and trusted by customers. For them, indeterminacy is framed in terms of the market, in the sense that how well they do economically depends on the availability of contracts and of opportunities to build. While they recognise that the capacity to make a profit *vis-à-vis* the market depends on their capacities as entrepreneurs, the market conditions themselves, in this case the unfavourable 'slow market', are seen as being outside of their control. While an understanding of markets as being beyond human control seems to be more aptly applied to finance and global flows (Maurer 2006), and keeping in mind the fact that anthropological analyses have warned against the reproduction of ideas of markets as abstract (Ho 2009: 33-38), contractors talk of the construction market with a degree of detachment, in terms of their capacity to control its fluctuations. In addition, there are other conditions which impact construction work and which do not depend directly on their actions, such as the weather and the availability and conditions of materials and tools (Applebaum 1981).

As such, contractors treat the indeterminacy of the market in which they operate as the factor that influences the success or failure of their business ventures – the profit margin. Thus, the slow market becomes the trigger by which new and more profitable investments can be made in terms of agriculture. This is possible, and in sharp contrast with the mere possi-

bility of autonomy for labourers, because they have the material resources to allow for their aspirations to be fulfilled if they wish. Their future success as entrepreneurs is again tied to future conditions, and in this case different markets, which they see as indeterminate. In this sense, the continuation of their autonomous condition is possible in the village because the very foundation of it, making a profit rather than earning a wage, is in their capacity to act within changing conditions.

Whether or not Juan and Pete will move to the village to invest in land does not affect the fact that, in their accounts of village life, there is continuity in terms of the life they have in the city, and they express a sense of the attainability of village life. Framed as indeterminate in terms of their economic activity and showing their understanding of agency as independent actors, their accounts of the rural index their current position in the city's economy and within the hierarchy of the construction industry. The indeterminacy which underlines the investment practices of contractors as businesspeople, and which is constitutive of their feeling of independence, also allows them to see the rural as a place of further economic venture and diversification. Thus, for Juan and Pete, the village signifies a possible change of livelihood in order to maintain the continuity of their position as autonomous actors in control of their resources and time.

Thus, whereas the *lack of* indeterminacy that Dylan and Alex feel limits the extent to which they see their hopes and aspirations as being attainable, for Pete and Juan it is the *presence of* indeterminacy that allows for their current business and which informs their more concrete ideas about future village life. The continuum between dependency and autonomy runs in the same

direction and is linked to a continuum between the conditions of determinacy and indeterminacy. The positionalities which are the most dependent are also the ones in which subjects see their conditions as the most determinate. Labourers see their conditions as determinate, while the village as an aspiration to autonomy – a break in dependency – is seen as being outside the realm of their choice or effort. For contractors, autonomy is predicated on the potential created by indeterminacy. The village signifies a discontinuity with their business in construction, but a continuation of their autonomous position. In the middle, tradesmen stand with their feet in both camps: while they are more autonomous than labourers, they are not as independent as contractors, and they juggle determinacy as workers and indeterminacy as small entrepreneurs. Thus for all of the men, their village accounts are in continuity with their lives in the city; only the sense of tranquillity in the village is shared among them all, regardless of occupation.

Conclusion

Accounts of village life do not only shed light on ideas about the rural, but also deepen an understanding of how the city is experienced by its inhabitants. This article opens a possibility of analysing, through village accounts, how urban dwellers frame their present living and working conditions. Rather than confining the village descriptions to a past-oriented and idyllic framework, the rural has been analysed as an open signifier that indexes urban dwellers' conditions

expressed in the various existential, experiential and economic meanings they give to the village.

I have framed the meanings of rural life in terms of hopes and aspirations shaped by one's conditions in two ways: firstly, in terms of the kind of life envisioned in the village, that is, what one sees oneself doing in the village; and secondly, in terms of the extent to which one's particular hopes are deemed attainable, that is, to what extent one sees one's own version of village life as dependent on one's will and within one's reach. I have grouped these hopes by their content, focusing firstly on quietness and secondly on economic life. On the one hand, I have shown that while attaining quietness depends on one's actual move to the village, it is seen as attainable by all if one does so. It depends *only* on the possibility of relocating to a rural area. On the other hand, the kind of livelihood possible in the village does not depend only on an unequal distribution of resources (the means to establish an economic activity in the village), but also on the extent to which workers understand their actions as determinate or indeterminate.

I have added a focus on autonomy, as both a position in which one sees oneself and as a condition to which people aspire. In juxtaposing the continuum between determinacy and indeterminacy with one of dependency and autonomy, I have shown that they run in parallel in terms of the present conditions of labourers, tradesman and contractors. Moreover, autonomy is valued by all, and frames the extent to which hopes are seen as potentially achievable.

In using the term 'open signifier', I emphasise how the village has a common character of quietness, but its value in economic and relational terms varies. In

looking at how the village is signified with different hopes that are unequally distributed, I have painted a picture of how the men I spoke with see themselves in the city. I argue that the ways in which they do so, specifically in this context, emphasise their placement in the city in terms of physical vulnerability and their degree of personal autonomy.

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Notes

- 1 https://dataunodc.un.org/gsh_app (accessed 25 August 2019).
- 2 This is the only translation from Spanish used in this article. The other direct quotes use a mix of Standard English and Belizean Kriol spelling to reproduce as closely as possible the degree of mixture of the two languages.

- 3 This sense of being stuck recalls other commentaries about Belizean 'stasis' in social and political terms (Iyo and Rosberg 2002; Cocom 2014 [<http://belizeanminds.blogspot.com/2014/07/perspectives-on-belizean-status-quo.html>, accessed 25 August 2019]).
- 4 Construction workers, on the whole, are subject to harsh economic conditions. In fact, in urban areas, construction and manufacturing are amongst the sectors with the highest poverty rates, below only the 'informal sector' which includes 'casual workers, hustling' (GOB and CDB 2011: 80).

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