5. The Role of Unrecognized Labor

5.1 Introduction

This chapter, based on empirical ethnographic data, examines the building salvage and farming labor activities of *çıkmacıs*. The family members work at demolition for most of the year in Istanbul. They adjust to neoliberal urbanization dynamics to generate income from street scrap collecting and material reclamation. Furthermore, they work seasonally on their farmland in Yazıhüyük. I will argue that, in regard to work insecurity and irregular income, they can be identified as precarious labor. Also, based on their dual lives, I will show that a family's activities can be understood as a bridge between rural and urban.

Rural migration and marginalized minorities are often associated with scrap collecting, waste picking, and building salvage—all of these are activities unregulated by the local authorities in Turkey as well as the Global South in general. They find their own below-the-radar survival strategies for overcoming poverty and unemployment (Bayat 2013). When there is a lack of urban structures and facilities, their solidarity and social networks become relational infrastructures (Simone 2015).

In the first part of this chapter, official and unrecognized actors in Istanbul's waste recycling will be identified. My aim is to highlight their heterogeneous structure and informal means (Gidwani 2015; Tuçaltan 2018); as part of that process, I will describe the activities of *çıkmacıs*. In the second part, I will describe building materials' demolition and reclamation processes. The sections to follow give a detailed description and analysis of the salvage work and the urban life of scrap collectors.

Because of global, political, and economic reasons, the state has neglected family farming in Turkey. Industrial agriculture controlled by corporations took over small-scale local farming activities in the 2000s (M. Öztürk et al. 2018). However, the farmland is a *vibrant object* that strongly influences

the two-fold livelihood of *çıkmacıs* (Bennett 2010). It can be regarded as a nonhuman actant that impacts human life through *trans-corporeal* associations (Alaimo 2010) via day-to-day bodily engagement with the soil. Their farmland's agency and its *cosmopolitical* capacities are beyond economic factors (Blok and Farias 2016). In a post agricultural era, their return movements depend on the climate, vegetation and many other nonhuman actors. In the last part of this chapter, I reflect upon their other work life in farmland and agricultural production. Even though they migrated to the city, they are bound to their village.

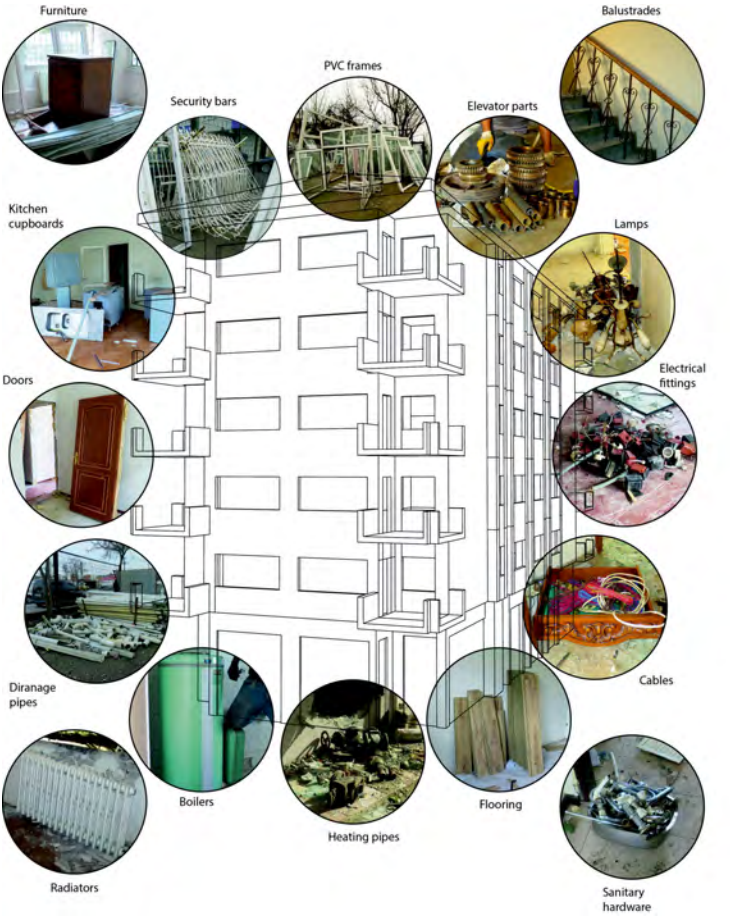
5.2 Heterogenous Waste Management in Istanbul

Waste has been an income resource throughout the urbanization history of Istanbul. Among the many street vendors and artisans in the city, some professions deal with discarded objects, waste, and their reuse processes. For instance, people called *lodosçu* (beachcombers) were salvaging items and materials after the Southwestern tides changed on the shores of the Bosporus (Aktaş 2010). During the 17th century, the waste collector guild[1] separated waste into reusable objects and materials (Ayşe 2008). Back when Ottoman guilds were representatives of particular professions, the wall masons and demolishers named *yıkıcılar* were responsible for demolishing and salvaging buildings (Çelik 2007). Even after the modernization of waste management systems, unrecognized recycling workers, scrap collectors[2], and waste pickers[3] continue to collect and segregate waste and scrap.

When urban demolitions intensified in Istanbul, the informal waste workers took advantage of infrastructural absences (Ceritoglu and Altay 2016). The overall management of waste flow is heterogeneous because formal and informal actors coexist in managing and recycling the discarded items (Gidwani 2015; Tuçaltan 2018). In the following section, which is based on empirical data, I will first discuss the municipality facilities and the private recycling industry, then move on to the laborers whose participation is unrecognized and unregulated.

1 Arayıcı esnafı in Turkish.
2 Eskici in Turkish.
3 Kağıt toplayıcısı in Turkish.

Figure 5.1: Building elements recovered from an apartment



Source: Author's own

5.2.1 Formal Actors: Municipalities and Licensed Waste Collection Companies

Turkey recovered 38 percent of its overall waste in 2020[4] officially (Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜIK) 2020). The collection and separation of domestic waste, that is not sorted out in households, are the responsibility of the district municipalities. Above that level, the metropolitan municipality is assigned to recycle domestic, industrial, construction, and medical waste in the most populated cities in Turkey; however, their collection system lacks the appropriate infrastructure and labor force (Kanat 2010). In Istanbul, some district municipalities funded companies with a waste separation facility to modernize their facility and hire waste pickers and scrap collectors.

