

Narrative Arcs

Amy Butt and David Roberts

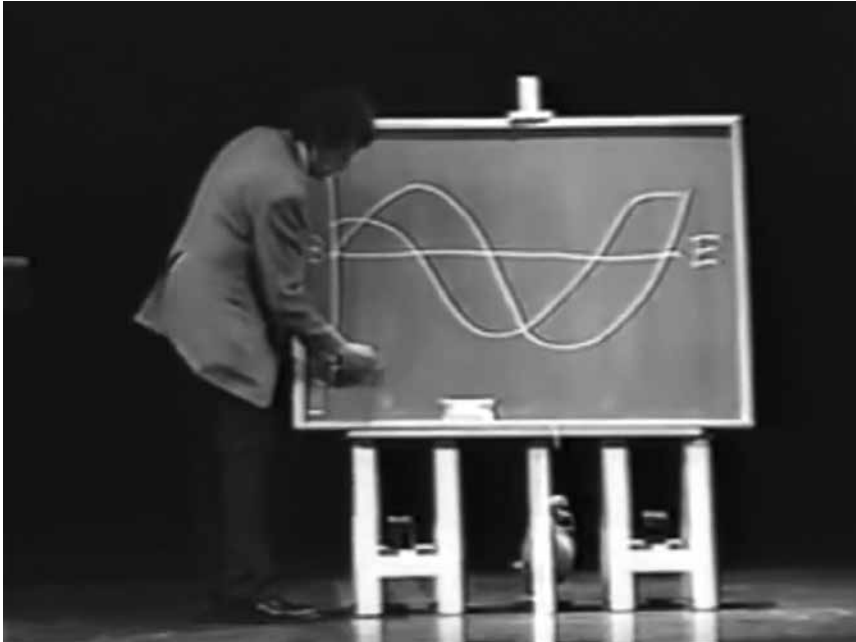


Fig. 1: "On the Shape of Stories", Kurt Vonnegut, University of South Carolina Aiken Lecture Series, 1997. YouTube, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pv-b2I2MNDg>.

*I'm Mary Finch, I've lived on the estate for forty-three years.*⁴⁸⁵

A man scratches chalk against board. "I want to share with you something I've learned." The students in tiered seating break into laughter. It's not the first time he has done this. "I'll draw it on the blackboard behind me so you can follow more easily. This [drawing a vertical line] is the G-I axis: good fortune to ill fortune. Death and terrible poverty, sickness down here [pointing to bottom of line], great prosperity, wonderful health up there [pointing to top]. This [drawing a horizontal line] is the B-E axis. B for beginning, E for entropy. Now this is an exercise in relativity, the shape of the curve is what matters, not its origin..."⁴⁸⁶

Had two children: Susan and Brian.

In his lectures on the universality of fiction, Kurt Vonnegut stands beside a blackboard onto which he plots the common patterns of stories in arcs of chalk. The complexity of Hamlet, Cinderella or the New Testament absurdly distilled. An opportunity, Vonnegut explains, to share the thwarted thoughts of his rejected Master's thesis. He draws a single line charting the central character's progress, sinuously or abruptly stepping from good

to ill fortune and back again. The students laugh because they know it is too easy.

I loved working in the school, started off as a dinner lady.

That a story has a shape feels true. It begins at the beginning and ends at the end. Things follow on from one another, actions have consequences and time marches onwards. The contained nature of a story is an ancient ideal, an idea of what a story is, first set out by Aristotle. "It should have", he said, "for its subject a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, a middle, and an end", the point where the chalk hits and leaves the blackboard, and its unbroken line between.⁴⁸⁷ Much of Aristotle's *Poetics* were lost, much has been disregarded as outdated, but the idea

