# Under the wire

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# Under the wire
## *Splintered time and ongoing temporariness in Accra's electropolis*

Katherine Dawson

*This paper discusses the occupation of an electricity transmission line right-of-way (ROW) at a busy interchange to the western edge of Accra, Ghana. In planning documents, ROWs are depicted as open spaces and obtaining permits to develop the land is prohibited. However, across the city, people continue to live and work under the wire, describing their occupancy as one of ongoing temporariness. Drawing from fourteen months of ethnographic research in Accra, I unpack the production of this urban temporality and argue that this ongoing temporariness is not linear, but should rather be understood as a condition punctured by events which both threaten and re-establish temporary occupation. I contend that it is only by attending closely to a splintered temporality, that we may grapple with the ways in which ongoing temporariness takes hold in cities marked by uneven access to land, income and capital.*

## Under the wire

As we sat in the shadows of the electricity transmission wires that draped across Awoshie Junction—a busy interchange to the western edge of Accra—Bright told me that he and the others shouldn't really be working here. As a taxi stopped on the side of the road, he paused and attended

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to the vehicle's puncture, hooking up his rumbling air compressor to a tyre, via a makeshift pipe. Bright and the others occupied an electric transmission line right-of-way (ROW): a designated strip of land, stretching 30–40 metres either side of an overhead electricity wire. Established in order to preserve and maintain the electricity transmission infrastructure, as well as ensure the safety of nearby populations, ROWs remain as open space zones in official planning documents and obtaining permits for development within these demarcations is prohibited.[1] While many transmission lines pass through less densely inhabited places, a significant length of the network passes through urban areas, where substations convert the voltage for local distribution. Here, as transmission lines pass through cities like Accra, the ROWs carve up urban space into designated zones of illegality. While there are policies in place for the compensation of land owners and users during the acquisition of land for the construction of pylons, lines and ROWs, once the ROW is established, any activities or structures that encroach into these designated zones are subject to removal without compensation.[2] Despite these established zones, as you move through the city, it is not uncommon to see people living and working in the ROWs (Today Ghana 2017) and as an occupant at Awoshie Junction pithily expressed, 'from Akosombo to Axim, there are people under the wires'.[3]

Thinking through urban life under the wire draws our attention to the infrastructural interfaces that shape the making and experience of the city (Graham and Marvin 2001). In particular, it renders visible the infrastructure that facilitates flows of energy and power across the city, exposing the landscape as, in part, an electropolis (Graham and Marvin 2001). In Accra, as elsewhere, the electropolis remains marked by fragmentation. As Silver observes, 'the ongoing interruption experienced across the city is produced by the historical development of the electricity network within and beyond Accra, which has resulted in a fragmented, splintered infrastructure that reinforces urban inequalities' (2016, 984). Indeed, despite Ghana boasting one of the highest levels of access to energy in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2021; IEA.org 2019), access to electricity remains fractious and intermittent. In the years of the Mahama presidency (2012–2017), regular and persistent power shortages plagued the nation. Christened *dumsor*—translated as 'off and on'—this electrical geography was felt unevenly, with those able to access generators likely more immune to the unpredictability of *dumsor*.[4] Accounts under the wire also point to a different kind of urban splintering to that rendered visible by Silver. Indeed, while Accra's electric infrastructure sets in motion fragmented energy flows, as Bright and others explained, the materiality of this energy scaffolding also carves out its own fractious geographies of contested occupation in the shadows of the overhead transmission wires.

However, as I listened to residents at Awoshie Junction share their accounts of life under the wire, they elicited not only notions of material splintering and contested occupation, but evoked their experience through the dimensions of temporality. In particular, the language of temporariness reigned supreme in these accounts, with residents explaining, for example, that 'we know we are temporary. It's not a permanent place'. Encompassing threats of state removal, of physical displacement, as well as of return, their stories of occupation exposed the temporality of life under the wire. As Bright explained,

10 years ago, the government came and removed everyone because of the wires. I packed up all my things, but within three months, I came back. They haven't come back again, but we are all waiting, we are all waiting if they will come back again. Maybe they will not come again, maybe they will come. We are here as, how should I say, as temporary.

Critically, despite what they understood to be their temporary status—or indeed, 'displaceability' (Yiftachel 2020)—in the long-run, Bright and others reiterated that they had remained under the wire. In this way, both temporary and ongoing occupation were not seen as mutually exclusive, but rather, together, captured a sense of *ongoing temporariness* which characterised their residing under the wire. I suggest that this condition of ongoing temporariness under the wire serves to expose yet another form of infrastructure at play in the electropolis— that of time (Besedovsky et al. 2019).