The Istanbul Environmental Protection and Waste-Processing Corporation (ISTAÇ) is the main waste management entity in the metropolitan municipality of Istanbul. They select, design, and construct sanitary landfills and function as technical consultants to local administrations. ISTAÇ coordinates industrial and medical waste disposal and has facilities that produce electricity from landfill gas and compost from organic waste. They are responsible for recycling packaging material and the extraction of solid waste from sea vessels. They clean the main arterial roads and squares, coasts, and beaches of Istanbul. Finally, they are in charge of managing excavation and demolition debris dumps. In addition, the company runs a specialized recycling facility with a capacity of two hundred tons per hour. Utilizing that debris surplus, the company assists in the rehabilitation of former mining sites and supplies material for land reclamation projects.

In 2016, at the beginning of my fieldwork, I visited a municipal recycling facility in the Esenler district in Istanbul; it was a sizable warehouse where 70 employees worked. This facility was selling separated waste as raw materials to recycling factories. In the warehouse, they had two different departments: transportation and sorting. In the sorting department, the workers used a conveyor belt to pick out unwanted objects from the bulk waste. There were machines for compressing and strapping among the heaps of paper and plastic. The workers, who earned minimum wage, had 8-hour daily work shifts. Primarily, they were Kurdish and originated from eastern Turkey. They used to

4 In European Union, it is 60 percent in 2020 (EUROSTAT 2022).

be farmers or livestock[5] breeders. One of them explained that he migrated to Istanbul in the 1980s to seek a better livelihood because of unemployment in his village. With the help of a relative, he started working as a waste picker and scrap collector when he migrated to Istanbul. He stated: "I found this job through a contact at the municipality. I am lucky to find this job; however, we have a short contract. Our job security is weak, but it is better than to go around all day scavenging waste". By and large, the informal pickers were hired by facilities like Esenler or licensed private companies to collect and recycle waste.

Figure 5.2: A recycling worker is collecting paper boxes on the street in Istanbul. They rummage through Istanbul with their pushcarts called "çekçek".

Source: Ali Saltan Archive

Close to the Esenler municipal recycling facility, there were several private plastic recycling depots in Topkapı industrial zone, among other small industrial production establishments. They granulate plastic waste and sell it to large-scale factories. One of the depots' owners stated that he was buying PVC window frames from scrap collectors who salvaged demolition sites. Some self-employed workers were working with him regularly. The owner was buying these frames by the kilogram and then separated the metal profiles and

5 The livestock was killed by the Turkish Military in the 1980s and breeding is banned in the pastures located in south-east Turkey (Zeybek 2020).

sold them to another metal recycling depot in the area. In the depot, the plastic granulating machine was breaking the frames into small pieces. After being traded as raw material, he explained: "PVC window frames become drainage pipes in a factory". After analyzing the exchange at this kind of depot, one realizes that a scrap collector is no different than a waste recycling worker (Figure 5.2) who, as a self-employed individual, sells waste as a commodity; by means of collecting, dismantling, salvaging, or "putting the waste into the carrier, segregating and classifying, all constitute both physical and social labor spent to make waste ready for recycling" (Dinler 2016, 38).

Figure 5.3: Salvaging an apartment building in Kadıköy[6]

Source: Author's own

The municipalities and their privatized companies *want to* adhere to EU recycling standards. In the absence of succeeding that, waste pickers, scrap collectors, and *çıkmacıs* (Figure 5.3) continue to recycle and repurpose waste. The

6 At this instant, Engin, Jabir, and Hayatullah are taking down a window frame that faces the Marmara Sea. Engin is hanging out the window (dangerously) to retrieve one last piece. The room is full of debris such as the long PVC profiles lying on the floor. Walking inside the large living room is almost impossible because of all the broken things, especially the broken glass. At the back, the edge of Kınalı Island can be seen, which is an expensive view and reveals this as an expensive neighborhood.

functioning of waste management systems depends on the symbiosis between formal and informal actors. Here, informality should be defined as a heuristic device that helps us think about the blurry border between formal and informal (Roy 2011, 223). It should not be regarded as an economic or social problem but rather as a social existence that can help us understand adaptation, practicality and negotiation practices of street labor (Bayat 2004). Because of this, 'unrecognized' rather than 'informal' is a more fitting definition of their legal and social status.

5.2.2 Unrecognized Actors: Çıkmacıs

Unrecognized laborers in the recycling sector are mostly rural migrants who were able to move to Istanbul in the 1970s and, more recently, refugees. There are two prominent actors in street collection work: waste pickers and scrap collectors. Prior to the daily collection of the municipal waste, which ends up in separation facilities or landfills, the waste bins are visited by the waste pickers who separate and collect recyclable materials and objects. As unregistered and unlicensed laborers in the recycling industry, they sell their waste to metal and plastic warehouses (Dinler 2016; Tuçaltan 2018). Day and night, they roam around the city with their pull carts from one garbage bin to another.

Unlike waste pickers, scrap collectors do not sort out solid waste. They roam around the neighborhoods collecting metal scrap, unused or damaged electronic equipment, old furniture, and household objects of any kind. While shouting "*eskici*" (ragman) from behind their pushcarts, they call out for old stuff and discards to buy from residents. Either they get the objects for free or haggle down to a very low amount of money. Later, they sell collected household items from their stall, pushcarts or flea markets. Sometimes they deal with second-hand shops where second-hand furniture and electronic appliances are sold. Additionally, they trade metal scraps to recycling warehouses or factories. Scrap collectors operate in a zone between street refuse and building salvage because of their mobility and adaptability to second-hand commodities.

Waste pickers are perceived as competitors by the private sector and municipalities. Such competition by the latter is unfair because state-supported bodies have the legislative power to marginalize waste pickers. Unfortunately, waste pickers have limited resources to organize themselves against this competition or related conflicts. Because they are self-employed, they are not represented by any recognized professional body. In South America, waste picker

organizations and cooperatives (e.g, OPDS in Argentina and Coopcent ABC in Brazil) contribute to making policy frameworks (Gutberlet et al. 2017). It also shows that the circular economy is not only bound to technical modernization and formal governance issues.

Figure 5.4: Moving salvaged building components[7]

Source: Author's own

Architectural salvage relates to the restoration and conservation of old building parts with historical and aesthetic significance (Addis 2006). During the fieldwork, I encountered a few architectural salvagers who sell second-hand parts of buildings because of their antique or vintage value. In contrast to this, the *çıkmacıs* mainly dismantle modern concrete apartment buildings from the 1960s that were renovated or remodeled with new building parts. Being in good condition, those parts have the potential to become part of the circular economy.

