



# Jocular Ethnography: The Productive Work of Humour in Fieldwork on Migration

*Anja K. Franck* | Associate Professor, School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University

**ABSTRACT** This article makes the case for why the jocular is both methodologically and analytically important in ethnographic work on migration. More precisely, it argues that we need to pay explicit attention to the productive work that the humorous does in our ethnographic encounters – and analyse what it means for the types of knowledge that we (re)produce around migrants' experiences, subjectivities and struggles. Drawing on ethnographic work conducted in the Burmese migrant community in George Town, Malaysia, the article first illustrates how the jocular can open up space for approaching issues that may otherwise be out of reach, including the power dynamics involved in the ethnographic encounter itself. Second, through explicit attention to the ways that migrants use laughter, jokes and comic displays to narrate their own experiences and comment on their collective precarity, the article shows how the humorous does distinct political work in migrants' agentic claims and in speaking truth to power.

**Keywords:** Humour, laughter, migration, ethnography, refusal, agency

## On “Sharing Humour”

For around a decade I have been following the everyday lives of Burmese labour migrants in the city of George Town, on the island of Penang off the northwestern coast of Peninsular Malaysia.<sup>1</sup> Through recurring field visits, I have tried to document and understand the everyday tactics that they employ in order to secure their livelihoods and navigate an increasingly securitised enforcement landscape, which has criminalised illegal migrants and simultaneously made all migrants prime targets of everyday policing, roadblocks, raids, and nationwide crackdowns (Nah 2011). One of the most striking aspects of this work has been the strong presence of humour in my ethnographic encounters. In our conversations and interviews, the migrants often used jokes when addressing the precarity of their situation, they mocked the greed of the police officers who were constantly extorting money from them, and used laughter to ease narratives about difficult experiences. Similarly, I often used humour as a way to get a conversation going or to approach more sensitive topics. I would also laugh at myself as a means to cover up mistakes I made (pronouncing things in the wrong way, not understanding what was being said) or in an attempt to mitigate my privileged position as a white Swedish researcher. In this article I, therefore, want to think

---

<sup>1</sup> While Myanmar is the official name of the country formerly known as Burma, the use of the term “Burmese (labour) migrants” in this article reflects that the interlocutors themselves used this terminology but also the vast majority of the interlocutors belong to the Burmese majority population, also known as the *Bamar* (with one notable exception being Sam who features later in this article).

further about the productive work that the humorous does in ethnographic fieldwork.

While humour has gained traction as a research topic across social sciences, limited attention has been directed towards humour as a methodological tool for conducting and representing research (Watson 2015: 407), particularly in unstable and precarious social settings (Trnka 2011; Goldstein 2003). This marginalisation of humour in ethnographic work is somewhat puzzling considering that it “seems at odds with the intuitive significance of the funny in fieldwork” – and the ways in which “[l]earning the laughing lines, getting the jokes” is often presented as the “high-water mark” of becoming embedded within the fieldwork setting (Carty and Musharbash 2008: 209-210). Most of us can likely recall humorous instances from the field. These may even be the moments that stand out in our memory afterwards. They become anecdotes through which we “spice up” our writing and form part of the stories we tell our students. Many of us, perhaps without thinking more seriously about it, also use the humorous in observational work as well as during interviews. As described above, we may smile or laugh to diffuse tense situations. We crack jokes as a means to “break the ice” when meeting new people. We laugh in response to circumstances we do not understand. This intuitive usage of humour speaks to the way that sharing humour is very much like “sharing food or music” (Morreal 1991 in Kmita and Mawhinney 2016: 95): a dynamic, spontaneous, and enriching way that we engage with and learn from our research environment (ibid).

The basic argument posed in this article is that we need to take humour seriously in our ethnographic work. More precisely, I am suggesting that we need to pay explicit attention to the productive work that the humorous does in/for our ethnographic encounters – and analyse what it means for the types of knowledge that we uncover. This argument is not merely a methodological one. Rather, it relates to the broader politics of knowledge production – and, in particular, to questions around *what comes to matter* in our research *and why* (Aparna et al., 2020: 111). While such questions are certainly relevant for ethnographic work more broadly, in the context of migration research they are also inevitably bound up with long-standing discussions around migrant subjectivity, agency, and victimisation (see for example Augustín 2003; Squire 2017; Mainwaring 2016). Within such scholarship, humour has however thus far gained very limited attention. In fact, migration literature has largely depicted, particularly irregular, border crossings as “completely serious endeavors devoid of humor or irony” (de León 2015: 93). The problem with this is, of course, that while the focus on hardship and precarity has been helpful for highlighting the violence and injustice of contemporary border regimes, it has simultaneously obscured how migratory journeys are not only punctuated “by brutality and violence but also by play and laughter” (Van Ramshorst 2019: 897). Attention to the humorous, I here propose, allows us to “de-exceptionalise” the migratory subject (Schapendonk et al. 2021): offering a crucial window into the complex ways that migrants comprehend and navigate their own circumstances as well as the more masked and subtle ways through which they challenge power (Goldstein 2003: 3).

In the following sections of this article, I will draw on my experiences of conducting fieldwork in the Burmese migrant community in George Town. Following an introduction to the key ingredients of humour, the first empirical section of this article centers on the presence and different functions of humour in the ethnographic encounter. Here, the analytical focus is placed on how laughter and jokes offer an entry point to topics that may otherwise be out of reach – including the power dynamics involved in the interview situation itself. In the second empirical section, attention is rather directed towards how

migrants use humour to address their collective precarity (van Ramshorst 2019). Here, the discussion focuses on the use of humour as a means of refusal and “truth telling”.