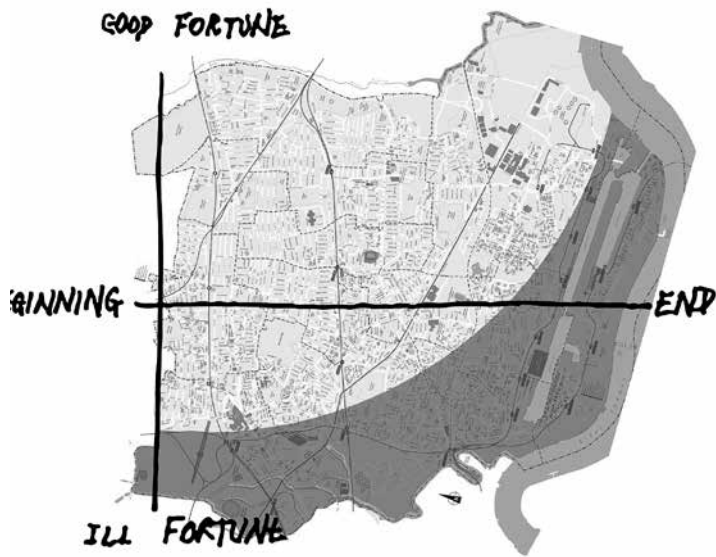


Fig. 2: Arc of Opportunity, Stratford to Beckton, 1999. Collage by Amy Butt and David Roberts, 2017. Source: Music for Masterplanning, 2016.

of the shape of a story remains. Narrative arcs shape how we tell stories to each other, about each other, about ourselves or about a place.

It was brilliant.

Those who study the form and function of stories, such as Jerome Bruner, Ruth Finnegan, Barbara Hardy, Karl Weick, see humans

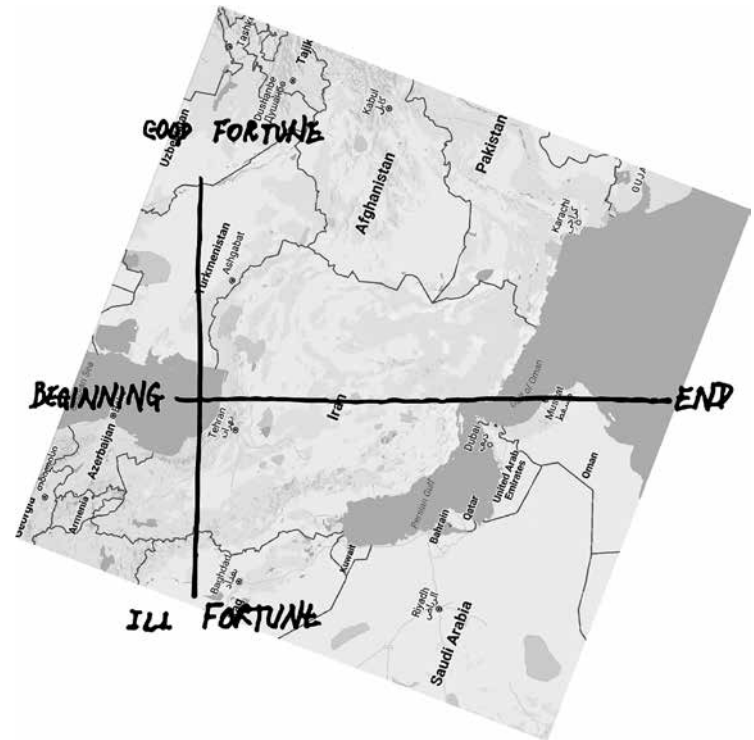


Fig. 3: Arc of Opportunity, the Horn of Africa to the Indian Ocean, 1979. Collage by Amy Butt and David Roberts, 2017. Source: Google Maps, 2017.

as storytelling animals.⁴⁸⁸ It is the way we share the mess of life with one another, bundled up in a form that leaves out all time spent waiting for the kettle to boil. These stories structure our lives in the retelling, constructing patterns of beginnings and endings out of a “flowing soup”.⁴⁸⁹ Eventually the story of our day becomes the day itself, not how it was, but how it was told.⁴⁹⁰ An accumulation of all the stories you tell shapes how others see you and, eventually, the stories shape how you understand yourself.⁴⁹¹

I became very ill in March.

Our stories as individuals nest inside and overlap with the stories of those around us, relegating one another to supporting characters or elevating us to heroic roles. So, why does a story about a place matter?

Delores, if I'm not around for a day or two, Delores will knock to see if I'm fine.