7 A scrap collector is bringing a window frame of a gecekondu to a supply yard. The frame weighs between 30 and 40 kilos, depending on the metal profiles inside. The gecekondu was demolished a few hours before. Other items (a washing machine and a satellite TV antenna) in the truck are taken to another second-hand shop. This is a typical size and type of truck for Çıkmacıs.

The *çıkmacıs* are the main actors in building salvage. The city is repaired and renewed by such labor, "continuously re-creating the conditions of possibility for urban life and capitalist enterprise" (Gidwani 2015, 576). When urban renewal via demolitions accelerated in all districts of Istanbul, the workload created job opportunities for the recycling market. Abandoned buildings became a resource (Figure 5.4) and demolition contractors, scrap collectors, and other entrepreneurs were able to benefit. After the intensification of demolitions, the scrap collectors expanded their business with their family-oriented workforce. They brought their relatives from their home villages. If the number of workers was insufficient, they employed Syrian and Afghan refugee workers for cheap labor. Through these strategies, they have adapted to the dynamics of neoliberal urbanization.

Figure 5.5: Transporting salvaged materials[8]

Source: Author's own

8 The truck belongs to Engin. They load the metal pieces of the roof before they bring down window frames. The pieces are stacked nicely to organize the load's volume. They will take them to a scrap dealer in the industrial zone. The fences of the demolition site are poorly placed and without a proper door. They have to sleep on the premises to protect their reclaimed materials.

Çıkmacıs generate income from two areas: the recycling sector and the second-hand market. First, they sell recyclable materials to municipality depots or private recycling factories. In this sort of exchange, they are like paper collectors: they act as middlemen between waste and recycling factories, sell their labor, and trade sorted waste as a commodity. For example, the recycled metal prices depend on global exchange prices (Corwin 2018; Dinler 2016). Second, they are part of an unregulated second-hand network of component reuse. Often, they reclaim, collect and repair second-hand building elements in their depots which are visited by a range of customers or whole-sellers locally or from afar (Figure 5.5). Their prices are regulated according to the cost of new products and labor expenses.

Through kinship and village fellowship relations, recycling labor and construction work are distributed among migrants dispossessed from their rural livelihoods (Erman 2001). For instance, most waste pickers come from Kurdish towns; scrap collectors are usually from Nevşehir; scrap dealers come from Niğde; Malatya is the origin city of most building demolishers; the workers who dismantle come from Bingöl; and so forth. After migrating to highly populated cities, the people who take these informal professions use their entrepreneurial abilities and relational strategies to survive and adapt (Simone 2015). More importantly, these relational mechanisms enable *çıkmacıs* to find different jobs via subcontracting and customer referrals.

As described above, their supply yards, warehouses and depots are established in former *gecekondu* neighborhoods. Although stationed at a fixed base, their labor system is very flexible and mobile: they can move their business from one neighborhood to another, from one demolition to the next.

5.3 Building Demolition in Istanbul

Three actors take part in building demolition and recycle-reuse processes in Istanbul: the construction company, the building demolisher, and the *çıkmacıs*. The company is responsible for financing and coordinating the demolition of the old building and the construction of a new building. First, they hire demolishers and sometimes *çıkmacıs* to clear the property. Second, the demolishers tear down the building and discard the concrete rubble at official debris dumping sites. Third, the *çıkmacıs* dismantle the salvageable and recyclable components and materials, which they will store and trade on the second-hand market. Before the intensification of the urban transformation projects, all mate-

rial reclamation was carried out by demolishers with their own salvage yards. Currently, salvaging of buildings in Istanbul is generally undertaken by *çıkmacıs* with scrap collector backgrounds but, in the other parts of Turkey, demolishers still handle the reclamation part.

These demolitions demand cheap manual labor with official and unofficial subcontracting agreements between actors. Most of the contracts are off-the-record and the labor conditions precarious. Subcontracting without job security allows the demolition and construction companies to end agreements at any time and cut payments. A *çıkmacı* commented on this situation:

> The company hires me as day labor, but they do not pay it daily. If we are lucky, we get the whole amount at the end of the month. But sometimes, they give less. Also, sometimes they pay for our health insurance, sometimes they don't.

In urban transformation projects, the demolition process starts with the property owners applying to state institutions for a seismic risk inspection. If the inspectors deem that the structure is insufficient to withstand a strong earthquake, the building is declared uninhabitable. The owners then arrange with a construction company to begin the renewal process. At that point, the condemned building, including all its materials and components, belongs to the contractor at no cost. After the municipality grants a demolition permit, the contractor hires a demolition company that, in turn, signs an official contract with the contractor. Generally, the demolisher estimates the service costs according to the height of the building. The total cost of demolition is calculated by summing up the costs or wages of equipment rental, machine operators, day laborers, and debris removal.

The workers start the demolition by placing a small excavator on the roof level. Then, they identify columns and beams and make holes in the floor. These holes channel the falling rubble to lower levels. To make the premises secure, they build a construction safety slide that internally lets down the debris to the lower floors. The wooden roof structure is generally reused to make this net (Figure 5.6).

In a large-scale demolition, for example, a housing project with several blocks, the contractor sells the building wreckage to the demolition company who then sells the salvageable building parts to the *çıkmacıs*, who then reclaim the materials. Retrieved from concrete by an excavator, reinforcement bars are sold to scrap metal dealers or recycling factories. *Çıkmacıs* reclaim plastic

window frames, doors, radiators, kitchen counters and sanitary equipment. They also pull out lighting hardware, plumbing fixtures, copper electrical cables, taps, and metal pipes; dismantle elevators and central heating systems for metal recycling; and break oversized window frames for plastic recycling. They even reclaim furniture and household items (books, pictures, chairs, sofas, and antique objects) from the previous tenants to sell at flea markets.

Figure 5.6: Installing the debris slide[9]

Source: Author's own

9 The workers create a debris slide to control the rubble falling from the upper floors. The beams holding the surface go through the floor slab. If they don't have enough wood, they sometimes use parts of wooden cupboards left by the old tenants. The man without work clothes climbs over to nail down one last piece of wood while others watch him to see if he needs help. Since the apartment is on a busy narrow street, they have to tear most of it down by hand.