### The Key Ingredients of Humour

Humour has been described as an “anthropological constant” (Berger 1997: x): found in every society and present in most human interaction. While social scientists have been rather late to the party, theorisation of humour as a philosophical and psychological conundrum are far from new. For example, it seems more or less obligatory in humour studies to point out that Plato and Aristotle reasoned around humour – and that Sigmund Freud in 1905 wrote a book on jokes and the unconscious (and look! I just did it as well!). The main theories of humour, which can partially be traced back to the work of these men, are often grouped under the headings of *superiority theory* (associated with the use of humour as a form of victory or triumph), *relief theory* (focusing on the release of tensions) and *incongruity theory* (focusing on humour as a form of disruption). While often presented as separate in origin and focus, contemporary humour scholarship, much like this very article, tends to draw on different aspects of all of the above theories – and they can thus be read as complementary rather than competing (Raskin 1985).

Throughout this text, I read humour as an inevitably social and context-bound activity that can perform a range of different functions (Kuipers 2008). As such, humour can work to build community and transgress social boundaries, but it can also be used to draw these boundaries and reinforce hierarchical social orders (Billig 2005). The arguments posed in this article are therefore not necessarily tied up with an understanding of humour as “good” or “bad”. Rather, and as spelt out above, my proposal is that we need to pay attention to the work that humour (and laughter) performs in the social context of fieldwork. In order to do this, Giseline Kuipers’ (2009) work on humour is helpful. In her article *Humor Styles and Symbolic Boundaries*, Kuipers presents an overview of the key ingredients of humour, which may not necessarily be present in *all* forms of humour, but that are “important to understand how humor works in social life” (Kuipers 2009: 220). As such, these ingredients are not “building blocks for a theory of humor ... but rather a theory about humor, which tries to understand how humor works” (ibid.: 220-221). In the everyday usage of humour these different ingredients clearly overlap, which is also why I will not use them as separate in the empirical sections of this article, but they are nonetheless useful when seeking to unpack more closely what humour *does* in human interaction.

Before turning to these ingredients, I would however like to point out that although the main analytical focus in this section is placed on humour, *laughter* is also central to my analysis. While humour and laughter are often connected, they are not the same phenomenon: laughter can therefore not be reduced to humour and, conversely, humour does not necessarily result in laughter (Emmerson 2017). Dittmer (2013: 499) suggests that one way to approach their difference is to think about humour as “the discursive” and laughter as the “affective”. This does not mean that the latter is not socially regulated, which is visible in our expectation that laughter should remain under control: in order to stay within the realm of the “normal” it should not be “mad” or “hysterical” (Cosser 1959: 171).

The first two ingredients of humour in Kuipers’ overview are *non-seriousness* and *ambiguity* (or *incongruity* as it is often referred to in humour theory). While incongruity is not necessarily “funny”, it permits humour to perform the function of “breaks” in conversations as well as broader discourses, which is also why the humorous is generally believed to offer a

potential for transgressing social norms (Kuipers 2009: 221). Non-seriousness, on the other hand, can be thought of as ensuring “a pleasurable state of mind resembling playfulness” (Chafe 2007 in Kuipers 2009: 221). Michael Mulkey’s (1988) sociological formulation of humour captures how the incongruous and non-serious intersect in what he terms the “humorous mode”. In the “humorous mode” we can play with misunderstandings, absurdity or contrast – and there is no demand for coherence or even truth. Even when dealing with very serious topics such as oppression or violence, speaking in the “humorous mode” is associated with a degree “innocence” (Jul Sorensen 2008) – because framing something as a joke allows us the possibility of taking it all back (I was, after all, only joking!). This ability to use humour as a means “to say without saying” (Hernann 2016: 59), is of course important when thinking about its function in the context of ethnographic fieldwork. As previous work has illustrated, the humorous framing is particularly effective for approaching themes that may be difficult, controversial, or even taboo (Goldstein 2003). In this way, humour can come to function as a “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990), where interlocutors are able to offer “alternative, sometimes subversive, versions of dominant narratives and official history” in a manner perceived as less threatening (Hernann 2016: 59).

When we assume that ethically viable fieldwork builds on principles of producing “negotiated spaces” and upon “practices of reflexivity” (Sultana 2007: 375), then the possibility of using humorous forms of communication as a hidden transcript is clearly important – as it allows room to address topics that may otherwise be out of reach. But scholars have also pointed towards how humour holds the potential for an “emotional reflexivity” that aids the researcher in understanding the power relations between the researcher and the researched (Van Ramshorst 2019: 902; see also Kmita and Mawhinney 2016). Sharing jokes and laughter makes it possible for the researcher and the interlocutors to step outside of their assigned roles – momentarily rupturing the power-dynamics of the ethnographic encounter (Browne 2016; Hernann 2016). As we will see further on, framing something as a joke, interlocutors are able to momentarily “take charge” of the conversation – and to approach the privileged position of the researcher in a way that would be very difficult (if not impossible) in a more serious framing. One reason for this, scholars suggest, is that humour allows us to relate on a more personal level – and studies of humour in healthcare have for example shown that patients and family members perceive a humorous approach as a sign that they were seen “as persons and not just part of the job to be done” (Dean and Gregory 2004: 144). Jokes and other humorous expressions then operate as a form of “appreciation” that can mitigate the potential feeling of being “used” by researchers (Kmita and Mawhinney 2016: 101).

Kuipers’ third ingredient of humour is *pleasure*. This is perhaps one of the most underestimated aspect of fieldwork, which cannot be separated from knowledge ideals that view fun and laughter as inappropriate or less valid for unravelling “truth” (Bakhtin 1984; Watson 2015). This is likely also why researchers have often shied away from the use of humour – for fear of damaging the credibility of their research (Sagi and Yechiam 2008; Watson 2015) and out of concern for being perceived as “making light” of the topic under scrutiny or the precariousness of their interlocutors (Fluri 2019). The idea that pleasure has no place in serious research endeavours, clearly creates a tension in the context of ethnographic work, given its importance for creating both an agreeable and trusting atmosphere during interviews and observational work. In turn, this is intimately connected to Kuiper’s fourth ingredient of humour: namely *sociability* (Kuiper 2009: 222). In the words of Rose Coser

(1959: 172): “To laugh ... is to invite those present to come closer”. While there are certainly moments when humour does the opposite, typically associated with laughing *at* rather than *with* someone (Meyer 2000, see below), humour has a recognised ability to foster community between those that share in the joke (Kuiper 2006). The potentiality of jocular interaction for building interpersonal bonds is thus important here, not just at the individual but also collective level (Hernann 2016: 65).