Imagine this: A borough plagued by ill fortune. A quest for transformation is rewarded. Its people revel in good fortune and off-scale happiness. “We have a story to tell”, its Borough Council proclaims, “Newham is being transformed from being an underperforming local authority, only three or four years ago, to being at the leading edge of local government thinking and development”.⁴⁹²

When I walked in here, God, I must admit I was over the moon.

Visitors to Newham Council’s website used to be greeted by the message “Newham—the most deprived authority in England”, an inauspicious start to any story.⁴⁹³ Vonnegut warns, don’t begin a story with tragic ill fortune, “not too low, nobody wants to be depressed”. So the council decided to update the moment

of beginning and map out a familiar, more optimistic plot line. They started a story being repeated elsewhere, reshaping the borough in its retelling. “Regeneration”, shouts the British Urban Regeneration Association, “is a comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area”.⁴⁹⁴ This story of regeneration soars across Vonnegut’s blackboard, its narrative arc a neat line of progress and development. In Newham, it becomes the story of a plucky borough, once underperformer now leading-edger, sweeping us



Fig. 4: Arc of Opportunity, Swansea Bay to the M4 corridor, 2003. Collage by Amy Butt and David Roberts, 2017. Source: Google Maps, 2017.

all up as supporting characters in a story bigger than ourselves.

I was stuck in this place that was falling—and I mean falling—down.

Regeneration is a story with compelling clarity. It fits neatly into templates for iconic plot lines. Christopher Booker would call it a “rebirth” story, or Joseph Campbell a “heroic monomyth” where trials are overcome to reap great reward.⁴⁹⁵ But telling a single story of a whole borough, constructing patterns out of the flowing soup of so many lives, means that a great many stories and the lives they describe are disregarded. To construct a single narrative from multiple stories requires a heavy-handed editor. For this active and considered process of exclusion, Paul Ricoeur offers the term “emplotment”, summarised by Jeff Leinaweaver as “boxing up narrative”, an act that exercises both “power and containment”.⁴⁹⁶

So when I got here.

“We call Newham London’s supernova”, the executive director for regeneration and inward investment announces. “It is literally a platform waiting for things to happen. Traditionally it has always been one of London’s poorest areas and that situation hasn’t changed. To turn it around would be history in the making.”⁴⁹⁷

It was just a house, but it was my house, you know?

The story of Newham needed a beginning and an ending, a moment when the chalk touches and leaves the blackboard. In his speech, the executive director for regeneration resets the beginning with three fresh starts, zero points on the narrative axis which relegate everything before to backdrop.

My husband Brian, his brother, he had this thing about that song “Nelly the Elephant”.

Newham is the site of a “supernova”, a plot device of implosive force to mark a beginning which burns away the clutter of history, experience, and place. After the dust has cleared, the setting for regeneration in Newham is revealed as a “platform”, an empty stage on which a new narrative can be played out. The existing local characters are also flattened, defined by a single economic condition—a poverty that “hasn’t changed”. With plot, setting, and characters in place, Newham is ready for a grand narrative, “history in the making”, the only story



Fig. 5: Arc of Opportunity, Leeds and Liverpool Canal, Wigan, 2007. Collage by Amy Butt and David Roberts, 2017. Source: Google Maps, 2017.

that will count.⁴⁹⁸

And after I came home from the hospital after my op, he threw me about the room from one end of the room to the other, doing “Nelly the Elephant” in a jive.

The editorial power of emplotment overlooks or omits individual stories that no longer fit. But, as a narrative, regeneration would be no more and no less powerful than any other narrative about Newham, were it not for the power behind its telling. The story of regeneration, uttered so frequently and with such conviction, gains power and the patina of truth in every re-performance.⁴⁹⁹

People must think now, “Ooh, look at them, living in places like that.”

Imagine this: the blackboard is a map of the world. A single exponential curve is resized and redrawn across its continents. The men holding chalk beside it look proudly at the soaring line of their cut-and-paste arc. “The Arc of Opportunity”, states Transform Newham, “sweeps from the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park down the River Lea to the Thames, then eastwards throughout the Royal Docks to Gallions Reach and on into Barking”.⁵⁰⁰

But they’ve not been inside them.