5.3.1 Reclamation Processes

After visiting çıkmacıs in Altınşehir, where there are many of them, I started observing the construction sites around my neighborhood in Kadıköy. The urban transformation and never ending construction trend, which intensified since the 2012 law changes, was at my doorstep. I first met Engin, the youngest brother of the Coruk family, in an abandoned apartment building behind where I lived. The façade of the building facing my room was ten meters away from me. After all the tenants moved out, I started to observe the demolition site. Sometimes working alone, Engin appeared through the adjacent windows. Sometimes others were helping him. The building was eroding more each day by his salvaging actions. At various parts of the building, he was dismantling and removing things as if they were special treasures. After days of observation, I decided to visit the site for documentation and meet him. When I passed the metal security barrier surrounding the demolition site, I realized the apartment building was named Uzay Apartmanı [Space Apartments].

The entrance and main stairs were filled with furniture that looked a little warped. There were also some potted plants there. Later I realized that they were the objects left by the tenants when they moved. As I wandered around the building, the first thing I noticed was that the front doors of the flats were removed. Their interiors were severely broken up by salvagers. Bits and pieces of small rubble were lying on the floor. The stair railing had been removed with a blowtorch (Figure 5.7). I shouted out to see if somebody was there. A response in an eastern dialect came a little later from an upper flat. Hesitantly I walked up towards the construction sounds coming from upstairs. As I stepped on glass shards, I realized the vertical air circulation felt larger because all the entrance doors were removed. I found Engin dismantling a window frame. He kept working while talking to me. He was looking for the bolts connecting the window frames to the concrete by making test holes. Then he removed them by pulling the frame out of the window gap like a dentist pulls a tooth. He was in kind of a hurry, almost as if he was running out of time. He was loudly smashing the frame he had just removed, the glass particles were spreading around the frames and lifting dust up from the ground.

—from my fieldnotes, entry on 08.10.2016.

With three to four workers, it takes a week to dismantle an 8-floor apartment block. The reclaimed materials and components are relatively new and

high-quality because most owners replaced old ones with the latest components when remodeling their flats. However, there was more glue, spray foam sealant, and other adhesives used in construction as well, which makes it more challenging to take down new buildings. Because the fieldwork was held in middle-class neighborhoods, apartment interiors are in good condition. Modern facades equipped with PVC window frames and shutters are particularly sought after. The window frames, which have narrow dimensions (between 1 and 3 meters) are carefully dismantled to be sold secondhand. When I asked why small sizes are preferred, Engin explained:

> The customers demand narrow window frames. In the villages where we sell the most components, they prefer small dimensions. The houses are smaller, and the climate is cold. Also, they are lighter to carry and transport. We can fit many in the truck since we sell every piece.

Figure 5.7: Cutting metal pipes[10]

Source: Author's own

10 A blowtorch is efficient for cutting old pipes although it creates an industrial smell at the site and leaves burn marks on the wall. The buildings in the area were built in the 1970s and have central heating systems made of metal parts. After dismantling, the çıkmacıs will send these parts to a metal depot and sell them by the kilo.

Since Istanbul apartments have wide openings due to the warm climate, the rest of the frames are broken up for recycling. *Çıkmacıs* can sell the reclaimed materials at the spot where the demolition is located; otherwise, they transport the materials to their yards. During our conversation about storage, he said:

> Sometimes a man who sees us working comes in [to our demolition workplace] and asks for the price of the components. We immediately bargain and sell them. In this way, we do not have to transport them to our depots.

The demolition site is not a safe place for *çıkmacıs* (Figure 5.8). It is extremely dangerous, and they have to work in precarious conditions; however, they do not wear proper work clothes. Ali, brother of Engin, protested about this safety issue: "The [heavy] work clothes do not allow me to move freely to do my job. So, I often do not wear them. If you are scared of accidents, you should not work at construction sites." Dismantling activities take place without any labor safety include hammering, torching, breaking, and crushing. They are also all activities that produce dust emissions. When *çıkmacıs* work on roofs or boiler rooms where asbestos has commonly been used, they potentially breathe the hazardous air, but they do not consider this to be a danger to their health. As I mentioned the harms of asbestos and asked his opinion, Engin answered:

> They say asbestos is dangerous, but who listens? Demolishers do not pay attention. They just spray water over the dust. And I have not seen anyone controlling it. We encounter some of these materials in the basements. I know it is a fibrous element. We treat it like any other element. Invisible to the eye, invisible to the attention.

The municipal authorities barely inform the workers about the dangers of asbestos. They also never inspect the demolition sites for safety. The neighborhood itself is even at risk due to the asbestos dust spreading from unsealed buildings (Odman 2019). The dangerous aspects of these materials may affect the health of the workers in the future (See Ch. 7.2).

As self-employed workers, *çıkmacıs* are supposed to pay for their own social security and health insurance. These payments were not very regularly paid by the workers since their incomes were not regular. Ali complained about such precarity: "I could not pay my health insurance last month because I could not work. During the construction, I had a hand injury. A loose metal profile fell

while I was pulling out a window frame. When such injuries happen, we cannot continue working so, there is no income".

Figure 5.8: Dismantling PVC frames[11]

Source: Author's own

Engin was earning slightly more from PVC recycling of window frames than his second-hand trade. However, he declared: "There is a big demand for cheap frames. Everything is getting expensive. Especially for those who build summer and village houses". They could quickly sell them at the construction site. That's why a supply yard was unnecessary. They sold salvaged parts to Anatolian traders who in turn distributed the same components to Anatolian cities: Sivas, Tokat, Erbağ, Kayseri, Nevşehir, Niğde and Balıkesir. Once, trom one 5-floor apartment in Kadıköy-Moda, Engin sold 40 pieces of window frames, ten metal entrance doors, 200 m2 parquet flooring, ten interior doors, and five kitchen cupboards to a contractor from Kayseri. They were regularly working with a wholesaler from the Black Sea who was running a warehouse in

11 The work requires a lot of strength because the frames are attached to the gap with many screws. First, the glass is broken since it does not have any use. Then the profiles are pulled out, sometimes with a crowbar. After this process, the joint marks on the walls become revealed. Mishaps may release asbestos from the insulation layer.

Fikirtepe. According to Engin, this wholesaler, whose name was Ali, had legal and illegal business connections. He owned a truck and transported goods of all sorts. Ali's connections were expanding to Batumi in Georgia.

In the next section, I will focus on Engin's family, who make their livelihood by scrap collecting and building salvage. Such informal jobs are called 'arrival occupations' (Michael, Deshpande, and Ziervogel 2019, 667). The highlight of the encounter with this family was its valuable empirical contribution that shed light on processes and dynamics observed during the fieldwork.

