

NAJWA LATIF—‘SAHABAT’

It is seven thirty in the morning in the Malaysian city of Kota Kinabalu, and I am heading out of the city, driving my two oldest children to school. As we trundle along, in slowly-building traffic, my ten year-old daughter sits in the front, acting as DJ. We move between two different English-language radio stations, and sample a selection of pop music in which Taylor Swift and One Direction feature heavily. The children are happy and chatty and I decide to put up with the music for the sake of a trouble-free school run. After seeing the two oldest girls into school, I head back towards the city, to drop my two year-old at her day-care. By now the traffic is very heavy and we move at a snail-paced crawl. ‘Shall we put on a CD?’ I ask breezily, knowing the exchange that is likely to follow. Not missing a beat, the toddler-in-the-back shouts ‘I want cakey one!’ Cakey one, as it happens, is The Rolling Stones’ *Let it Bleed*, which has become a kind of audio comfort blanket for my small daughter. However, listening to ‘cakey one’ means listening to the first track—‘Gimme Shelter’—again and again. If the CD is allowed to move forward to the second track, the mini-tyrant behind me shouts, ‘No, I want cakey one!’ Again, I give in, for the sake of an easy life. Once the toddler is dropped off, my identity can begin to shift, from parent to fieldworker. Cakey one is ejected, and I tune the radio in to ‘Era’, a Malay-language station, in part to practice my Malay comprehension but also to hear less American-influenced music. There is some inane banter and high-pitched male laughing involving the presenters, but then a song starts up, with simple guitar chords. I later discover that the song is ‘Sahabat’ (Friend) by Najwa Latif. I find myself relaxing,

letting go of my pent-up traffic annoyance, and mentally preparing for the day’s fieldwork visits.

This paper is about the emotional power that this song came to have for me during a year of fieldwork, from 2012–13, with children of migrants and refugees. Although this fieldwork was productive and thought-provoking, I also found myself grappling with some difficult contradictions, both personal and professional. For various reasons, some of which I will explore, hearing ‘Sahabat’ on the radio would help me to temporarily reconcile these contradictions. DeNora has argued that music often acts as a ‘referent (...) for clarifying the otherwise potentially polysemic character of non-musical phenomena’ (2000: 44). During fieldwork, something about this song helped me to constitute and reconstitute myself as an anthropologist, fieldworker, child rights researcher, mother and Malay speaker.

Sabah is one of two Malaysian states on the large Southeast Asian island of Borneo. Although it has always been a place of multiple ethnicities and population flows, in the last 40 or so years it has experienced large-scale migration from two of its neighbours, the Philippines and Indonesia. My fieldwork in Sabah’s capital, Kota Kinabalu, was with the children and grandchildren, aged between 8 and 19, of these Indonesians and Filipinos. I investigated children’s family histories, their links with their parents’ home countries, their access to education and their experiences of illegality and of work. Of the children I knew, the vast majority were born in Malaysia. However, since Malaysia does not grant birth citizenship, and because their parents may be irregular migrants, many of these children face

problems connected with a lack of documents. In addition, both documented and undocumented 'foreign' children are unable to attend Malaysian government schools. These children live at the margins of a society that is profoundly ambivalent about their presence. Indigenous Sabahans protest against the demographic changes linked with the high numbers of migrant workers in the state, especially given rumours that many thousands of Muslim migrants have been granted citizenship as a way to ensure support for Malaysia's ruling coalition. Since unskilled and low-skilled migrants are not supposed to bring their families with them, or to marry whilst working in Malaysia, there is also a strong sense that the very presence of children of migrants is 'illegal' (Allerton 2018).

My research with these children was my first new fieldwork project since my doctoral (and postdoctoral) research, and I found myself making endless comparisons between these two experiences. My first fieldwork had been village-based research, in a mountain site on the Indonesian island of Flores. During that fieldwork, I had lived with a family in a bamboo house with no electricity or running water, and had become completely immersed in the life of animist shifting cultivators. By contrast, in Kota Kinabalu, living in a flat with my husband and three children, with computers and broadband, it was all too easy *not* to be immersed in ethnographic research. Each day's fieldwork involved shifting out of my comfortable, if chaotic, family life, as I spent time with children at various 'alternative' learning centres throughout the city. As time went on, I also began to visit children at their homes in squatter settlements, or in crowded workers' housing next to factories, timber yards or quarries. Such urban fieldwork, in a sprawling and log-jammed city with poor public transport, involved many hours of driving, an aspect of research that

I hadn't predicted, and that I found frustrating and boring.

It was during such driving that I started to search for different radio stations to listen to. Rejecting the English-language and American rock-dominated stations favoured by my daughters, I at first chose a station that played classical Malay music. However, whilst I loved the music this station played, it felt very remote from my experience of living in a modern Malaysian city. Eventually, I settled on 'Era', a Malay-language station that played contemporary Malay music as well as the occasional English pop song for good measure. It was after a few weeks of listening to this station that I realised how much my traffic-soured mood would lighten when Najwa Latif's 'Sahabat' was played. The song has a simple, catchy beginning, and Najwa, the 17 year-old singer, has a sweet and clear voice that is complemented by the voices of Syam Kamarul, a Malaysian singer, and SleeQ, a Singaporean rap duo. The song title means 'Friend', and the lyrics are addressed to someone who is 'here in my happy times', who is 'always by my side, hearing the bittersweet story of my life'. As a mother who had brought her children to Malaysia in order to conduct research, and as an anthropologist working with children and young people, the youth and sweet energy of the song appealed to me. When it came on the radio, I temporarily forgot my frustrations with driving and with the difficulties of urban fieldwork. The song helped me to relax and to feel more immersed in Malaysia, enabling an embodied shift from my English-speaking ordinary life to my Malay-speaking fieldwork mode. Its catchy and youthful tone, and the clarity of Najwa's singing voice, helped me look forward to seeing my child interlocutors, and to the fieldwork day ahead.