The final two ingredients of humour in Kuipers framework are *transgression* and *aggression*. The former (how humour often touches upon and allows us to approach “taboos and sensitive topics”) has been dealt with above, but the latter warrants some further scrutiny. Theoretically, the association between aggression and humour can largely be traced back to various versions of superiority theory but has also more recently been addressed in the important work of Micheal Billig (2005) in relation to the power of ridicule. At the most basic level, the very act of *not taking something seriously* can be an act of aggression (Kuipers 2009). In the fieldwork situations described in this paper, this is important for the ways that migrants’ laughter and mockery of, for example, police officers can be seen as a way to refuse their authority (Bhungalia 2020). However, the ingredient of aggression is also significant for understanding the productive work of humour in defining what is “outside of the normal” (Kuipers 2008: 365) – as anyone who has pulled a joke that was not laughed at, can likely attest to.

While the coming sections of this paper will place emphasis on the presence and function of humour in my own ethnographic work, I do (like so many humour scholars before me) feel the need to underline that the reader may not find the stories particularly funny at all. While this is in many ways as natural as not being frightened by articles on fear or disheartened by texts on depression (Oring 2003), there are also aspects of humour that are hard to capture (at least for me) in writing. One part of this has to do with the fact that much of “the humorous” that goes on in conversations is not verbal – rather, it is present in the form of facial expressions, intonations, timing, or body language. What makes something funny is therefore not necessarily *what* is being said but *how* it is said. The “funnier” aspects of the migrants’ stories may also be missed due to the “you had to be there” type problem, but also because their jokes, comments, or even gestures may only be legible to the “insider” (Kuipers 2008). While this provides the perfect illustration to the way humour is a socially and spatially specific form of social interaction (*ibid*), it is nonetheless a challenge in academic writings on humour. Now, with this caveat in place, we will take a trip to *Komtar* shopping center, downtown George Town.

### **Ibrahimovic, Human Trafficking, and How to Make Ladies Happy**

The best place to cross the street to access the *Komtar* building is to use the massive x-shaped zebra crossing at the junction of Jalan Ria and Lebu Tek Soon. However, to cross here does come with a degree of difficulty – as there simply is not enough time to make it across before the pedestrian traffic light starts counting down with an aggressive beeping sound. Having made it across the junction, you can follow the narrow sidewalk, past the Maybank office, and turn left up the escalators that take you to the first floor. You then walk through the open hall, where vendors display bright-coloured Malay clothing, batik sarongs, and various gadgets for mobile phones, and continue left down a corridor with smaller clothing shops that play loud (or rather: very loud!) Chinese music. Take the short flight of stairs down one floor and you enter a space that – if you pay attention – looks, smells, and feels different to

the other parts of this shopping complex: the so-called “Burma shops”. Here, the signs are in Burmese, shops feature newspapers from Myanmar, the TVs inside the restaurants play Burmese music videos (that always seem to end in tears), mobile stalls sell the *kun-ya* (betel nut, lime, and catechu wrapped up in a betel leaf that will turn your teeth red) and posters of Aung San Suu Kyi hang in some of the shop windows.

During my fieldwork in George Town, I have spent a lot of time in the Burma shop area of Komtar, engaging in the ethnographic method that Sandhu et. al. (2007) have dubbed “serial hanging out”; repeatedly, but over short periods, spending time in the same place with the intent of removing one or several layers of “outsiderness,” making me more approachable, engendering informal interactions (Lundquist 2021). In more practical terms, this has entailed walking around the hallways talking to people, writing or reading on my own in the cafés and restaurants, socialising over dinner with friends and colleagues, and buying my groceries in the Burmese shops. Together with Lin, the very patient and knowledgeable man who inspired and helped me design my study from the outset, and who now works along with me as a research assistant in my project, I have also conducted a number of recorded interviews here; sometimes because I was interested in the particular activities taking place here, or simply because interlocutors suggested Komtar as a convenient place to meet.

On this one particular afternoon we have agreed to meet Sam outside the *Hundi* office that his brother owns.<sup>2</sup> The office is tucked away at the end of one of Komtar’s many winding corridors and when we get there, Sam is already seated at the table outside with some friends. “So...” I say jokingly, “we have some moooore questions for you”. Everyone around the table laughs. They know that Sam has already answered questions for close to two hours earlier this week, and my colleague now cracks a joke about the fact that Sam will soon be having nightmares about Swedish people that come to ask an endless number of questions. In our defense, the last interview came to an abrupt end when someone at the table got a phone call of warning that the police were heading in our direction. On that particular occasion, rumour had it that the police had been playing cards for money, and the officers that had lost the game were now roaming in Komtar for migrants without passports that they could extort money from (see also Franck 2019). While there was no way for us to verify if there was any truth to this particular story, the migrants in our company acted as if it presented a viable threat and quickly dispersed.