5.3.2 A *Çıkmacı* Family

The Coruk family originates from a village called Yazıhüyük in Nevşehir. The region is famous for its geographic wonders: the underground cities of the Cappadocians, its fairy chimneys, and its volcanic valleys. The village is named after a 'prehistoric tell', an archeological mound or artificial hill created by the remains of many generations living and rebuilding on the same spot. The tells are made of ancient debris and discarded items. It is interesting that this hill has ancient conceptual connections to the Coruk's present livelihood in Istanbul, where they earn their living from building salvage.

This family is a patriarchal family consisting of three brothers and their parents, wives, and children of 'Yörük' origin—Turkmen nomad ancestors from the Taurus mountains in the same region. Their nomadic story continues: Their dual lives are split between Istanbul and Yazıhüyük. Their migration started when the elder brother escaped to Istanbul at the age of 18. Ali did not want to work on the farm and help his father. 25 years ago, he ran to Istanbul and lived with a former fellow from the village. He left without the consent of his father. Bored of village life, he was a young misfit. Firstly, he worked in a supermarket as a bagger who helped pack groceries. Later with the help of another friend from his village, he started scrap collecting with his pushcart, traveling from street to street. For him, his job gives him a sense of freedom: "Collecting scrap means being free; one can wander around the neighborhoods of Istanbul". The family has been farming for at least two generations, and the father disapproved of his son's choice at first. Later though, after seeing his son maintain a steady income from scrap dealing, and because he was living on the edge of poverty, he decided to send his two other sons to Istanbul. This did not stop them from farming, and

> they also didn't stop salvaging and scrap collecting. During planting and harvest, the brothers travel back and forth.
>
> —from my fieldnotes, entry on 27.05.2018.

The youngest of the family, Engin, aged 35, has been a scrap collector for the last 15 years. As more and more apartment buildings became discarded commodities, he adjusted by hunting for abandoned buildings and traveling from one neighborhood to another. At his first job, he was getting paid with building scrap in exchange for a cash debt. They buy the scrap material from the contractor. Their status at the construction site is relatively ambiguous, he explained:

> We are not providing a service for the contractor. We work for ourselves. We are self-employed individuals that mine materials from buildings. When the municipality comes for inspection, we say that we work for the construction company. It's easier. If we explain we are scrap collectors, they ask for safety permits and insurance. We try to avoid that.

During my visit to their village in 2018, he said that building salvage tripled last year since there was high demand for rebuilding apartments in the area because of seismic risk. I asked him if the buildings that he salvaged really needed to be demolished because of this risk and he responded: "Some seem strong enough to survive an earthquake. I would say sixty percent of the buildings were fine. But demolition is good for vitalizing our economy". He further explained that construction quality was better in a middle-class district like Kadıköy. He added that the buildings should be abandoned immediately in Fikirtepe since they were poorly upgraded from *gecekondus* in the 1990s (See Ch. 4.5.1). He made this observation when he was working in Fikirtepe, which was a former squatter district. Moreover, he observed that the buildings were built using wet sea sand that caused corrosion in the reinforcement bars in the concrete.

They rotated their tasks in the buildings where they worked. Dismantling continued in different stages, but their tasks remained the same. At the first deconstruction location, one dismantled the window frames. In the second location, the other retrieved the copper electric wires. At the third place, another cut out the metal parts of the building. Meanwhile, Ali, the older brother, was hunting for demolitions: scouting in Kadıköy and giving offers to contractors.

To secure the abandoned building and its scrap, they had to guard it day and night during their operation. Otherwise, the material to be reclaimed

would all be taken by other waste collectors or other individuals (Figure 5.9). As a result, Engin had to sleep on the ground floor of apartments to protect the building from others. Like the zoning hierarchy between waste collectors (Altay and Altay 2008), he said that fights sometimes broke out over discarded material and territorial competition between salvagers. Because of these reasons, cooperation seemed impossible.

Engin and his family were not inspected for labor safety. However, sometimes they were being reported to the municipality because of noise and the complaints from the neighbors. They threw weighty materials out of the upper floors. For that reason, their activities were very loud for a densely populated residential area. When they were dismantling façade elements, it was dangerous for all the workers on the ground floor. Sometimes these materials fall outside the security barriers surrounding the site. It was even threatening to passersby. At the Uzay apartment block, they had to stop for a few days after a complaint. Then, it turned out that demolition permission had not yet been approved by the municipality. They had to stop until the contractor got the permit. For good reason, they generally try not avoid damage the surroundings of the demolition:

> If we do not destroy any surrounding assets like cars or other neighboring buildings, I count ourselves successful. Otherwise, the contractor will not work with us if we are not careful. If there is an accident, we have to pay for our damage. We cannot afford to buy insurance that can cover the damage done by work accidents.

When the construction sector was thriving, Engin and his family members were competing with other salvagers to increase their income from the demolition market. They also increased their income capacity by working on multiple demolition sites at the same time. In July 2018, their team had twelve workers and were simultaneously salvaging six buildings in Kadıköy. These locations were in Caferağa (Moda), Acıbadem, Kozyatağı, Maltepe and Bostancı. Engin complained about how the state did not recognize them as a profession. Without an official tax registration for salvage and scrap collection, they had to pay their own social security insurance as self-employed workers.

Figure 5.9: Guarding reclaimed materials[12]

Source: Author's own

12 Çıkmacıs permanently live in empty apartments because they have to guard the reclaimed materials there. They make a temporary environment using the items they find during the salvage process. Above, we see an electric heater converted into a tea cooker. The writings on the wall were made by the seismic structural inspectors.

At the demolition site, they dismantled elevator parts, security bars, old boilers, and handrails to be sold to the metal recycling factory. They pulled out copper and brass electric wiring, which were precious elements for trading. Generally, it took one week to salvage a building. There was not a single nail left after they finished their work. They also collected kitchen cupboards, radiators, conduit boxes, electrical sockets and left-behind furniture. Sometimes, if they were lucky, they found antique objects in the basements. On Fridays, they sold whatever was appropriate to a flea market[13] in the Historic Tuesday Bazaar in Kadıköy.

The flea market duty was given to Engin's elder brother, Murat. He inspected the evicted buildings for left-behind objects while others were busy dismantling the building parts. He used the ground floor of the empty building to store the furniture and household items: chairs, tables, mirrors, carpets, books, framed pictures, household ornaments, knickknacks, toys, stereos, shoes, flags, sports equipment, and etc. Every Friday, he went to sell things at the flea market. The flea market was a small part of the large bazaar where all sorts of things could be found, from food to clothing. The flea market in Kadıköy was central and very popular. That makes it an exception to those in Seale's analysis that are socially and geographically peripheral (2015).