So far, I have hinted at two personal paradoxes or disconnections that this song

seemed to reconcile for me emotionally. The first was my awareness of the difference between the rather privileged life I had with my family in KK, and the poor and marginalised lives of the children I knew. The second was my occasional frustration at the nature of urban fieldwork—with its cancelled appointments, busy interlocutors and traffic jams—when compared to my previous, fully-immersed (if often stifling) research in rural Flores. However, the third difficulty I struggled with in fieldwork was more complex.

Though it took a while to get used to urban fieldwork, the practicalities of my actual work with children were intensely enjoyable. Over the year that I was in Kota Kinabalu, I observed and chatted with children, sometimes teaching them English as a way to help the learning centres where they studied. I also devised various ‘child-friendly’ research techniques, including drawing and map-making, lending children cameras, writing on sticky-notes during group discussions, and filling in worksheets about various topics. Each time that I visited a learning centre, I would try to work with a group of children, and would investigate different issues using a range of creative techniques. The children themselves were very enthusiastic about my visits, and about many of these methods. However, whilst this research was often a lot of fun, the ‘results’ that I took home each day often saddened me.

For example, during an activity with children at one Indonesian learning centre to chart the time they spent on different daily activities, I became intrigued by the enormous number of hours one boy, Joni, seemed to spend watching television. When I asked him about this, Joni told me that his parents worked every day of the week until 7 or 8pm and that he was responsible for looking after his four year-old sister for much of this time. After sweeping their small house and cooking rice for the

evening, he and his sister would watch television together. As the son of hard-working migrant parents, Joni spent all of his time when not at school at home, in a small dwelling next to his father’s workshop. This kind of experience, of immobility and attendant boredom, was a common finding during my fieldwork. Often, children without documents were confined to the home because of the fear that they might be picked up in police operations to check documents.

In addition to uncovering the immobility of children’s lives, I also started to collect their worries about their family members and the consequences for their lives of their undocumented status. In a brainstorming exercise to find out what children were worried about, 10-year-old Jeri told me that he was worried about his mother. When I asked why, he described her physical symptoms of an illness that sounded very like asthma. I asked him if she was seeing a doctor about it but he said, ‘No, she won’t go to the hospital, because she doesn’t have any documents and is worried about being arrested.’ Rudy, a teenager, was distracted one day because his mother had been arrested, even though her new visa was ‘in process’. Another boy, Mat, told me how he had once been rounded up with his mother and had spent eight months in a detention centre.

Although it would be wrong to give the impression that these children do not have good experiences and good people in their lives, or that they all dislike Sabah, it is nevertheless the case that they are extremely marginalized from wider Malaysian society. Most of them lack social contact with Malaysian citizens (other than their parents’ employers), and many have experienced racism and prejudice. Although, as I have said, the vast majority of them were born in Sabah, they are considered ‘foreigners’, and news articles and blogs frequently extol

the necessity of 'sending them back where they came from'. As I drove around Kota Kinabalu, listening to the cheerful and multicultural depiction of Malaysia on radio stations, or when I encountered anti-migrant prejudice amongst Malaysians in the course of my daily life, I often felt quite antagonistic towards Malaysia, and towards its very poor record on human rights, particularly the rights of migrants and refugees.

Although Najwa Latif's 'Sahabat' could not get rid of these ambivalent feelings towards Malaysia that my fieldwork provoked, it could temporarily soothe them. Najwa and her (Malaysian and Singaporean) friends afforded an acoustic glimpse of a more optimistic, inclusive, youthful nation. When her sweet voice sang of 'becoming your friend', I thought about the potentially stateless children I knew, who were not afforded the hand of friendship by many Malaysians, but who were becoming a particular kind of friend to me. These children often played music through the tinny-sounding speakers of their phones, sometimes choreographing dance routines in front of me. And in the absence of formal modes of belonging, whether citizenship or attendance at Malaysian school, this music provided children with one, informal mode of 'belonging' to wider society.

Since the end of fieldwork, my links with my child interlocutors have been extended into the virtual world of Facebook, where many of the teenagers I knew have befriended me. The material that it is possible to gather through online fieldwork is of a very different kind to

that gathered during face-to-face fieldwork. On Facebook, children project ideal locations and educations, and endlessly post 'selfies'. However, occasionally, a comment or a link resonates with my physical fieldwork in KK. A few weeks after the end of fieldwork in 2013, Siti Anis, a 13-year-old Suluk girl born in Sabah to Filipino parents, sent me an invitation. Siti Anis attended a learning centre for Filipino children where I worked as a part-time English teacher, and always seemed to revel in her lessons and her friendships there, after many years of no schooling. The invitation that Siti Anis sent me on Facebook was to 'like' Najwa Latif's 'Sahabat'. And of course, I accepted.

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