We now hope to hear more of Sam’s story, interesting for its rich detail on the journey to and from Myanmar. Aged 22 and ethnic Kachin, Sam left Myanmar to find employment overseas a little over a year ago. He did, however, return to Myanmar a while back to get married, and he was in the midst of taking us through this journey when we were interrupted the last time. Just as we get ready to (re)start the interview, a familiar face approaches the table. “Hey, remember me?” the man smilingly exclaims, “I am Ibrahimović”! Everyone starts laughing again. Zlatan Ibrahimović is likely Sweden’s most famous soccer player, and it is not uncommon that he is the face that people associate with our small country (well, apart from Abba, of course). We chat with “Ibrahimović” for a moment about my latest trip to Yangon, and then try to – yet again – proceed with our interview. I turn to Sam: “So, when we stopped the last time, you were just about to cross the border in Thailand”? Sam nods and starts telling us about the human smuggler he had paid to get him across the

<sup>2</sup> Hundi is the term that the Burmese migrants use for the informal agencies that secure the wiring of remittances back home.

border. However, he is soon interrupted by Ibrahimović and the others around the table, who start lecturing him on the importance of telling us the truth. It seems they fear that Sam is holding back, giving us a more “sugar coated” version of the human smuggling experience. This leads to a longer conversation within the group about the difference between human smugglers and traffickers, and the conditions in the detention camps where those who get arrested along the border often end up. Ibrahimović tells us that he is sometimes called in to negotiate for migrants who are arrested. He works as a consultant for an agency that has been contracted by the Myanmar embassy to help out in the identification process in these detention camps. “It is really, really painful for me to go inside there. It is really, really painful”, he says. He describes the camps as pure horror, “like, you know, in the movie *Schindler’s list* by Stephen Spielberg”. The inmates in these camps, he says, “are not able to do anything” about their situation. They simply have to obey the orders of the guards.

The conversation makes it clear that Ibrahimović is really taken by the fate of the people that he meets in these camps, and he is particularly outraged by the way that the increasing number of Rohingya refugees are treated. He speaks in excruciating detail about the way these refugees are treated by human traffickers as well as the guards in the detention camps. “They are humans!” he exclaims. “It is really terrible! You guys are only listening to the stories now but when you see it in real life that is really, really ...” He doesn’t finish the sentence, and there is a moment of silence around the table.

Ibrahimović explains that he feels a sense of responsibility for those who have arrived from Myanmar more recently, because he has been in Malaysia for 20 years. “Have you been here for 20 years?” I ask, somewhat surprised. Most migrant workers from Myanmar stay much shorter periods, a few years, and then return home. He smiles, leans back in his chair, and says, not without a degree of sarcasm, “You missed me!” – meaning that despite the many interviews I have conducted, I have missed the most important person to talk to, namely him. “You guess, you guess how old I am!” he suddenly demands with a big smile. A bit taken aback with this sudden turn in the conversation, my answer is slow. “Ok... so you have stayed here for 20 years...” But Ibrahimović has no patience with this. “No, la!” he exclaims. “You should not *think* about it! Just look at my face!” “Okay”, I respond, “so 40...?” He seems content that I managed to get it right. I retaliate. “And me, how old am I?” I glare at him to make sure he doesn’t avoid the question. Ibrahimović takes a long look at me with his arms crossed over his chest. “Okay, so I give you ... 27!” The whole table erupts in laughter, and he is scolded in Burmese by the others. They think his answer is stupid. How can I be 27 when I am a university teacher with several children? Ibrahimović desperately tries to rescue the situation. “No, no, no!” he exclaims. “But Western people look different! Sometimes when they look 28 or 27, they are actually older ... and Asian people, when they hit 40 or 50, they look older, older, older than Western people. Am I right?” Some of the others nod, but one of the older men is not willing to let Ibrahimović off the hook that easily. He pokes him again about his poor judgement. Ibrahimović jokingly scolds the man back:

You don’t understand! All over the world, all the ladies hate if you say that they look older [than they are]. When you tell the ladies that they look younger, they are really happy. This is part of the entertainer’s job! *This* is why you are single, and nobody got married to you, you know!

As the table erupts in laughter again Ibrahimović leans forward, as if to let us in on a secret.

“Actually, I am not married either”, he says. “None of us are”. He points to several of the men around the table and continues:

For us it has been the wrong timing. This is the reason ... When I was of marrying age, I was really struggling here in Malaysia, you know. ... At the time, if I wanted to find a Burmese girl here it was very hard. Now, there are a lot, but back then there were no Burmese girls here. There were Malaysian girls but we, the Burmese, are Buddhist and Malaysia is a Muslim country. The Chinese [Malaysians] are Buddhist too, but they are a little bit different, so we could not find someone to be a wife. And we were not going back to our country for some time, so we didn't get the chance to marry.

The conversation proceeds for a while about all sorts of matters and in the end, following several follow-up visits, we even manage to record Sam's narrative without too many interruptions (well... sort of).

### **Breaking Expectations, Levelling the Ethnographic Encounter**

Apart from capturing the general messiness of ethnographic fieldwork, the above story is illustrative of how serious and humorous themes would often be present in my encounters with migrants in George Town *and* how the more precise function of humour could vary over the course of the conversation. Much like we used humour as a means to (re)open our interview with Sam (smiling apologetically, cracking a disarming joke about his coming nightmares of nosy Swedes), Ibrahimović used a joke to insert himself into the conversation. Obviously curious of what was going on, and eager to participate, the Ibrahimović joke represented “a break with expectation” (Kuipers 2009: 221) that allowed him to invite/insert himself into the conversation – something that would likely have been much harder for him to do through a serious question like: “Can I join you?”. But while Ibrahimović initially used humour in a way that signalled confidence, or perhaps even a degree of superiority (calling himself Ibrahimović to start with, but also through ridiculing us subtly for “missing him” as the most important interlocutor), his use of humour later in the exchange exposed a greater degree of vulnerability (the bad timing of marriage).