5.3.3 Engin's Depot, a Family Business

When the fieldwork started, Engin and his brothers were running a metal and plastic scrap collection depot on the ground floor of a three-floor building in the Fikirtepe neighborhood of Kadıköy. The depot looked like a garage: it had a ramp at the entrance that enabled pushcarts to enter and exit easily. It had been made into one large room by demolishing the inner non-load bearing walls. It was a relatively small space with a low ceiling, which was a bit unexpected for what was primarily a storage space. The walls were stained because of their salvaged materials' dusty, greasy, and rusty content.

There was a small office for one person made from leftover material. In one corner, they piled electric cables; in the other, they put metal bars. There were

13 Dinler (2016, 59) makes reference to the economy of gift-exchange (Mauss 2002) when she observes the way waste paper collectors sell the valuable objects that they find in waste bins at the flea market. See also Chris Birkbeck who makes a similar case for garbage pickers in Cali, Columbia, who sell valuable objects to second-hand dealers (Birkbeck 1979).

all sorts of junk lying around everywhere. All over the interior space, there were signs of overuse and damage. There was a sizable digital scale in the middle of the room used for weighing and pricing their recyclable materials. For smaller materials, they were still using an old rusted balance scale. They did not store components here long term.

Figure 5.10: Engin's first depot in Fikirtepe[14]

Source: Author's own

In the morning, they met with other family members before going to the demolitions in their truck. In the daytime, the depot was not busy; however, in the evening, when they all returned to the depot, it became occupied by members of the family bringing the day's scrap collection (Figure 5.10). The ones who worked at the demolitions were unloading the materials like cables and metal parts from the truck. Some of the family members with the pushcarts were carrying the scrap collected during a day's work in the streets of Kadıköy. Sometimes there were others there: refugees, waste pickers, or co-villagers selling scrap to them. Most of the members who worked through kinship relations

14 Family members are gathered to weigh their scrap. On the left side of the picture, a scrap collector pushcart is parked. It is a typical three-wheeled barrow that one can often spot in the streets. They are either used by scrap collectors or street vendors.

were getting paid a daily salary; other outsiders were paid for the quantity of materials they brought.

The area functioned as the backbone of small-scale industrial workshops and waste collection in Kadıköy. Because a recent urban redevelopment project resulted in an eviction report in 2016 (See Ch. 4.6.3), Their depot was demolished, after which they moved to another store in the same district. Engin described the situation:

> Since the beginning of the development in Fikirtepe, all the businesses have been forced to leave. We might have to move again in five years. The transformation follows us in the way the demolitions do. So far, we have survived in Fikirtepe. If there is no work here, we will go to Avcılar on the Asian side where urban transformation is progressing faster.

The new depot was larger than the previous one. It had two floors: the ground floor was used as a workshop for dismantling and storing the scrap; the second floor was used as a dormitory. Engin explained how they used the space:

> We are sleeping upstairs. It is very convenient. We reduced our cost of living. Plus, someone should be watching the depot; we have to protect our materials. They are like gold to us; otherwise, the Gypsies could steal them.

While he was breaking an elevator cogwheel for its brass composite, he explained the exchange value of the materials:

> The most expensive one is the yellow (brass) inside the elevator parts. The prices are indexed to dollar currency in the market. Yellow is very valuable: copper comes next. PVC is not comparable. It is the cheapest but there's more of it. (Figure 5.11)

They no longer accepted materials from outside sources. They were only trading their scrap to recycling warehouses and factories because the building salvage was supplying enough resources.

They managed to survive Fikirtepe's gentrification even though they had to move their small depot twice. Like most rural migrants in general, they were part of the precariat. However, by staying mobile through the salvaging of several buildings in several different parts of Istanbul, they remained adaptable. Their activities were not costly, and they could adjust their labor

power. Since their field was proceeding along with unregulated, uncontrolled, undocumented, and unregistered mechanisms, refugees were able to find job opportunities in this sector.

Figure 5.11: Dismantling elevator parts[15]

Source: Author's own

5.3.4 Working with Refugees

According to the European Social Policy Network work report, only roughly 21 thousand Turkish work permits were issued in all of 2017 while, at the same time, 1.5 million Syrians were engaged in informal work there (Adaman and Erus 2019). Two refugee workers, Hayatullah and Jabir, used to work with Engin (without a permit) between 2016 and 2018. Our conversations were limited to a primitive level, however, because we could not understand each other without

15 In Engin's second depot, all the family members are dismantling the brass parts of an elevator. The two young kids are his nephews. At the back, the boy's father, Ali (Engin's brother), is smoking a cigarette. Ali wants his children to learn their profession instead of going to high school. Ali was not keen on returning back to their village. He likes Istanbul.

the help of Engin, who knew Arabic. They lived in Fikirtepe in a bachelor room[16] with eight other workers, who were either in construction or some other kind of labor-intensive job. The older worker, Jabir, came to Turkey as a refugee from Afghanistan in 2016. After three years of fighting against the Taliban, he escaped from war and joined his relatives in Istanbul. Back in Afghanistan, he used to live in a village and work as a shepherd. Due to the shortage of full-time jobs, he mainly worked in construction, which needed intensive manual labor. With his thin and short features, he could very quickly climb the façade of the buildings from the outside. I learned that his physical skills came from his military training.

Due to the challenging work conditions and Turkey's economy, he clarified that salvaging was only a temporary job for him. His goal was to go to France where some relatives had been relocated to a refugee center. His relatives received money as support from the French government. Plus, he claimed that there were better-paid illicit jobs there. Then, he clarified that his relatives reached France with the help of human traffickers. He was saving money to pay for this dangerous trip. Unfortunately, he was getting paid less than a Turkish worker. Engin paid the refugees a fair wage and took care of them when they were sick. Since having a work permit was complicated and required waiting time, Jabir could only find an unregistered job in the recycling and construction sector. In Turkey, a foreigner under temporary protection can apply for a temporary work permit that takes six months to obtain. Although there were opportunities for seasonal agricultural work in the east of Turkey (Kavak 2016), he preferred to look for temporary work in Istanbul.