To write of time as an infrastructure is to follow Besedovsky et al. (2019), who, by engaging with the multiplicity of urban temporalities that animate our contemporary cities, argue that time itself may be usefully understood as an infrastructural process. As an analytic that stresses mechanisms of mediation, they argue that 'approaching time through the notion of infrastructures allows us to outline how time not merely reflects, but also effects, enables, constrains, and preconfigures contemporary urban life' (Besedovsky et al., 584). Significantly, they argue that this optic allows us to unpack the power relations productive of urban temporalities, exposing the terms through which the city's uneven temporal terrains are reproduced (Besedovsky et al. 2019) I take these positions forward and dialogue with them through the temporalities described by Bright and others. In this respect, I posit ongoing temporariness under the wire as an infrastructure, intersecting as it does with the energetic flows and the material infrastructure of the electropolis.

Drawing from fourteen-months of ethnographic data, in this paper, I recall the unfolding of a specific set of events that followed threats of removal by the local state to those under the wire at Awoshie Junction. I detail the ways in which these threats prompted a set of exchanges between occupants, a landlord and the state, which together served to secure extended temporary occupation. Indeed, as Elliott-Cooper reminds us in a reading of displacement temporalities—'displacement is never a one-off event but a series of attritional micro-events that unfold over time' (Elliot-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2019, 11). Thus, I argue that while residents spoke of long-term temporariness, like the story Bright recounted, this was a condition punctured by momentary events where temporary occupation was both threatened and subsequently re-established. In this way, I contend that ongoing temporariness is not a linear process, but should rather be understood as a condition interspersed by events that suspend temporariness into the realm of potential re-making— alluding to Guyer's (2007) notion of a 'punctuated' temporality. In this way, we can read ongoing temporariness through an analysis that positions *time itself* as something splintered: as fragmented, fractious, variously experienced and variously made through a set of non-linear processes (Figure 1).

Indeed, while authors have written on the splintering of space, networks and infrastructure to understanding the city's uneven terrains, this paper

**Figure 1:** Kiosks, shops and market infrastructure under the wire at Awoshie Junction. Author's own image, 2018.

foregrounds time itself as a splintered phenomenon. In doing so, the paper guards against conflations between the enduring and the linear in our reading of ongoing temporariness, and instead opens-up analyses which examine the specific fragments of time through which longer term temporal conditions are re-made. Thus, in this paper, I look at a specific fragment of time at Awoshie Junction, examining the set of events, material relations, social histories and governing practices which together, served to reproduce the longer-term condition of ongoing temporariness.

The paper begins by presenting the research space at Awoshie Junction more closely, following which I detail the long-term structural reproduction of temporary conditions under the wire. Building on interviews with residents, as well as metropolitan planning officials and employees at district government offices, I argue that residing under the wire exposes the city as a terrain structured by uneven access to land, income and capital. I suggest that while elucidating the broader inequalities of the city, in order to understand the making of ongoing temporariness, we must look to those events which splinter this longer-term condition. I contend that it is only by attending closely to this splintered temporality, that we might grapple with the ways in which ongoing temporariness takes form and thus by extension, render visible the terms on which temporary conditions in an unequal city may become 'permanently stabilized and/or institutionalized' (Goldstone and Obarrio 2016, 13).

## Temporary horizons at Awoshie Junction

Home to approximately 4 million inhabitants, Accra is the capital city of Ghana, located on the nation's southern Atlantic coast. Sprawling at its edges and consolidating in emerging centres, the city has been described as a 'variegated and contradictory metropolis' (Quayson 2014, 4). Accra was once a string of fishing villages and European forts, which accommodated the expanding population of the Ga ethnic group. Following its designation as the capital of the Gold Coast in 1876, the city grew significantly and its landscape rapidly changed into an urban centre (Parker 2000). Now, as neither 'global nor traditional … neither formal nor informal, neither fully urban nor rural in orientation', contemporary Accra has been positioned as the 'quintessential globalizing city' (Grant 2009, 154). A diverse set of historical and contemporary analyses have engaged with the contested spaces of the city, exploring, among other facets, the politics of displacements and the occupation of public space (Afenah 2012; Fält 2016; Gillespie 2016; Morrison 2017; Spire and Choplin 2018). Together, these examinations dialogue with the so-called 'Southern turn' in urban studies (Lawhon and Truelove 2020). These analyses speak to a vast literature which serves to animate a multitude of ongoing practices and processes related to urban evictions, slum removals, dispossessions, displacement, and gentrification on the one hand, and the related lenses of collective action, resistance and slum habitus on the other (Bayat 2000; Benjamin 2008; Banerjee-Guha 2010; Goldman 2011; Ghertner 2011; Watson 2013; Gillespie 2015; Choplin and Ciavolella 2016; Wilhelm-Solomon 2016; Brickell, Fernandez Arrigoitia, and Vasudevan 2017; Leitner and Sheppard 2017).