As relief theory would hold, laughter is about the release of nervous energy – and in the many humorous twists and turns seen in the above conversation, this certainly holds merit. The quick shift from the depiction of the horrid conditions in the detention camps to the discussion of age is one example. As was often the case, these “moments of shared embodied release through laughter” (Fluri 2019: 127) were not necessarily related to migration at all. Rather, “universal” and light topics, such as age and marital status or food cultures and clothing styles, would often be jokingly inserted into the conversation to “lighten up” the atmosphere following accounts of serious issues. My sentiment was that, at times, these humorous breaks were made for my benefit – to offer me a way out of the depressing path that we were walking down. What is interesting about this here is that this use of humour was linked to my perceived “fragility” as a “Westerner” with less expected experience of hardship. While sometimes stated in a more serious mode (“I will spare you the rest of this horrible story” type comments), the jocular framing offered the migrants a more discreet way to exert their judgement regarding how much more I “could handle”. Through these jokes, the migrants then, took charge of the conversation – which also opened up space for a somewhat different – albeit temporary – power dynamic in the interview situation.



While humour can certainly operate to draw social boundaries, ethnographers have shown how humour can also offer a unique opportunity to build stronger social bonds (Hernann 2016: 65). In my case, sharing in the laughter around the table in Komtar, making all of us the objects of “fun making”, while also exposing my vulnerabilities, clearly engendered not only a pleasurable atmosphere but also a trusting one. Such trust-building is clearly invaluable to a researcher – as it allows us to gather information that may otherwise be out of reach. The jocular framing of the conversation around age in the story above, for example, led to the conversation about the marital status of the older men around the table. While this started as a form of mockery against the unmarried man who did not understand how one should talk to “the ladies”, the outcome was an opening of a discussion around the difficulties of building a family during the migration process. Here, as Alison Browne (2016) has also noted, the humorous framing allowed for a conversation around more intimate and “awkward” topics – that would have been much more difficult (or even impossible) to approach in a more serious framing.

However, the jokes around age also fulfilled another function: the possibility to, if ever so subtly, address my obvious national and class privilege. Implicit in the jokes around Asian people looking much older than “Westerners” are issues of global inequality – and the fact that Myanmar nationals face much harsher living conditions and have a much lower average life expectancy. In fact, jokes that addressed our different living conditions and choices would often reoccur in the interviews. Some evolved around the fact my husband stayed at home with our children while I was conducting fieldwork. As did humorous remarks about the fact that I was “keeping my husband thin” (in all fairness, he is a very slender man). Such “critique” of my privileged, puzzling life choices and culture would not have been voiced in a serious mode of conversation – but were here made possible behind the shield of humour. The “joking relationship” thus allowed the migrants to depart from the “respectful distance” that our relationship would normally include (Hernann 2016: 65) and making me the target of jokes also allowed for momentary shifts in the power dynamics involved in the researcher-informant relationship (Browne 2016). But the jokes of “where my children were” is also an illustration of how humour involves aggression. While comments around my family were never made in an aggressive fashion – they did nonetheless convey that my behaviour was “outside of the normal” (Kuipers 2008: 365).

While the above sections have set out to illustrate the productive work that humour can do in the ethnographic encounter, the coming section will focus on how migrants used humour in narrating their migratory experiences – and what this means for our reading of these experiences. We will therefore return to George Town, and the apartment of the three cousins Ann, Li and Sofie.

### **Fears, Tears and an Umbrella**

The air is really warm and humid. Just one hour ago, heavy rains poured down over George Town, forcing us to hastily seek shelter in one of the nearby food courts before we can continue on the motorbike. While Lin mockingly assures me that there is no problem, I am still a bit concerned about the fact that we are now showing up late to Ann’s apartment. But he is right, of course. Ann does not seem the least bothered when she invites us in and serves us some tea on a mat laid out on the living room floor. A few moments later Ann’s cousins, the twin sisters Li and Sofie, also join us. All three of them are from Tavoy in

Southern Myanmar and have travelled illegally to Malaysia to find employment. “I wanted to support my family”, Ann says, and explains how she would not be able to do that with the wages earned in Myanmar. Like so many other Burmese migrants that we have spoken to in Penang, these three women work in George Town’s vibrant street food sector. While Ann seems quite happy with the work she has got, the twin sisters describe how their boss treats them “like slaves”. Ann smiles, and adds in a sarcastic voice that, actually, “my boss only treats me nicely because he is afraid that I will run away”. We all laugh in recognition at this remark. Ann is certainly not the only migrant worker in Malaysia whose employer is scared that she will abscond from the workplace; in fact, for migrant workers, both with and without the required legal documentation, “running away” from employers is one of the only means available to avoid exploitation, and it is therefore a commonly used tactic in migrant communities (Franck and Vigneswaran 2021). Our conversation soon turns to the everyday challenges of living as an “illegal” migrant in George Town, and the difficulties they face when moving about in public without a valid passport. The penalties facing those that stay and work in the country illegally include arrests, hefty fines, imprisonment, detention, deportation, and even whipping (Nah 2011). Not surprisingly then, migrants actively seek to avoid these punishments. “I don’t feel safe here”, Ann says. “I am scared that a policeman will catch me. The thing I am *the most* afraid of is the police. Every time I see the police, I am frightened”. Asked if she has ever been arrested, the three women look at each other and start giggling. Finally, when looking at my puzzled face, Ann confesses:

I was caught one time, but I cried *so much* that the policeman got scared and ran away! Ha, ha, ha! They didn’t want to ask me any more questions and I even didn’t have to pay [a bribe]. I had been shopping and I had bought an umbrella. The policemen approached me, and they wanted to get me into the car, and they used the umbrella to push me.

She uses exaggerated body language to re-enact how this comic scene played out – and how she was left behind on the sidewalk, umbrella in hand, as the police officers left the scene frightened by her strong display of emotion.