With the Arc of Opportunity the story of Newham found its shape. But arcs of opportunity did not begin in Stratford and will not end in Beckton. Two decades before the council first washed over Newham’s southeastern perimeter in pink, the cover illustrator of *Time* magazine warped the shores of the Indian Ocean through to the horn of Africa into an amber crescent.⁵⁰¹ Within its pages Cold War diplomats and foreign correspondents wrangle over geopolitical strategy of this region rich in oil reserves rocked by Islamist revolution. As they question who

will transform the “arc of crisis” into their “arc of opportunity”, the shape, identity, and destiny of this narrative is forged.⁵⁰²

Don’t go by the appearance of what Mr Mayor has done, putting the boards up.

Arcs of opportunity, whenever they sprout and whatever region they sweep, have always been more politics than place. Just as narrative arcs shape the type of stories we tell, arcs of opportunity warp landscapes and lives, recasting spaces and peoples until paths of narrative promise align with geography. UK city councils

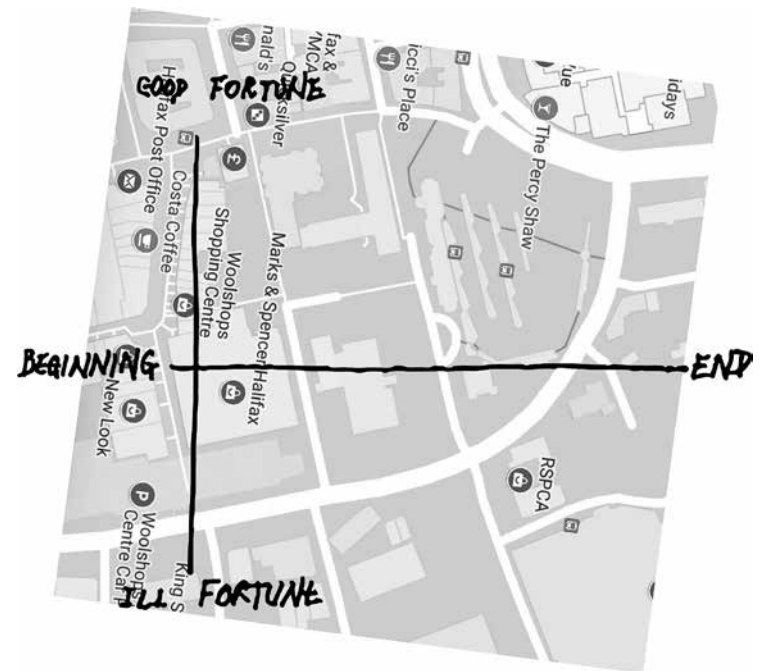


Fig. 6: Arc of Opportunity, Winding Road, Halifax, 2008. Collage by Amy Butt and David Roberts, 2017. Source: Google Maps, 2017.

seem particularly eager to impose trajectory on topography.

This is what I have to say to him:

As policy papers and promotional videos smear the regeneration programme over Newham, eight further arcs of opportunity snake across the UK: stretching around the shore of Swansea Bay along the M4 Corridor⁵⁰³; extending from the University of Salford to the Oxford Road corridor⁵⁰⁴; spanning Dudley to West Birmingham⁵⁰⁵; creeping along the Leeds and Liverpool Canal



Fig. 7: Arc of Opportunity, Fleming Way, Swindon, 2016. Collage by Amy Butt and David Roberts, 2017. Source: Google Maps, 2017.

west of Wigan⁵⁰⁶; lining the A451 in Kidderminster⁵⁰⁷; reaching across Halifax town centre⁵⁰⁸; swelling from the Waterfront to Victoria Street in Liverpool⁵⁰⁹; and striding along Fleming Way in Swindon.⁵¹⁰

“If you honestly think that I am going to give up my home to you at my time of life, forget it.”