While this paper does engage with this work to some extent, it also departs from some of the assumptions embedded in some of these analyses. Indeed, while offering theoretical insights into the multiple manifestations of contested urban occupation, as Ong critically observes, both theoretical approaches—of neoliberal logics and subaltern resistance—'bear a Marxist pedigree and are thus overdetermined in their privileging of capitalism as the only mechanism and class struggle as the only resolution to urban problems' (2011, 2). As such, Ong argues that viewing urban phenomena through the universalising lenses of 'global capitalism' or 'postcolonial agency' tends to cast 'different sites as instantiations of either a singular economic system or the same political form of globalisation' thus losing sight of complex urban situations: situations that 'cannot be mapped out in advance as being on the side of power or on the side of resistance' (Ong 2011, 2, 9). In this way, the tendency to continually default to constructed 'binaries between the powerful and exploited, the elite and the excluded' (Simone and Pieterse 2017, 12)—and with this paper in mind, the smooth and disruptive—fundamentally limits our capacity to theorise beyond predisposed readings of power in a politics of urban occupation. As Simone and Pieterse argue, in order to grapple with the 'real city', we must abandon endlessly rediscovering the existence of neoliberal spatial processes and instead commit to releasing empirical details from the grips of pre-existing dispositions, 'treat[ing] them as secretions that may mix and congeal in ways that go beyond our available vocabularies' (2017, 59; see also Parnell and Robinson 2012). I take these positions forward in the analysis presented below, detailing the ways in

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which conditions of temporariness are reproduced at specific moments in time, through distinct conjunctures of materiality, state-citizen interfaces and both historically-produced and place-specific socialities—which together, fail to take shape within the predefined remits of citizen versus state or oppression versus resistance.

The paper is set within the space of a popular suburb of Awoshie, in Western Greater Accra—a space which has experienced significant population growth,[5] land consolidation processes and infrastructural development. The paper presents research conducted at Awoshie Junction—one of the city's interchanges. Forging a link between an East–West road that spans across the urban region with a road that extends towards the northern-most part of the Greater Accra Region, Awoshie Junction constitutes an important hub of connection, linking Awoshie to the central Accra Metropolitan areas, other suburbs and other regions beyond Accra. Awoshie Junction is a significant landmark in the city and is a place through which flows of people, goods and vehicles pass through relentlessly. Young men cart recycled copper; young women carry cold drinks for sale to passing traffic; tipper trucks transport sand and stones; *trotros* collect school-going children and street-side pastors share the word of god. The junction is, in the words of De Boeck, a kind of 'thickening' (2016), where the energies of the city coalesce around its time-spaces and await their redistribution into the elsewheres of Accra. Though issues related to urbanity in Accra have been widely theorised, places like Awoshie Junction, which resist easy classification, have tended to remain 'off the map' (Robinson 2006). Rather, attention has focused on spaces like the slum, commercial centres, the rapidly shifting peri-urban fringe, or indeed centred on specific neighbourhoods or housing (Gough and Yankson 2000; Doan and Oduro 2012; Barry and Danso 2014). Yet, as the visual meditation, Lagos/Koolhaas (2002) reminds us, the [West African] city may be understood, in part, as a series of connecting intersections, where things and people coalesce and disperse simultaneously. Grounding our understanding of ongoing temporariness in these spaces presents an important way of engaging with the realities of the city, offering up alternative readings of urban environments beyond pre-existing geographical references.

Keen to pursue ethnographic methods, I had been invited by a friend, Afia, to her Auntie's beauty salon at Awoshie Junction, suggesting that, given my gender, this could be an appropriate place for me to spend some time. The salon was located at the roadside, which besides the salon, hosted a string of shops and commercial activity: a mechanics workshop, a mobile money counter and a provisions store, as well as enterprises at the immediate roadside, which included a money exchange table, a popcorn dispenser, a cabinet displaying electrical items, a shoe repairer and a fast-food counter. Behind this string commercial activity were the homes of many of those who worked in these spaces. Occupants of this space knew each other and had spent several years working in close proximity. Some were related, some were good friends, others were in long-term romantic relationships and others were more or less peers. But while some relationships were stronger than others, most affected inhabitants conversed daily. Much of this exchange tended to centre around Lily's hair salon which occupied a prime position among the containers in this small stretch of the urban fabric. Whether they lived or worked close by,

people would often use the small space in front of the salon to pass to the road, making the salon a focal point for frequent social exchange. It was here that both pleasantries and arguments unfolded, acting somewhat like a stage in the local social arena. Sitting upon the porch chairs, people would often come and share neighbourhood news or discuss the plight of relatives who had recently travelled to the Middle East. Business also tended to be dense here, given that Afia occupied the salon's front porch where she displayed her jewellery for sale. Meanwhile, Kwame—Afia's boyfriend—utilised the electricity connection in the salon to shine light on the goods he displayed in the glass showcase positioned at the roadside. As I show, the junction, and the spatial realm surrounding the salon more specifically, emerged as a particular kind of locale—a milieu through which the politics of life under the wire would play out.

Over the course of fourteen months between 2017 and 2019, I built the bulk of my ethnographic data at Awoshie Junction, speaking with residents on an almost daily basis. I also moved out and beyond this immediate space to speak with a wider set of inhabitants, as well as to join occupants on visits to local district offices. In addition, interviews were carried out with planning officers at the Accra Municipal Assembly (AMA), the Town and Country Planning Department in Accra, the electricity transmission company (GRIDCo) and district governments. In the following section, I draw from these interviews and field notes to unpack some of the driving forces undergirding the occupation of space under the wire.