Another refugee worker called Hayatullah, aged 18, worked with Engin for almost a year. During the Syrian Civil War, his home was destroyed in Kobane. Later, he fled from Syria with his family in 2016. Before the war, he was a high school student. After his arrival, he lived in a refugee camp on the Syria-Turkey border. The remaining family members were scattered around Anatolia trying to find seasonal work, but he came to Istanbul because it has more possibilities and opportunities. He worked as a waste picker for a while. It was very difficult for him, not so much because of the long hours of walking and carting of material, but rather due to the territorial conflicts with Kurdish pickers and some racist attacks. Six months after the interview with them, Engin informed me that they left Istanbul permanently to find refuge in France. These outcasts

16 Bachelor rooms (Bekar odası in Turkish) are shared dormitories for seasonal workers and refugees.

were once again forced to leave in the hope of finding better living conditions (Bauman, 2011). Nevertheless, Engin would not employ them on a regular basis because the number of demolitions had decreased due to recessions in the construction sector. Because of these recessions, Engin was more often in his native village taking care of their family farm. In the following section, I will report on these nomadic circular transitions and dual lives and introduce Engin's farming activities in Yazıhüyük.

5.4 The Circular Mobility of the *Çıkmacıs*

Istanbul is connected to its hinterland via the economic and social mobility of its dwellers who migrated from villages in search of better living conditions and work opportunities. Within an extended network of relationships, informal laborers retain their ties between village and city through their engagement with farming activities, a sense of home and social attachments. Mainly, they live a dual life in order to cope with their limited access to decent incomes in urban centers. Villages accommodate the second part of the migrant's livelihood and become retirement places in Turkey (Öztürk et al. 2018, 513). Transportation and communication infrastructure enables the commuter labor to navigate both zones (Echanove and Srivastava 2014). This is the case even despite the corporatization of the agriculture sector. For instance, forty percent of industrial labor in China comes from rural parts of the country; the workers are firmly attached to the countryside because it provides land to plant and homes to inhabit (Standing 2014).

To better observe the *çıkmacıs*' dual lives, I visited the village of Yazıhüyük in Nevşehir province, where Engin and his family live and engage in the agricultural activities on their family-owned land. As an economic reserve or backup that remains unpossessed by industrial agriculture, their land provides their primary livelihood and safety ground; even still, their financial and social resources there were not enough. In the end, the story of this family is a unique example of a substantial workforce divided between informal waste work and farming: "youngsters are not needed on the farm and, rather than act as a drain on the family resources, are better off going away to support themselves—and, indeed, contribute to the family budget where possible to help maintain the farm" (Öztürk et al. 2018, 522).

Figure 5.12: The house belongs to Engin's father. The washbasin was salvaged from a flat in Istanbul. On summer nights, they live on the terrace.

Source: Author's own

5.4.1 Village Livelihood in Yazıhüyük

After waiting for the public bus, which only ran very seldomly, I arrived at Yazıhüyük village in the Derinkuyu district of Nevşehir city to meet with Engin in late May, 2018. Derinkuyu is famous for its underground city from Ancient Cappadocia that is carved out from the soft volcanic rock of the region, which is also evidence of the fertile earth for agriculture. For generations, the fields surrounded by the mountains were very generous to the people. On the way, I saw a small hill in the middle of the flat plane, which was the archeological tell from which the village took its name. I found Engin in a coffee shop close to the village square, decorated with Justice AK Party flags. The coffee shop is a shelter for the village's male population, where they play card games and kill time. Although there was rampant unemployment there, the village seemed wealthy since the houses were fairly large and well-built and had farm fields in front.

—from my fieldnotes, entry on 27.05.2018.

Before Engin showed me his house and land (Figure 5.12), we sat a while at the coffee shop. He was with a relative whose name was Mehmet. Mehmet related that, after 30 years of doing it, he finally retired from scrap collecting in Istan-

bul. He explained that most people from the region who migrated to Istanbul in the 1970s found jobs almost exclusively as scrap collectors because the scrap was easy to access as a resource for income generation. The job did not need education or special qualifications. The village solidarity networks in the city provided particular forms of manual labor opportunities through their connection to earlier generations of the same kind of workers. For instance, Engin told me that in the neighboring village, most of the men worked as construction plasterers in Istanbul.

Mehmet chose to move back to the village after his retirement. He explained that after the marriage of his children, there was no reason to stay in the city. In addition, he could not work any longer because of back pain caused by having to carry heavy things in the salvage work. After he sold his *gecekondu* in Fikirtepe to a real estate developer[17], he started to live in a flat far away from the city center in the peripheral neighborhoods.

Mehmet and Engin were curious about my interest in scrap dealing that brought me to their village. They believed that the public image of scrap dealing was associated with dirt and not pleasant, and the village was a peripheral place of seclusion. They explained that the recycling work represented unhygienic conditions. I told them that their unrecognized participation in construction and recycling sectors created an inspirational model that should be supported. All in all, they were sustainably creating value from scrap. However, Mehmet was pessimistic about the future of their profession in Istanbul because of its privatized recycling sector and street collection. Since then, he has wanted to return to the village because he could not obtain better living conditions. Nevertheless, Engin had a different opinion because he found an opportunity in an urban center close to their village. He believed that building salvage work could keep their farm running for a little longer until an economic crisis created unemployment in the cities. He commented on this unpredictable situation:

> The village is a stronghold for me. In Istanbul, I am far from my homeland. The land is home for me. Demolitions could slow down. That is why our scale is small. And we are mobile. But there will always be scrap to collect and deal with in the city. For example, recently, I took my crew to Konya [close to Nevsehir] for salvaging materials and demolition.

17 The *gecekondus* were replaced by high-rise residential blocks and their owners had to move to the peripheral areas.

Engin worked for a construction contractor in Konya. He and his team demolished and reclaimed materials from a condemned hospital. He was content with the location and scale of the project in central Anatolia. The work took them 25 days with ten other workers. For technical reasons, the old state hospital had to be demolished by hand. There were eight Afghan workers, also Jabir, without proper permission to work and travel inside Turkey. These refugee workers traveled to Istanbul from Konya in the back of a truck and slept at the construction site. Inside the hospital, there used to be a publishing department in which Engin found 15 thousand books. Later, he sold them to a paper recycling warehouse in Konya.

From the deconstruction, they reclaimed five hundred building pieces which he traded to a local second-hand wholesaler. Then, Engin sold the rest of the scrap salvaged from the hospital to a local recycling factory. When I asked him how he got the job, he explained that it would be impossible for him to get the job if he did not already know the people who hired them in Konya. Otherwise, a local person would have taken the job. He knew the contractor from Istanbul, whom he worked with on several projects. Meanwhile, the rest of the family started working in the European part of Istanbul because the demolitions had nearly stopped in their district. After all, the construction companies went bankrupt after the coup attempt in 2016. Simultaneously they were working in two blocks with 50 flats in Büyükçekmece and one block with 20 apartments in Bakırköy.