And the arcs grow. From an isolated curl in the northwest of Adelaide⁵¹¹; to soaring sprawling spans throughout central Asia to Afghanistan⁵¹²; across the South Pacific Rim⁵¹³; circumnavigating Marrakesh to Bangladesh⁵¹⁴; most recently returning to the UK to delineate the first round of new Garden Cities looping around the Green Belt from Southampton, Oxford, and Cambridge to Felixstowe.⁵¹⁵

“I will fight you.”

Applying a shape to something as complex as geography or politics is as simple as drawing the narrative arc of Hamlet on a chalkboard and just as absurd. Vonnegut’s students would laugh because it is too easy. But the power of the story is such that, on its own terms, stripped of all the complexity of life to distract or divert us, arcs of opportunity can feel true. Emplotment edits out other stories which might blur its beginning or fray its ending. But if we are able to resituate the grand narrative of regeneration, to see it for the story it is, we find it as vulnerable as any other.⁵¹⁶ There is plenty of space on the blackboard to draw over it.

“You will have to drag me out.”

In this singular story, the idea of “Newham” is the main character, with Borough and Council indistinct. When residents reclaim an authorial role to cast themselves as protagonists the plot line of progress—the economic, physical, social, and environmental

improvements promised in regeneration rhetoric—rarely feature. Those who study the impact of urban policy, such as Ben Campkin, Loretta Lees, Paul Watt, find that those cast in the story of regeneration are often cast out by its reality. Instead, support networks break, rents and other costs rise, and the people and activities that form and forge diverse communities are displaced.⁵¹⁷

*“It belongs to me.”*⁵¹⁸

Imagine this: On the blackboard a tangle of lines strike through and obscure Newham’s clean Arc of Opportunity, preceding its



Fig. 8: Arc of Opportunity, Afghanistan to Central Asia, 2005. Collage by Amy Butt and David Roberts, 2017. Source: Google Maps, 2017.

false beginning at the regeneration supernova and extending beyond the covenant of legacy. Beside it stand a cast of Newham residents who have given their voices and their stories to *Music for Masterplanning*. Amongst them, Mary Finch, whose words weave through this chapter. Her life on the Carpenters Estate becomes a story of resistance told by the Land of Three Towers, an all-female cast of housing activists, people who have experienced homelessness and young mothers. The power of stories grows with each retelling, the power to mutually renegotiate identity.⁵¹⁹ These “fragmented, polyphonic, collectively produced stories” are what David Boje refers to as “antenarratives”.⁵²⁰ Their existence disrupts the “linear mono-voiced grand narrative”.⁵²¹ Music for Masterplanning is a retelling of Newham. Each song is a performance of self, redressing the grand narrative that subjugates the stories of its residents.⁵²² They are antenarratives that shatter the singular voice of regeneration into many pieces, to re-author life stories in all their complexity.

*This is a song about my hometown,
This is a song about the place where I’m from...
It’s my area. It’s where I know my place.
Nowhere on earth is like my village.*⁵²³

Let’s start at the beginning. For the Arc of Opportunity that is the moment of the supernova. Da Sweetnezz in My Hometown push this moment of beginning backwards, establishing a Newham “village” as a foundational source of personal identity, a beginning which frames subsequent individual stories of place. For Da Sweetnezz, being from Newham is something to be cherished, a source of comfort and a source of pride.

*Regeneration Supernova is a’comin’
It will blow you all away
Regeneration is a’comin’
And it’s here to stay...*

*And you can go anywhere from here my friend.*⁵²⁴

From these multiple moments of beginning, these sung stories resolutely refuse to follow the narrative arc set out for them. Rayna’s “Regeneration Is Our Salvation” repeats the hollow promises of regeneration, reframed by the loudspeaker of market-stall holder or missionary. While the Arc of Opportunity curves towards good fortune for all, the plot details seem to require the same leap of faith as any path to salvation. The narrative of regeneration is universally appealing because it can lead “anywhere from here”, as placeless as utopia.

His world is delusional, that there is something false about it...

People claim to remember past lives;

I claim to remember a different—very different—present life.