## An opportunity to make ends meet

The occupation of ROWs throughout Accra was often positioned as the outcome of population growth, uneven access to land and the relatively low incomes of a considerable number of the city's inhabitants. Officials at the AMA, district assemblies and GRIDCo explained that as existing urban areas become more populated through migration and natural population increases, finding a place for a home or business is extremely difficult, encouraging people to consider encroaching onto ROW land. A GRIDCo official explained,

> in the urban areas … after some time, you realise that because of expansions and development, those areas where nobody was living or carrying out any activities, you will now find people encroaching on those areas, as squatters … as it becomes more and more difficult for people to get land or space to do their things, you find that the activities of these encroachers keeps on increasing.

Moreover, given the high costs associated with buying or renting a piece of land, the authorities highlighted that the ROWs provide an opportunity for those with low incomes to occupy a space in the city, with a GRIDCo official adding that 'they look at it as if it is a free land. They don't have to buy the land, nobody has sold it, so they are just perching, they are squatters'. An urban planner at the AMA's Town & Country Planning Department reiterated this point, observing that 'in Accra, there are housing challenges and the value of land here is high, so people see the spaces as an opportunity to make ends meet'.

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According to traditional authority, the transmission wires were constructed across Awoshie Junction in the late 1970s. This is a high voltage line (161 kV) which carries power from generating stations at the Akosombo dam, via sub-stations through Accra (the Tema-Achimota-Mallam transmission line). Upon its construction, space surrounding the ROW at Awoshie Junction was sparsely populated, as residents, occupants and authorities regularly reflected upon Awoshie as historical 'bushland'. They often explained that 'maybe 15 to 20 years ago, these areas had houses and they were surrounded by bush ... Now it is packed, you won't get land here'. At Awoshie Junction, those occupying the ROW operate small businesses, as opposed to homes, including salons, mechanics, lottery operators, food outlets and provision stores. While some have occupied the ROW for 10–20 years, others had been present for 3–7 years, while some expressed they had recently arrived in the last few months, signalling the existence of a dynamic space with ongoing comings and goings.

Reasons provided by inhabitants for their occupation of the ROW shared many parallels with the sentiments expressed at planning authorities and district offices, largely related to the high cost of renting shops or containers and limited space in the city. Occupants also detailed the ambiguous realities associated with land under the wire, with inhabitants explaining that although the land belonged to the government (GRIDCo), there was a landlord who owned the land surrounding the ROW, who, they said, they were paying discounted rent to. Occupants explained that the presence and thus power of the landlord family had cemented over decades, such that, even though this land belonged to GRIDCo, de facto ownership lay somewhere between the government and the family-centred landlord[s]. Residents reiterated that finding space in Accra was difficult and even those spaces under the wire were in demand, giving value to land that should otherwise exist outside of the rental market. Thus, far from void, the spaces beneath the transmission wires had important histories beyond the ROW that gave shape to how they were inhabited in the present. As I show in greater depth, these histories shaped the ways in which the temporary both unravelled and was subsequently re-made.

In this way, ROW occupation in both Accra and Awoshie Junction more specifically, could be understood as the outcome of a series of relations that structure land and life in the city. The scarcity of space, low incomes and land-owning histories gave rise to a situation in which land under the wire was both desired and inhabited, and thus together undergirded a condition of 'displaceability' (Yiftachel 2020).

While offering an important vantage point from which to examine the driving forces of ROW occupation, these accounts reveal little of the repeated practices to re-secure temporary occupation. Indeed, while this perspective points to the demand for ROW land, what could explain the persistent remaking of their temporary occupation? I engage with this question by turning to the unfolding of a set of events at Awoshie Junction that I observed during fieldwork. In this respect, I build an ethnography of 'the near future' (Guyer 2007), summoning insights beyond a distant past, or a distant future and instead inviting an engagement with what Mbembe denotes as 'emerging time', or 'time that is appearing' (2001, 16). I show that while life for residents under the wire at Awoshie Junction may be understood as a condition of ongoing

temporariness, as occupants suggested in their narratives, their experience of ongoing temporariness was not linear, but was rather interrupted by events which served to both threaten and yet also re-establish temporary occupation.

The nature of these events allude to Guyer's (2007) understanding of 'punctuated time.' Indeed, in writing of the temporality of our shared present, Guyer observes that the contours of both 'formal and informal daily life', are perceived around 'a time that is punctuated rather than enduring: of fateful moments and turning points', such that 'the world itself falls increasingly into the disciplines of a punctuated time that fills the gap between an instantaneous present and altogether distant future' (2007, 416–417).

In this sense, while understood as an ongoing temporariness, life under the wire was 'punctuated' by specific moments, turning points and events, that had both threatened their occupation and provided a means of re-securing a temporary presence.