### **Refusal, Truth-Telling, and the Absurdity of Violence**

The above story serves as an interesting point of departure for thinking about the productive work of humour in more precarious social settings. For example, it is worth considering more precisely what humour *does* in Ann’s narrative of being stopped by the police in the street. While such encounters typically involve a great deal of fear on the part of the migrant, Ann’s comical re-enactment here effectively locates the behaviour of the police officer within the realm of ridicule (Bahktin 1984; Mbembe 2001). In this humorous narrative, focus is placed on *his* fear of her emotions, which sets him up as a ridiculous, rather than an almightily powerful figure. This is analytically important because in situations of protracted precarity, the use of humour can function as a tool to reclaim time and space in ways that also install a provisional sense of safety (Fluri 2019: 126; see also Mayo 2010). While Ann’s mockery of the police officers’ behaviour clearly does not do much in terms of providing her with any physical safety, it can still offer a momentary feeling of “mastery” over a situation that is otherwise beyond her control (Trnka 2011: 340). In that particular moment, when humorously narrating her story, she becomes the *author* of the situation; authoring “an emotional sensibility” that momentarily replaces her fear (ibid). This reminds us that

although humorous framings of frightening or humiliating experiences can certainly be interpreted as a coping mechanism, the use of humour can also be read as “a product of agency and struggle” (Bernal 2013: 301). In fact, Lisa Bhungalia (2020) proposes that in the context of oppression we can think about the use of humour, laughter, or even the simple act of smiling, as a “politics of disavowal”. This politics is not necessarily confrontational in the sense that it overtly opposes power, but it is *disruptive* in the sense that it refuses to recognise and normalise the conditions of subjugation it relies on. This suggests that the political potentiality of humour in the context of oppression lay precisely with the way that it deprives power of the necessary recognition from the subjugated (Bhungalia 2020; see also Fanon 2001). Laughing at the police officers’ behaviour, Ann is thus putting the authority of the police officers temporarily out of place (Bhungalia 2020).

While the migrants in George Town often used humour when narrating their encounters with the police – the most common topic in this genre was certainly the issue of corruption. For migrants who lack the required legal documents to stay in Malaysia, police corruption constitutes a double-edged sword. On the one hand, their precarious legal status makes them easy targets for extortion (Aziz 2016; Hoffstedter 2014). On the other hand, the possibility of paying the patrolling officers some *duit kopi* (literally: coffee money) is often the only possible way to avoid an arrest (Franck 2019). While most people would just hand over the amount asked for, migrants who had stayed longer periods in Malaysia – and who thus possessed the required language skills and familiarity with the social codes – often attempted to bargain with the police. In such negotiations, humour played a role in creating a less threatening atmosphere. Ibrahimović, for example, laughingly shared a story of how he had handed a police officer a one-ringgit bill when he was recently asked to pay some *duit kopi*. The – very surprised – police officer had objected. The going rate for a bribe was, after all, rarely below 50 ringgits, and few migrants would come up with the idea of offering just one ringgit. ‘Bla bla bla, he wanted more money, la!’ Ibrahimović says in a demeaning voice. But rather than giving the officer more money, Ibrahimović had told him to just go down the street to get his coffee (where the running price is closer to one ringgit). “I told him: You don’t have to go to Starbucks to get it!”

Ibrahimović’s jocular – and literal – reading of *duit kopi* here illustrates how humour can function as a shield when speaking truth to power. The incongruity of the Starbucks joke (as an unexpected “break” combined with the possibility to instantly take it all back (I was only joking!)), meant that Ibrahimović was able to overtly challenge the police officer’s attempted extortion – something that would have been very difficult in a more serious framing. For the most part, however, humour and jokes around the corrupt practices of the police would rather fit the description of a more “hidden transcript” (Scott 1990): a way for migrants to share information as well as voice their discontent with the police officers’ behaviour within their own community (Hernann 2016). There were, for example, a range of running gags about police officers’ greed – as well as the fluctuating rates of bribes. On one occasion during my fieldwork, I ran into one of my interlocutors at a friend’s house. This interlocutor is a young man with a propensity to get into trouble with the police for driving a motorbike without a driving license. Happy to see him and eager to catch up, I therefore initiated the conversation by jokingly asking him if he had recently been arrested. His face lit up and he happily exclaimed: “No! It’s election time! So, the police do not disturb the foreigners”. His cheerful comment reflected the belief that during the Malaysian

national elections, the police rather focused their attention on checking for “alcohol and drugs at the road-blocks” rather than the documents of migrants.

Police corruption is a notoriously difficult issue to approach in research, given that interlocutors may be both fearful and have a strong incentive not to provide accurate information (Ivkovic 2003). While the migrants in my study would certainly provide serious accounts of having to pay the police money, it was the many jokes around bribery that alerted my attention towards the everyday tactics that migrants employed in relation to police corruption. One night, Lin’s friend, for example, wanted to accompany us to an interview in a nearby building. When she was met with objections and questions regarding the risk of moving about late at night without a passport, she simply reached into her pocket and waved a 50-ringgit bill in front of her face, while happily exclaiming “Insurance!” These insurance jokes were not uncommon, and they provided an important gateway for me into new knowledge and conversations around the intricacies of dealing with a corrupt police force – including precisely how much money a migrant should carry in public space (to always have some cash to present to the police but decrease the risk of being charged too much). This speaks to the way that jokes and humorous remarks around contentious issues can operate as a form of (ironic) truth-telling (Trnka 2011), that allows marginalised groups the space to voice social concerns and critique power in a manner perceived as more “innocent” (Jul Sørensen 2008). But, as the comments around the decreasing interest in migrants during election time reveals, a jocular framing also allowed me as a researcher the ability to approach the contentious issue of police behaviour in a more “pleasurable” and thus perceived “safer” manner.