The labor network of Engin's family proved that urban transformation via demolitions was spreading to different parts of Turkey, and their business that started as a local reclamation was expanding its limits as well. Their mobility enables them to keep the connection to their village and also to find demolition-related jobs in cities across Turkey.

5.4.2 Agricultural Activities

Engin's family land encompassed nearly 1.5 hectares. There were four small single-floor houses in the four corners of the land. The one-story houses, made of stone bricks, were self-built and had flat roofs. Most of the original components of the houses had been replaced by reclaimed materials from Istanbul. His father and three brothers and their families were living individually in those houses. There was a ramshackle barn at the farm entrance where they kept all the animals: a watchdog, cow, ten chickens, quails used as bait for hunting, and fighting cocks. They owned a tractor with several attachments, but

it looked old. According to Engin, farming demanded more attention, special skills, and knowledge than salvage work:

> I learned everything from my father. First of all, you have to know what to plant when. He showed me how to plow the field before spreading the seeds. Then I apply the pesticides. And then, I do the harvest. Apart from that, I have to take care of the animals, like milking the cows. Making cheese from the cow's milk.

Figure 5.13: Engin's inherited farmland[18]

Source: Author's own

Occasionally he came back every two months to check their crops, but in the planting season, which was mid-October for barley, he had to stay for two to three weeks at least. Engin explained to me that the barley crop had to be rotated. If it were planted too often, the soil would lose its quality. So, after barley harvesting, he had to plant vegetables to ventilate the soil. When he was away, his father and his wife looked after their fields, but he was getting too old to do it. In 2017, he harvested nearly two tons of green beans, barley, potatoes,

18 Engin's land stands in the middle of their houses. It waits for harvesting after a long fallow period. They planted some fruit trees next to his brother's house in the background. On the edge of the land, they have planted poplar trees, which can be seen at the back.

and zucchini (Figure 5.13). He sold these to a wholesale market in Mersin, a hub for the distribution of agricultural products in the area. The farm and its fields are fertile living entities that have a crucial effect on the human actors. Such multiple agency lies in the aliveness of the more-than-human world (Bennet 2010).

Engin never fully migrated to Istanbul, but his older brothers did. He was the only one who left his wife and two kids behind to help their mother. Unlike his brothers, Engin seemed very fond of village life and appreciated nature, and loved working with the earth. After a very intense day of work in the farm, he liked to go hunting, participating in cockfights with his own birds, or spending time with his wife and kids. His fondness for his village was substantial:

> Farming is a better occupation than salvaging. It is a lot cheaper in the village. We have our vegetables and animals. I feel freer and happier away from the construction dust. The time in the village feels like a holiday even though I have to work harder. However, we do not earn much from agriculture.

It was impossible for Engin to purchase a house with a garden in Istanbul. He decided to build a new larger house in the village with materials he salvaged from demolition sites. It was also a way of investing in his retirement; he did not want to live in Istanbul anymore, which he saw as getting very expensive and harder to live in. He was expecting that the backbreaking manual labor would lead him to retire early. He saw his village property as providing an economic safety net because the construction and recycling industry was unstable in Istanbul. For example, sometimes they did not work for months, especially during a financial crisis that shrank the construction sector.

In sum, his farmland has given them a feeling of social, cultural, and economic stability. The village is their primary home where they left their family and Istanbul seems like a temporary place. Since they are attached to their land and agriculture, they have work opportunities with limited income. Since some of the older brothers are doing the scrap collection and building salvage in the city all year long, the younger brother can keep the farm running. Eventually, it will become a place for retirement, and they prefer to invest and upgrade their homes in the village.

5.5 Conclusion

In order to join the EU, Turkey intends to formalize its waste and scrap collecting according to European waste management standards (Izci 2016). Without taking into consideration the livelihoods of waste pickers, they attempt to adopt management models from industrially developed countries. However, such a transition is problematic since there is already an existing heterogeneous structure. Regrettably, the contribution of informal labor is overlooked by the state, which prioritizes building formal business models based on a circular economy in the recycling industry. Local governments denounce waste collectors as illegal workers, attempt to eliminate them from the street, and try to impose a privatized system. In this new system, the local government supports household sorting, develops waste processing facilities, and supports private recycling companies.

Çıkmacıs can stay out of these conflicts, for the time being at least, because they buy the building scrap from private owners and contractors. In the future, if the municipalities or companies take over demolition salvage, their sector may become privatized. Additionally, they suffer from precarious work conditions similar to those of waste collectors. Workplace safety is often bypassed and ignored in the construction sector (Kolektif 2018). The same is true of material reclamation. A lack of occupational safety and the presence of asbestos threatens their lives (Odman, 2019) but the state apparatus does not inform salvagers about the health danger or do anything to create safe workplace conditions.

Çıkmacıs relationship to economic markets are twofold: recycling industry and second-hand trade. On the one hand, the recycling industry depends on the prices determined by the London Metal Exchange (Corwin 2018; Dinler 2016), on the other hand, second-hand trade is a field free from market regulations.

Adaptation to formal markets and solidarity networks is an important feature of relational infrastructures (Simone 2015). *Çıkmacıs* use the opportunity to extend their field of operation and secure their livelihood within neoliberal urbanization. With the recent developments in the construction sector, demolitions generate an excess of scrap materials and other leftovers that the private owners and contractors undervalue. The *çıkmacıs* anticipated this situation and adapted to changing situations. For instance, they hired new family members and refugee workers. They are flexible in sharing work responsibilities in the family. By establishing a second market, they became suppliers of affordable

components. Using their know-how in the street collection, they use their contacts to trade sorted refuse to recycling companies. Yet, they did not entirely cut their relationship with their homeland. Such long-distance commuter urbanity identified as circulatory urbanism creates a continuum between rural and urban areas (Echanove and Srivastava 2014). What is more, the agency of their farmland impacts their movement because it creates reciprocal relationships based on time in terms of seasonal plantation.

By following in the footsteps of others, scrap salvaging becomes an inherited profession. And this relationality provides substantial networking opportunities. Plus, their farmland gives them security if they cannot maintain building salvage and scrap collecting. It provides a place for family members while the others are temporarily in the city. In the village, they can have breaks from precarious labor even though they have to take care of the farm. Plus, it is a safe retirement destination.