*I know of no one who has ever made this claim before,
but I rather suspect that my experience is not unique.*⁵²⁵

In both the narrative and promise of regeneration, Newham could be anywhere. The “platform” provides a blank setting for the narrative of regeneration to play out. But in his track “Umwelten”, Kunal Modi stakes a claim to a “different present”. The words in the track are quotes from a speech by Philip K. Dick entitled “If You Find This World Bad, You Should See Some of the Others”, where the science-fiction author recounts a drug-induced state that revealed reality as we know it to be a fiction, an experience that echoes many of his own plot lines. Modi uses this personal story of revelation as a commentary on regeneration, to reframe it as a constructed layer of representation that must be stripped back to expose the reality of the present. It creates a moment of resistance, using one possible fiction to unpick another.

I know this place so well

I am the East End

I know this place so well

And I am the East End

I know this place so well

I am, the East End

I know this place, so well

*I am the East End!*⁵²⁶

Within the narrative arc of opportunity, the central protagonist is the *idea* of Newham, singular and subsuming all the individual resident voices within it. While the setting and protagonist are still inexorably linked, in Romerlin’s “I Am the East End” both reclaim their individuality. The words “I am the East End” are repeated in multiple voices, rich with a variety of accents, inflections, genders, and ages, to create a story where there are a

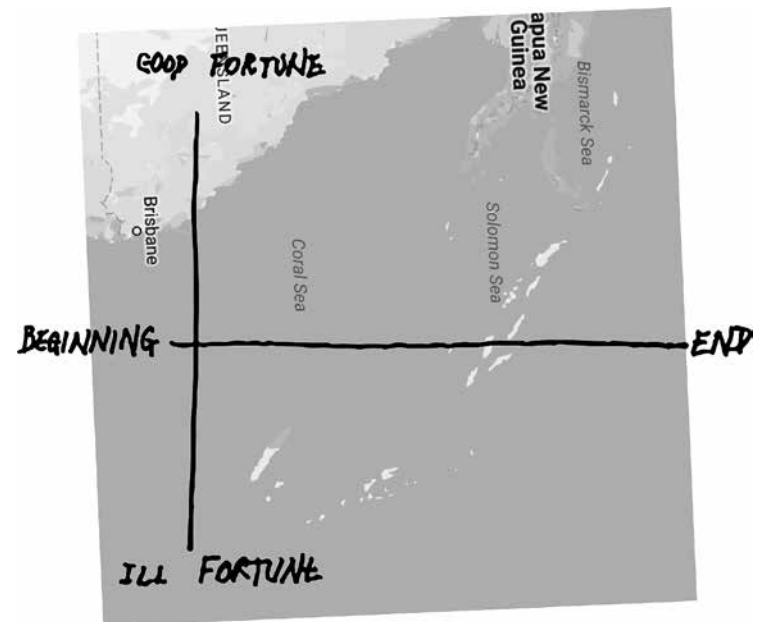


Fig. 10: Arc of Opportunity, Marrakesh to Bangladesh, 2004. Collage by Amy Butt and David Roberts, 2017. Source: Google Maps, 2017.

plurality of protagonists defining their place on their own terms.

*Tried my best to forget the past
Scars of the soul are the ones that last
Turn my back and try to be better
Hope everyone left there wouldn't remember
Times I said I would change the world
Big ambitions for a ne'er-do-well.
(Chorus)
We're going back to where we belong
Where the hearts of the people, remain strong...*⁵²⁷

This grand narrative removes the inhabitants from any position of agency; there is no space for individuals to change “history in the making” and this frustration is reflected in City Strays’ “Canning Town”. But even as City Strays lament their inability to “change the world”, the return home provides a chance to “be better” using the collective strength of community. Rather than the radical reconstruction of a place, this “rebirth” story revalues that which is already present.