The many jokes around police corruption, the exploitative practices of employers, and the precarious legal and social position of the migrant workforce expose the incongruous nature of the Malaysian migration regime, and how it places migrants in precarious as well as bizarre situations. In fact, humour has been found particularly effective for identifying the very “absurdity of violence” and the many ambiguities and insecurities that it fosters in everyday life (Fluri 2019: 127; see also Goldstein 2003). One reason for this is that humour tends to “develop out of situations of *disjuncture* [my emphasis]”, and laughter often becomes “a means of giving voice to a situation that strikes one as radically irregular” (Trnka 2011: 338). In other words, when the surreal has become the norm, humour emerges as an important “tactic” of survival (de Genova 2005: 169). An illustration of this phenomenon is that on many occasions during my fieldwork, horrid stories of exploitation or violence would end in laughter. At times (and as illustrated in the previous section), this was the result of someone deliberately using humour as a “break” from the serious topics of conversation. Such as when one interlocutor commented on the “nice colour” of someone’s t-shirt – directly following a gruesome account of having been sold by the guards in a Malaysian detention center to the Thai mafia. At other times, laughter however erupted as a direct response to the utterly bizarre nature of what was detailed in the migrants’ stories. During an interview with a man working in a fancy restaurant in central George Town, we for example asked about his experiences of violence in the workplace. His response was that although “yes” his boss, the European man who owned the restaurant, had a “really bad temper”, “no”, he had never experienced violence. Just a few moments later he however started telling a story of how he, only last week, had made a mistake in the kitchen that had resulted in his boss throwing a full-sized watermelon at him. “Did you get hurt?” we asked with big eyes. “No, no, no!” he exclaimed triumphantly. “I am *super-fast!*” – meaning that he

managed to quickly jump out of the way. Rather than hitting him, the melon had therefore smashed on the floor. When we started giggling nervously, mostly at the absurdity of the scene he was describing but also at the fact that he did not perceive this as violence, his face lit up and all of us could not control our laughter for several minutes thereafter. Following this, watermelons (“oh, no problem, it was only a watermelon!”) became a running gag between us. Beyond the obvious release involved here, this incident is illustrative of how laughter was sometime the only possible response: the “only grammar” available, to borrow a phrase from Lisa Bhungalia (2020: 396), to capture “the absurdity of the moment”. Finally, these instances of shared laughter also presented an opportunity for me to show solidarity with the interlocutors. While my own laughter was sometimes spontaneous (as in the case just outlined above), I also used jokes as a means to “save the face” of someone speaking about difficult issues (i.e., to try to avoid embarrassment on the part of the interlocutors) or as explicit confirmation that I too, found the treatment of migrants unacceptable and utterly bizarre.

### Concluding Remarks

This article has made the case for why the jocular is both methodologically and analytically important in ethnographic work on migration. First, paying attention to the various functions of humour in the ethnographic encounter, it has sought to illustrate how the jocular can be helpful in laying bare the power dynamics involved in the actual interview situation – and how this opens up the space for speaking about issues that may otherwise be out of reach. Allowing space for the humorous, participating in the jokes, making the researched *and* the researcher the objects of fun and ridicule allows the vulnerabilities, privileges and shortcomings of both parties to become part of the conversation – something that can also engender a more trusting attitude in sharing information about other difficult issues. Second, through explicit attention to the way migrants use humor to describe their own experiences and for interpreting and commenting on their social and political surroundings (Hernann 2016), this article has suggested that the jocular does distinct work in migrants’ agentic claims and in speaking truth to power. As such, it has suggested that attention to the humorous is helpful for uncovering different as well as more detailed understandings of both new and familiar issues.

In his recent work on humour, theologian Ola Sigurdsson (2021) proposes that the recognition of someone as a humorous individual – in essence: a person who is able to find something funny – is inevitably connected to more fundamental questions of what it means to be a human being at all. For the purposes of this article, Sigurdsson’s proposition is important because it opens the window to conversations about humour as a fundamental aspect of the human condition – and even more importantly, the consequences of overlooking the humorous in our research. Indeed, if as Lisa Bhungalia (2020: 398) suggests, the humour of the subjugated “is as much about ‘turning away from power’ as it is about asserting humanity”, then the almost singular focus on “the serious” in ethnographic work on migration has severe implications for the types of knowledge we (re)produce around migrants’ experiences, struggles and subjectivities. Failing to recognise migrants as humorous individuals, overlooking their use of humour in navigating their life circumstances, is therefore not merely a methodological omission. Instead, it risks exceptionalising migratory subjects (Schapendonk et al. 2021) in ways that deprive them of agency and humanity.

## Acknowledgements

This article is the result of many different conversations with fellow travellers in academia. While it would be impossible to name them all, I would particularly like to acknowledge the encouragement and helpful comments from Theodor Aalders, Joseph Anderson, Emanuelle Brandström Arellano, Carolina Cardoso, Nicholas de Genova, Richard Georgi, Elizabeth Olsson, Joris Schapendonk, Benedict Singleton and Darshan Vigneswaran. I also want to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their very constructive feedback that helped me clarify what I was actually trying to say.