I extend this notion of punctuated time, by thinking about splintered time, to be read alongside the more common renditions of both splintered infrastructure and splintered space. Significantly, understanding seemingly persistent conditions through the lens of a fragmented temporality, allows us to unpack the specific ways in which such conditions are reproduced at particular moments of time.

In the following ethnographic account, I detail a specific fragment of time in the longer condition of temporariness under the wire. In doing so, I draw attention to the specific processes and practices through which temporary occupation was both unravelled and re-established. This set of events then, can be understood as a splinter of time in the longer mode of ongoing temporarinesss.

## The temporary unravelled

We were now entering October. The rainy months had been relatively quiet. Whether it was that people weren't coming to do their hair or people weren't interested in upgrading their mobile phones, complaints circulated that people were not spending money and the market was tough. These rumblings were soon eclipsed by a more imminent issue. One morning, members of the local city authority had approached the commercial containers immediately beneath and adjacent to the transmission wires and, in large letters, spray painted 'Remove Now' on the fronts of the structures. This included Lily's salon, among other containers and more mobile roadside enterprises. Residents anxiously asked each other questions. Why now? Why had they heard little from the government for some time, but something had materialised this month? Who or what was 'behind' this?

For many, what they described as 'development' was the reason for the increased presence of the government and thus the explanation for the current eviction threats. By 'development', residents recounted the recent history through which Awoshie Junction became 'the recipient of a large array of spatial interventions and products' (Simone and Pieterse 2017, 24). Inhabitants discussed the construction of a multi-lane road which stretches from Awoshie Junction to other rapidly expanding suburbs in the metropolitan region. This
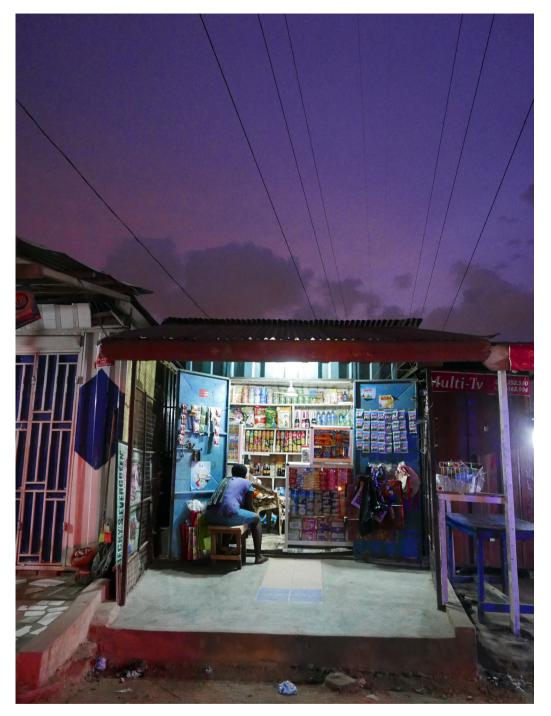
**Figure 2:** A shop under the wire at Awoshie Junction. Author's own image, 2018.

project, they argued, had increased the junction's visibility and brought the planning authorities to these spaces, prior to which the main mode of state encounter was via tax collection—which was not seen to threaten their physical occupation under the wire. An official at the local government expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that the reality of occupation under the wire came to visibility during the road construction.

For others, they stressed that a new government led by the New Patriotic Party (NPP) had brought into power a new administration at the local government level, which they argued presented more problems than the previous government, led by the National Democratic Congress (NDC). As was explained, 'the NDC won't disturb you like the NPP will'. Others speculated that the landlord may have taken the opportunity to attempt to extract extra rent or extend their power. They pointed to a large charismatic church across the road which, at the time, was engaged in a land dispute and was responsible for the removal of a significant number of commercial structures. These occupants, now without shops for their enterprises, had expressed an interest in the ROW land (Figure 2).

For many, moving from Awoshie was unthinkable. Prior to the threat of imminent displacement, inhabitants had explained that any urban fabric beneath the transmission wires, including that of their own, took the form of temporary structures. By temporary structures, they referred to tables, roadside kiosks and containers made of aluminium or other metal composites. While these structures were not permitted, it was argued that their materiality would render them movable if necessary. In this way, they argued that the materialities of their workspaces played a role 'in their long-term sustenance' (Moatasim 2019, 273). Yet, when faced with imminent eviction, these materialities emerged as far less mobile than had been described. For the salon, a concrete foundation, a tiled concrete porch and an electricity connection meant that Lily would lose significant material capital invested in her business. Others expressed similar concerns, arguing that the core concrete fabric undergirding their structures would be entirely lost. Meanwhile, even if some aspects of these structures could be dismantled, recovered and reassembled elsewhere, where this elsewhere would be remained problematic. Occupants complained that they had paid rent to the landlord which would be irrecoverable and had little funds to support paying rent elsewhere, particularly as prized roadside space was both hard to come by and expensive. Additionally, their clienteles were embedded in the surrounding spaces and these businesses relied upon loyal clients, coming to do their hair or customers regularly purchasing goods. In addition to paying rent to the landlord, occupants also stressed that despite not having structural permits for their containers or kiosks, they frequently engaged with the local state, paying taxes to revenue collectors for the business operation, which for them, indicated a sense of legitimacy to their occupation.