*I visualise the transformation of my land
My homeland
Newham...
The original people devoted to Newham have been betrayed
People who put colour, culture, different aromas, ethnicity,
harmony of languages, onto Newham's blank canvas, feel betrayed
We don't have a place to put our signatures anywhere
On this new London borough of Newham portrait.*⁵²⁸

The endings of these sung stories are as diverse as their beginnings. While some are hopeful, the track written by Alistair Newton with members of the Creative Writing course at MIND in Stratford speaks of the loss of a future, an ending already written into the lived present, the underside of the utopian promise

of regeneration. But, in telling this genesis story, Newton and MIND reclaim and acknowledge the agency that residents had in shaping Newham as it is, the impact that individual stories have had on this telling of a place. While there may be no “place to put our signature”, a damning critique of exclusionary urban policy, in telling their story Alistair Newton and MIND make a place, one which complicates and disrupts the Arc of Opportunity. Within these songs, and in the act of their telling, the chalk line of this narrative arc is overwritten. While regeneration is a compelling narrative, in *Music for Masterplanning* it is challenged by equally

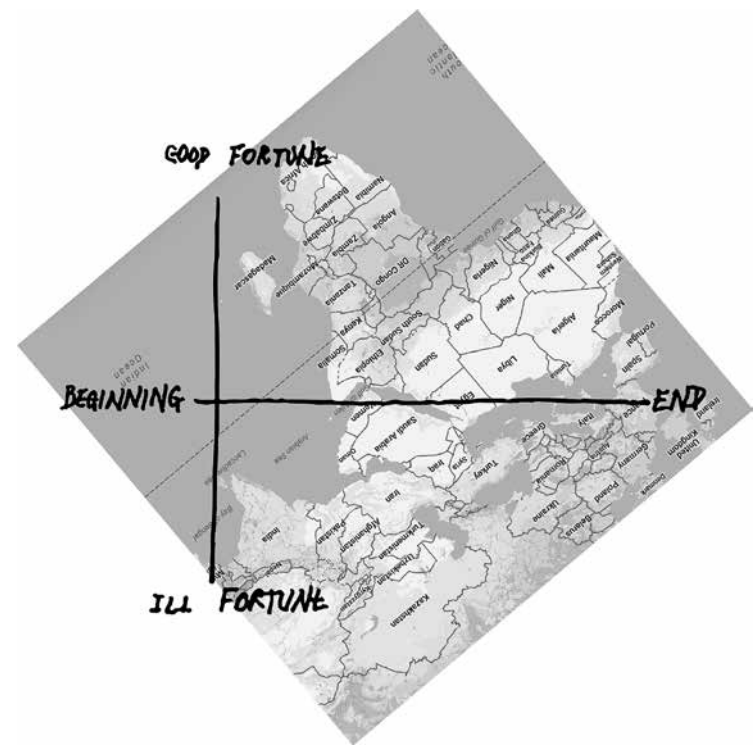


Fig. 9: Arc of Opportunity, South Pacific Rim, 2015. Collage by Amy Butt and David Roberts, 2017. Source: Google Maps, 2017.

compelling voices, one powerful story among many.

Things'll never change likely
The feds and snakes they wanna bite me
So when can I escape
Problems escalate
Friends best of mates
Ends got the best of them
So it bleeds when I press the pen
On paper...
How can I live here with no dreams?
Don't know how I'd cope if I didn't have my team
These investors are on a joke ting, like a meme
But I'm gonna tell 'em with the mic, 'cause I'm a microphone fiend.⁵²⁹

List of Contributors

Rohan Ayinde is an interdisciplinary artist whose work is dedicated to creating spaces of empowerment and reflection for marginalised people. He has described his work as being “committed to creating an audience that is Black without the limitations of race”. Using both photography and poetry, Ayinde views art as his most powerful means of stimulating dialogue and action that has the means to change the world. Rohanayinde.com

Robert Baffour-Awuah is an urban strategist. He previously worked in marketing and branding, and has more recently worked in urban regeneration with the Greater London Authority and the Royal Docks Team. He studied digital media production at London College of Communication, Landscape Architecture at Kingston University and Urban Studies at University College London. Robert writes on confluence of brands, city-making and everyday life on his blog [Brand Urbanism](http://BrandUrbanism.com).

Theodora Bowering is an architect (RAIA), Gates Scholar and PhD Candidate in the Centre for Urban Conflict Research at the Department of Architecture, University of Cambridge. Theodora's PhD investigates everyday experiences of ageing within cities, looking specifically at mobility and memory in the London Borough of Newham. She has worked in architectural practices in Sydney and London on residential, heritage and public buildings and most recently as project coordinator and