## References

- Agustín L.M. 2003. Forget victimization: Granting agency to migrants. *Development* 46(3): 30–36.
- Aparna, K., J. Schapendonk and C. Merlín-Escorza. 2020. Method as Border: Tuning in the Cacophony of Academic Backstages of Migration, Mobility and Border Studies. *Social Inclusion* 8(4): 2183–2803.
- Azis, A. 2014. Urban refugees in a graduated sovereignty: The experiences of the stateless Rohingya in the Klang Valley. *Citizenship Studies* 18(8): 839–54.
- Bakhtin, M. 1984. *Rabelais and his world*. Indiana University Press.
- Berger, P.L. 1997. *Redeeming laughter: The comic dimension of human experience*. New York: Walter De Gruyter.
- Bernal, V. 2013. Please forget democracy and justice: Eritrean politics and the powers of humor. *American Ethnologist* 40(2): 300–309.
- Bhungalia, L. 2020. Laughing at power: Humor, transgression, and the politics of refusal in Palestine. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space* 38(3): 387–404.
- Billig, M. 2005. *Laughter and ridicule: Towards a social critique of humour*. SAGE Publications.
- Browne, A. 2016. Can people talk together about their practices? Focus groups, humor and the sensitive dynamics of everyday life. *Area* 48(2): 198–205.
- Chafe, W. L. 2007. *The Importance of Not Being Earnest: The Feeling Behind Laughter and Humor*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: J. Benjamins Pub. Co.
- Coser, R. L. 1959. Some social functions of laughter: A study of humor in a hospital setting. *Human relations* 12(2): 171–182.
- Carty, J. and Y. Musharbash. 2008. You've got to be joking: Asserting the analytical value of humour and laughter in contemporary anthropology. *Anthropological Forum* 18(3): 209–217.
- De Genova, N.P. 2005. *Working the boundaries: Race, Space and 'illegality' in Mexican Chicago*. Duke University Press.
- De León, J. 2015. *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press
- Dean, R. A. K. and D. M. Gregor. 2004. Humor and laughter in palliative care: an ethnographic investigation. *Palliative & supportive care* 2(2): 139.
- Dittmer, J. 2013. Humour at the Model United Nations: The role of laughter in constituting geopolitical assemblages. *Geopolitics* 18(3): 493–513.
- Emmerson, P. 2017. Thinking laughter beyond humour: Atmospheric refrains and ethnical indeterminacies in spaces of care. *Environment and Planning A* 49(9): 2082–2098.
- Fanon, F. 2001[1963]. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin Books.
- Fluri, J. L. 2019. What's so funny in Afghanistan? Jocular geopolitics and the everyday use of humor in spaces of protracted precarity. *Political Geography* 68: 125–130.
- Franck, A. K. 2019. Corrupt(ing) borders: Navigating urban immigration policing in Malaysia. *Geopolitics* 24(1): 251–269.
- Franck, A. K. and D. Vigneswaran. 2021. Hacking migration control: Repurposing and reprogramming deportability. *Security Dialogue*. Online First.
- Goldstein, D. M. 2003. *Laughter out of place: Race, class, violence, and sexuality in a Rio shantytown*. Univ of California Press.

- Hernann, A. 2016. Joking through hardship: humor and truth-telling among displaced Timbuktuans. *African Studies Review* 59(1): 57-76.
- Hoffstadter, G. 2014. Place-making: Chin refugees, citizenship and the state in Malaysia. *Citizenship Studies* 18(8): 871–84.
- Ivkovic, S. K. 2003. To serve and collect: Measuring police corruption. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 93(1): 593–650.
- Jul Sorensen, M. 2008. Humor as a serious strategy of nonviolent resistance to oppression. *Peace & Change* 33(2): 167-190.
- Kmita, M. and L. Mawhinney. 2016. A requirement and challenge of joke-ability in humor researcher: A fusion autoethnographic analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal* 16(1): 92-107.
- Kuipers, G. 2009. Humor Styles and Symbolic Boundaries. *Journal of Literary Theory* 3(2): 219-239.
- Kuipers, G. 2008. The sociology of humor. In *The primer of humor research* (ed.) V.Raskin. Berlin and New York: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Lundquist, M. 2021. Towards and everyday peace? Exploring the political significance of everyday life in post-war Nepal. PhD Thesis, School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg.
- Mainwaring, C. 2016. Migrant agency: Negotiating borders and migration controls. *Migration Studies* 4(3): 289–308.
- Mayo, C. 2010. Incongruity and provisional safety: Thinking through humor. *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29(6): 509–521.
- Mbembe, A. 2001. *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.
- Meyer, J. C. 2000. Humor as a double-edged sword: Four functions of humor in communication. *Communication Theory* 10(3): 310-331.
- Morreall, J. 1991. Humor and work. *International Journal of Humor* 4(3/4): 359-373.
- Mulkay, M. J. 1988. *On Humor: Its Nature and Its Place in Modern Society*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Nah, A.M. 2011. Legitimizing violence: The impact of public “crackdowns” on migrant workers and refugees in Malaysia. *Australian Journal of Human Rights* 17(2): 131–157.
- Oring, E. 2003. *Engaging Humor*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.
- Raskin, V. 1985. *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Dordrecht.
- Sagi, I. and E. Yechiam. 2008. Amusing titles in scientific journals and article citation. *Journal of Information Science* 34(5): 680-687.
- Sandhu, J. S., P. Altankhuyag and D. Amarsaikhan. 2007. Serial hanging out: rapid ethnographic needs assessment in rural settings. In International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction (pp. 614-623). Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg.
- Schapendonk, J., M. Bolay and J. Dahinden. 2021. The conceptual limits of the ‘migration journey’: De-exceptionalising mobility in the context of West African trajectories. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 47(14): 3243-3259.
- Scott, J. C. 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Sigurdson, O. 2021. *Gudomliga komedier: Humor, subjektivitet, transcendens*. Glänta Produktion.
- Squire, V. 2017. Unauthorised migration beyond structure/agency? Acts, interventions, effects. *Politics* 37(3): 254–272.
- Sultana F. 2007. Reflexivity, positionality and participatory ethics: Negotiating fieldwork dilemmas in international research. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 6(3): 374–385.
- Trnka, S. 2011. Specters of Uncertainty: Violence, Humor and the Uncanny in Indo-Fijian Communities following the May 2000 Fiji Coup. *Ethos* 39(3): 331-348.
- Van Ramshorst, J. P. 2019. Laughing about It: Emotional and affective spaces of humour in the geopolitics of migration. *Geopolitics* 24(4): 896-915.
- Watson, C. 2015. A Sociologist Walks into a Bar (and Other Academic Challenges): Towards a Methodology of Humour. *Sociology* 49(3): 407–421