In these accounts, residents rendered visible the 'gray' nature of life under the wire (Yiftachel 2009, 90). For Yiftachel, 'gray spaces' can be understood as 'partially incorporated people, localities and activities…positioned somewhere between the 'whiteness' of legality/approval/safety, and the 'blackness' of eviction/destruction/death' (2009, 89). These spaces, he argues, are 'usually tolerated quietly, often even encouraged, while being encaged within discourses of 'contamination', 'criminality' and 'public danger' to the desired 'order of things', indeed, 'concurrently tolerated and condemned, perpetually waiting 'to be corrected' (2009, 89–90). In this way, gray space is not eliminated, but rather maintained by a 'politics of un-recognition' accompanied by marginalizing indifference', where occasional threats may be

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'performed' (2009, 92). These mechanisms, he argues, undergird the making of cities characterised by persistent informalities—of spaces suspended in a 'permanent temporariness' (Yiftachel 2009, 90). Set within the complex realities of gray space, leaving Awoshie Junction was to be avoided. Yet, occupants recognised that this land formally belonged to the government, not to make way for some other kind of development, but as a space of legal non-development. Thus, it became a matter of steadying the ground beneath them for the time being, it became a matter of holding out for an unspecified time-period, with the hopes of re-securing temporary occupation. In this way, it was not simply *space* under the wire that was gray, but *time* too emerged as a deeply gray phenomena.

## The temporary re-made

Following the appearance of the markings on the affected structures, a group of men in high visibility jackets arrived at Awoshie Junction. Their jackets read 'AMA Task Force', which stood for Accra Metropolitan Assembly (AMA), the Task Force of which were made up of groups of (mostly) men who toured the city, removing unauthorised signage and spray painting warnings on unauthorised structures. Otherwise known as the 'AMA boys' at Awoshie Junction, a small group of AMA Task Force workers arrived one quiet afternoon, approaching each container threatened with removal and informing occupants to 'go and see the landlord'. Confused, a group of occupants left their work and walked behind this row of commercial enterprises, approaching the landlord. The landlord explained that the land they occupied was government land and if they want to stay, they needed to pay 'rent' to the local government. A small sum was suggested. This would be collected over the coming days and delivered to the local government office. As occupants returned to their kiosks and containers, I spoke with the Task Force and the landlord, who stood together discussing the issue. The Task Force member reiterated that the area surrounding the ROW was owned by a private landlord, whose family had occupied the land prior to the installation of the transmission lines. He suggested that these realities had to be respected and thus it was appropriate that the landlord and the Task Force collaborated.

Over the next few days, money was collected and the landlord was responsible for negotiating the temporary occupation of those inhabiting the ROW. He was left responsible for delivering this money to the local government office, which the AMA Task Force belonged to. Yet, two weeks later, the Task Force turned up once more and claimed no money had been received. Rumours began to circulate and occupants—confused, frustrated and disillusioned—approached the landlord. Avoiding the situation for as long as possible, the landlord eventually revealed that he had 'chopped' the money, following a desperate situation he himself faced. He suggested that this money would be deducted from the next rent instalment. Unhappy with this situation, yet more concerned with facing imminent displacement, the occupants assembled at the porch of Lily's salon, which, as suggested, often functioned as a meeting place for those working nearby.

Kwame, who occupied the roadside space selling his electronic goods from a glass cabinet, soon emerged as a de-facto community leader. He had, over time, shown himself as a trusted arbitrator of local feuds and often called out individuals who he thought had mistreated himself and others. He knew occupants well and spent the day's slow market-trading hours in the shops of his friends, sharing news from near and far. While he had spent somewhere close to three years at this spot, his elder brother, who had recently moved to Dubai in search of factory work, had spent many more years at Awoshie Junction and this gave Kwame added authority. Significantly, Kwame was trusted by Lily—the Auntie of his girlfriend, Afia. This was important given that Lily herself was well-respected and was the first to raise concerns at both the motives of the Task Force and the landlord, whom she claimed to have been mistreated in the past. She was highly critical of the state and was keen to deliver a solution to their imminent removal beyond both the lower echelons of urban governance and the landlord. As discussed, her salon occupied an important space in the urban fabric and it was here that a plan of action to secure temporary occupation was made. A group, made up of Kwame, Lily and the occupants of a further ten containers and stalls gathered to make arrangements. Here, occupants engaged in an anticipatory urban politics, or 'the art of staying one step ahead of what might come, of being prepared to make a move' (Simone 2010, 62 in Zeiderman et al. 2015, 4). The decision was made to approach the Chief Executive at the local government office.

Acting as a community head, Kwame led the group to the nearby government office, hoping to speak with the Chief Executive. After waiting, Kwame, the group of occupants and myself were invited into his office. Kwame presented the situation and explained that money had been collected to secure temporary occupation in the ROW, but this had not reached the government offices. In a somewhat opaque response, the Chief suggested that he knew little of this, but advised that a new agreement be reached. A sum of money was negotiated and this was to be collected and returned to the offices immediately. After I had questioned this mode of government, he responded to me that,

> [o]ur directive is to remove all the people under the high tension.[6] If there is a problem, the damage could be huge. But we also understand that these people rely on those spaces and they need to take care of their families. In the long run, the people won't be there. We are partners in development, and we believe in engagement.

Indeed, what was often relayed was that the local authorities had a 'human face'—that they understood that space is both limited and expensive in Accra and thus were open to engaging in an agreement. This agreement would not secure a place for residents in the ROW, but it would allow them to evacuate immanent removal and preserve a position, somewhere in the gray space of temporariness, as 'neither integrated nor eliminated' (Yiftachel 2009, 89). Thus, while the law designates those inhabiting the ROWs as illegal, and formal planning institutions demarcate them as non-development zones, at other levels of government, a deeper engagement manifests, at times presenting itself as government with a 'human face'—or one even offering solace for inhabitants who depend upon these temporary spaces. In this way, we might situate the

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governing motives at Awoshie Junction as a set of 'official allowances for "licensed encroachments", imagined to be provisional and revocable' (De Certeau 1984, 96 in Moatasim 2019, 292).

The practice of exchanging money, however, was more complicated and it was difficult for me to ascertain from either side why this was necessary. For the occupants, answers ranged from the government wanting to 'chop money' to a recognition that an exchange of money secured the deal on both sides—it was a vote of confidence. When I asked inhabitants where this money would go, an occupant turned to me and asked, 'did they give us a receipt?!'—highlighting the fact that this was not a formal exchange, and this money was for the personal gain of government employees. Though the word corruption was never used, from the outside, it was hard not to see this complicated set of events as a moment of corrupt practice: as a 'blurring' of the public and private (Gupta 1995). In our discussions, inhabitants reflected on this exchange as a relatively routine way of settling things in the city. Occupants often cited events where they had paid local government members and the police, concluding that 'in Accra, money talks'. While most occupants agreed to this kind of engagement, they often criticised what they saw as unfair treatment by the local authorities, arguing that they were acting in their own interests, extending their power by whatever means necessary. Conversations among inhabitants were often heated and some expressed complete disdain for engaging with the authorities. Some even recited circulating urban tales of local authority employees being cursed due to their ill treatment of Accra's inhabitants. Yet, inhabitants also distinguished this 'deal' from the grander practices of money exchange that they imagined to be behind the unfolding dispute between the church and occupants on the other side of the interchange. Here, they discussed the circulating rumours that the church had links with local and national politicians, and were endowed with huge amounts of wealth, which enabled them to shape urban space in line with their own desires—in this case, removing long-standing occupants to make way for their expanded building. This distinction was important, as it revealed that both the scale and the outcome of the informal practice mattered to the occupants' moral reading of money exchange.

Meanwhile, some inhabitants agreed with the action taken, arguing that had a different set of governing motives been deployed, they could have been removed. In the midst of these discussions, others, including Lily, reflected on what they saw as a 'set-up' by the landlord and the AMA boys, speculating that the initial money raised was in fact shared among both the landlord and the Task Force. Discussing these kinds of agreements with a town planner in downtown Accra, it was made clear that those engagements were 'not official, there's nothing to negotiate. Maybe that's an informal way of governing, but that's different to official policy'. Other officials expressed that these engagements tended to manifest at the lower levels of government, or those employed to go out on the ground and do the hard work of governance—and like elsewhere, the alleged attempts to extract smaller sums of money where possible were couched in terms of 'chop money' to subsidise the low wages paid to do this kind of task force work. Either way, this agreement with, through and beyond the landlord and the local government, secured what occupants imagined to be another year in place. Yet nothing was guaranteed.

The re-establishing of temporary occupation under the wire speaks to the structural difficulties of maintaining space, securing work and making a living in the city—particularly in areas where land values are rising, land assembly is consolidating, the state is increasing its presence and new opportunities for profit are emerging. Yet it also exposed important interfaces between the materiality of the city, its inhabitants and governing instruments. In this instance, the re-making of temporary occupation under the wire reminds us that the city is in part, a material place. It is made up of both grand physical infrastructures—in this case, the electropolis—and small scale materialities, which at times, come together to shape the parameters of engagement. Yet, it also points to the temporal splintering that mediate experiences of the city. In this respect, the ongoing temporariness of life under the wire was remade at the intersection of unstable and highly negotiated practices. These practices remained embedded in specific social contexts, including the history of the landlord's treatment of his tenants, the experience of respected community members, as well as the ability to build trust among occupants. Without these social ties, it remains unclear what kind of action would have unfolded. Thus, the remaking of temporariness cannot be separated from the history and politics of place, alongside the personal motives, desires and personalities of individuals who resided there.

Significantly, the re-making of temporariness at Awoshie Junction revealed the 'different kinds of "micro-government" that already exist on the ground', exposing urban government as 'an ad hoc construction of different knowledges, practices and institutions that "ha[ve] no internal consistency apart from the network that connects its elements" (Braun 2014, 61)' (Simone and Pieterse 2017, 26, 22). Indeed, the diverse set of mandates and practices across urban governance demonstrate that 'government is always in the process of trying to figure itself out. Its authority is always partial' (Simone and Pieterse 2017, 22). In this way, making sense of how temporariness is reproduced requires us to grapple with the multiple forms and rules of governing, in order that we might grasp how different instruments of government generate their own narratives, divergent motives and act as they see fit, beyond the remit of 'right' or 'wrong'. At Awoshie Junction, this splitting of governance across the formal and the insurgent gave rise to 'dynamic and relational fields' and it is within these fields that the temporary was both unravelled and re-established (Simone and Pieterse 2017, 157).

Following what appeared to be like the closing of a chapter in a much longer story, I discussed the recent events with people I had come to know. For some, they expressed what they felt as their own kind of political capacity to stay in place. While the current resolution offered no guarantees, they explained that they knew who to approach should they be threatened with removal again, but for now, they could trust they would not be disturbed for the coming months. After things settled, some residents even made new investments, upgrading their workspace from a kiosk to a container, indicating a sense of relative security under the wire. Yet others expressed desires to leave. As Afia's Auntie put it, 'I'm not feeling good about being here. It is not safe. At any moment someone can come again. So I have to save money and get a proper place'. It was not long before rumours began circulating that removal was possible again.

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These rumours were sourced to the occupants beneath the transmission wires on the opposite side of the road, where inhabitants had suggested that GRIDCo was due to upgrade the lines—a looming threat which would soon become embroiled in an ongoing dispute with the headquarters of the church. Like it had done so in the past, the temporary, I was told, would likely unravel in due course.

## Conclusion

This paper has analysed the making of ongoing temporariness in the splintered electropolis of Accra. Locating time as an infrastructural interface, the paper committed to engaging with the structural forces and everyday practices that produced this condition of ongoing temporariness. Through an 'ethnography of the near future' (Guyer 2007), I looked under the wire at Awoshie Junction, detailing the unravelling of temporary occupation and its subsequent re-establishment.

Looking to conditions under the wire exposed the difficulty of making a life in cities where incomes are volatile, [affordable] space is scarce and populations are growing. Life under the wire points to the makeshift contours of the 'urban now' (De Boeck and Baloji 2016) and the multiplicity of gray time-spaces that form the terrains upon which city life is negotiated. It also tells us about the ways which infrastructural interfaces, governing mandates, place-specific histories and social relations come together to shape both short-term encounters and long-term conditions. These are important domains for understanding the forces undergirding temporary modes of life and living in the city. Yet, looking under the wire has also elicited a much broader conceptual point, namely the necessity of understanding ongoing temporariness through the vein of splintered time: a fractious, non-linear temporality. Indeed, as I have argued throughout this paper, ongoing temporariness may only be understood by attending to moments and events which puncture the longer-term condition.

In this context, a lens of a splintered temporality revealed the specific conjunctures of time–space, the socio-political and the material-historical, which together produced the terms on which ongoing temporariness was re-made at particular moments of time. In this sense, as I argued, a splintered temporality helps us guard against the conflation between the enduring and linearity—between persistence and the preordained. It is only by making these separations that we might begin to demystify the making of the city's uneven temporal terrains and chart out possible ways of securing more just urban futures. Moreover, if Goldstone and Obarrio are right in their suggestion that the notion of temporariness offers 'an especially poignant glimpse into the conditions of the social and political existence on the [African] continent' (2016, 13), then a splintered temporality may be usefully deployed to capture the production of temporary conditions beyond the city altogether. This, I argue, opens-up a potential vista of comparative gesturing for understanding the making of ongoing temporariness as a much broader condition of our shared contemporary.

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## Notes

1   As set out in the Volta River Authority (Transmission Line Protection) Regulations, 1967 (LI 542) as amended by Regulation No. 1737 of 2004, a distance of between 30 and 40 metres is demarcated, depending on the voltage of the transmission line.

2   ROW land belongs to GRIDCo – the sole operator of electricity transmission – however, the removal of populations from the ROW is performed by local city authorities responsible for implementing the physical planning of the city.

3   Akosombo is the name of the town which hosts the dam supplying a significant volume of electrical energy to the nation, while Axim is the name of a small town on the Western coast of Ghana. By naming these places, the speaker intended to express the widespread reality of ROW occupation across the country.

4   The underlying cause of *dumsor* remains both historical and multifaceted, attributed to lowering water levels in Akosombo Dam, surging demand and technical difficulties with both transmission and distribution.

5   Awoshie has exhibited some of the highest population growth rates in the metropolitan region, at 32.7% between 1984 and 2000, compared with only 3.3% in the city of Accra (Owusu 2012, 5).

6   Another word for transmission wires.

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